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SAMAEL, LILITH, AND THE CONCEPT OF EVIL IN EARLY KABBALAH

by

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I

One of the major problems in the study of early kabbalah is the difficulty in distinguishing between old traditions used by kabbalists and new ideas presented in their writings for the first time. Early kabbalists often pretended to be using books and treatises by ancient authorities, a pretense which is usually characterized as pseudepigraphy; however, there can be little doubt that some kabbalists in the Middle Ages did have access to old traditions, transmitted orally or in writing, which they used to mould their own mystical attitudes, and the attempt to distinguish between the old and the new is, in most cases, very difficult, if not outright impossible. The main problem is that scholarly study can never prove a negative; one can do one's best to prove that a certain writer had such and such a source before him, but one can never conclusively prove that a writer did not know a certain text or idea. Still, it is the duty of scholarship to try to follow the development of ideas, themes and symbols, and to suggest, with the help of close textual analysis, to what extent a certain writer followed ideas and texts, and to surmise carefully what his original contribution was.

In this paper an attempt is made to clarify both the sources and the original contribution to the mythological concept of evil as developed by Rabbi

Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen in Spain in the second half of the thirteenth century. The major text to be considered is Rabbi Isaac's treatise on evil, entitled "A Treatise on the Left Emanation," published by Gershom Scholem in 1927.¹ In this text a kabbalist, for the first time after three generations of the development of the kabbalah, presented a comprehensive concept of evil, based on extreme dualistic attitudes, characterized by Scholem as "gnostic," which indeed bears close phenomenological resemblance to the ancient systems of the Marcionites, the Ophites and even the Manichaean gnostics. A significant detail in this system is that here, for the first time in a dated Jewish work, Samael and Lilith are described as husband and wife in the realm of the Satanic power, a concept which was later incorporated into the Zohar and became one of the most popular and well-known chapters in Jewish myths concerning evil.

The following analysis is divided into two parts: the first is an attempt to discover two types of sources which were used by Rabbi Isaac—mythological sources and theological sources; the second part is an attempt to point out the reasons for Rabbi Isaac's mythological attitude and his relationship to other kabbalists, both earlier and later. In this fashion, a conclusion might be reached concerning the role of mythological elements in the development of early kabbalah.

II

The sixth chapter in Rabbi Isaac's "Treatise on the Emanations on the Left"² is opened by a list of the "princes of jealousy and hatred," that is, the active powers of evil influencing the world, the first of which is Samael. After describing seven such "princes," Rabbi Isaac states: "Truly I shall give you a hint, that the reason for all the jealousies which exist between the princes mentioned above, and the [other, good] princes which belong to seven classes, the classes of the holy angels which are called 'the guardians of the walls,' the reason which evokes hatred and jealousy between the heaven-

1. The text was published by Gershom Scholem, "Qabbalat R. Ya'aqov ve-R. Yiṣṣḥaq benei R. Ya'aqov ha-Kohen," *Madda'ei ha-Yahadut* 2 (1927): 244–64, as a part of the first study of the kabbalah of Rabbi Jacob and Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen. (The study was also published as a separate book [Jerusalem, 1927], from which it is quoted here; the treatise on the Left Emanations appears on pp. 82–102.)

2. Scholem, *Qabbalat*, pp. 89–90 (pp. 251–52 in *Madda'ei ha-Yahadut*).

ly powers and the powers of the supreme host, is one form³ which is destined for Samael, and it is Lilith, and it has the image of a feminine form, and Samael is in the form of Adam and Lilith in the form of Eve. Both of them were born in a spiritual birth as one,⁴ similar to the form of Adam and Eve, like two pairs of twins, one above and one below. Samael and the Eve the Elder, which is called the Northern one,⁵ they are emanated from below the Throne of Glory, and this was caused by the Sin.”⁶

The author goes on to explain the disaster caused by the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, which, according to his description, caused sexual awakening among the two pairs of “twins,” an awakening in which the snake, called here Nahasiel or Gamliel,⁷ took part. The result was that the snakes became “biting snakes,” that is, Evil came into its own, and began to express itself.

Several elements in this myth are new, unknown from any previous Jewish source, especially if other motifs, found in parallel passages in this treatise are used to explain this description.⁸ But it seems that the first one to be considered should be the joining of Samael and Lilith as a pair, analogous to Adam and Eve. It is a fact that both Samael and Lilith are major figures in earlier Jewish traditions, but nowhere are they mentioned as a pair in a dated work before this passage in the second half of the thirteenth century.⁹ Since talmudic times Samael was regarded as the archangel in charge

3. Hebrew: *šurah*, here probably meaning “a spiritual being,” form as opposed to matter.

4. Hebrew: *toladah ruhanit du-paršufim*, a creature which is at first male and female together (see Genesis Rabbah, 8:1), and then divided into separate beings.

5. See Scholem’s note (*Qabbalat*, p. 89, n. 4). Samael is identified with the north not only because of the biblical tradition that evil comes from the north, but also because of the possible reading of his name as “left,” which is identical with north (if facing east). His spouse, therefore, receives the feminine form of “north.”

6. My translation was prepared with the assistance of Mr. E. Hanker of Berkeley, California.

7. These names are in fact identical, because the snake (*naḥash*) had the form of a camel (*gamal*) before he was cursed; this midrashic tradition was included in the Book Bahir, sec. 200, based on Pirḳei de-Rabbi ’Eli’ezer, chap. 13—both serving as the basic source for Rabbi Isaac’s description of the story of the Garden of Eden.

8. Some further descriptions of Lilith are translated below.

9. A serious problem concerning the development of this idea is related to a medieval text of magic, *Sidrei de-Shimmusha Rabbah*, published by G. Scholem in *Tarbiz* 16 (1945): 196–209. It is quite clear that the author of that text knew that Samael and Lilith were related, and there are several other points which suggest a close relationship between it and Rabbi Isaac’s treatise. However, the chronological problem has not yet been solved, and it is impossible to decide with any amount of certainty whether Rabbi Isaac used ideas which were known some time before him and reflected in the “Shimmusha,” or that the author of the “Shimmusha” made use of some motifs he found in Rabbi Isaac’s treatise.

of Rome, and therefore a satanic figure—especially in the mystical literature known as the *Heikhalot* and *Merkabah* literature¹⁰—though originally he was one of the fallen angels mentioned in the *Book of Enoch*.¹¹ The concept of Samael developed in the early Middle Ages. In the late midrash, *Pirqei de-Rabbi 'Eli'ezer*, he is one of the participants in the drama of the Garden of Eden, as he is also in the first kabbalistic work known to us—the *Book Bahir*.¹² But nowhere in these detailed descriptions is there a hint that he has a wife or a feminine counterpart, and Lilith is not to be found.

The history of Lilith is even more complex. She seems to have been an ancient Near Eastern goddess, mentioned in the Bible¹³ and she is characterized several times in talmudic literature as a danger to infants.¹⁴ A very unclear tradition in the midrash seems to hint that Lilith was Adam's first wife before the creation of Eve, and that from this union demons were born.¹⁵ In all these sources, however, Samael is never mentioned. How, then, did Samael and Lilith become man and wife in the treatise by Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen?

Part of the answer to this question may be found in the famous source of most of the legends concerning Lilith—the *Alpha Beta* of Ben Sira, which should properly be called “Pseudo-Ben Sira,” a narrative work in Hebrew written late in the gaonic period. This book was recently studied in detail by Eli Yassif, who prepared a critical edition of the text, using dozens of manuscripts.¹⁶ One of the most important conclusions reached by Yassif is that two versions of the work exist, one closer to the original and another, known in Europe since the eleventh century,¹⁷ which was edited and enlarged by a

10. Samael's role as a power of Evil is especially prominent in the section of *Heikhalot Rabbati* (Adolf Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrash*, 6 vols. [Leipzig, 1853–77], 3: 87) which describes the martyrdom of ten of the mishnaic sages, as well as in the separate descriptions of this martyrdom in the treatise on the Ten Martyrs (see my *The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages* [Hebrew] [Jerusalem, 1974] pp. 62–69).

11. The development of the image of Samael is described in detail by G. Scholem in his *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 385–89 (and see the detailed bibliography there).

12. Sec. 200 (the last section; in Scholem's edition—sec. 140).

13. See Isa. 34:14.

14. See Reuben Margulies's collection of the talmudic and midrashic traditions in his *Malakhei 'Elyon* (Jerusalem, 1945), pp. 235–37.

15. This tradition was preserved in *Midrash Avkir* and elsewhere; see G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 357 (and the detailed bibliography there concerning Lilith, pp. 360–61).

16. Eli Yassif, “Pseudo Ben Sira, The Text, Its Literary Character and Status in the History of the Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages” [Hebrew], 2 vols., Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1977.

17. The later version is the one found in *Bereshit Rabbati* by Rabbi Moses ha-Darshan.

later compiler. This distinction between the two versions, proved conclusively by Yassif, can shed some light on the history of Lilith and how she became Samael's spouse.

The early version of Pseudo-Ben Sira tells the following story:

When God created His world and created Adam, He saw that Adam was alone, and He immediately created a woman from earth, like him, for him, and named her Lilith. He brought her to Adam, and they immediately began to fight: Adam said, "You shall lie below" and Lilith said, "You shall lie below, for we are equal and both of us were [created] from earth." They did not listen to each other. When Lilith saw the state of things, she uttered the Holy Name and flew into the air and fled. Adam immediately stood in prayer before God and said: "Master of the universe, see that the woman you gave me has already fled away." God immediately sent three angels and told them: "Go and fetch Lilith; if she agrees to come, bring her, and if she does not, bring her by force." The three angels went immediately and caught up with her in the [Red] Sea, in the place that the Egyptians were destined to die. They seized her and told her: "If you agree to come with us, come, and if not, we shall drown you in the sea." She answered: "Darlings, I know myself that God created me only to afflict babies with fatal disease when they are eight days old; I shall have permission to harm them from their birth to the eighth day and no longer; when it is a male baby; but when it is a female baby, I shall have permission for twelve days." The angels would not leave her alone, until she swore by God's name that wherever she would see them or their names in an amulet,¹⁸ she would not possess the baby [bearing it]. They then left her immediately. This is [the story of] Lilith who afflicts babies with disease.¹⁹

It seems that every reader of this story in the Middle Ages was puzzled by one question: Why did the angels leave Lilith alone? They were ordered by God to bring her back to Adam, and for an unstated reason they were convinced by her speech not to do so. But it is not just an unclear narrative point: in the story as stated in this version one might easily come to the conclusion that these three exalted angels were bribed by Lilith by the promise

18. These three angels are Sanoi, Sansanoi and Samanglof, mentioned in the text of Pseudo-Ben Sira. Many attempts have been made to explain these names by the use of several oriental languages. It seems to me that they could have been created by the author of this work as a parody on the angelology of the Heikhalot literature (which often used names like San-saniel, etc.).

19. Yassif, "Pseudo-Ben Sira," pp. 64–65. This version is close to the one published by David Friedman and S. D. Loewinger in *Ve-zot li-Yehudah* (Budapest, 1926), pp. 259–60.

that she would never harm babies protected by them or by their names on amulets—and this might very well have been the author's point.²⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the editor of the later version, the one which became known in Europe, changed this part of the story. When describing the encounter between Lilith and the angels in the Red Sea, he wrote: "They tried to take her back, but she refused. They asked her: 'Why don't you want to go back?' She told them: 'I know that I was created for the sole purpose of making babies ill from their day of birth until the eighth day, when I have permission, and after eight days I have no permission. And if it is a female, [this is so] for twelve days!' They said to her: 'If you do not come back we shall drown you in the sea.' She answered: 'I cannot return because of what is said in the Torah—"Her former husband who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled,"²¹ that is, when he was the last to sleep with her. And the Great Demon has already slept with me.'"²² The author goes on to describe the agreement between Lilith and the angels.

It is quite obvious that the editor of this version was confronted with the difficulty concerning the behavior of the angels, and supplied a halakhic reason for why Lilith could not return to her former husband. For this reason he added a new hero to the story, the Great Demon (*ha-Shed ha-Gadol*), whose sole function is to serve as a pretext for Lilith's being unable to return to Adam, since she was defiled by somebody else. The "Great Demon" is a new term, unknown in previous Hebrew sources, but it is quite natural that he could not remain unnamed for long. Jewish tradition usually named the archdemons, as it did the archangels. There was only one possible name for this "Great Demon" added to the text of Pseudo-Ben Sira by the later editor, and that name was Samael. This was the only demonic name associated

20. The question of the meaning of this story depends on one's attitude toward the character of the Pseudo-Ben Sira. I still maintain that this is a satirical, and somewhat heretical, collection of stories by a religious anarchist (see my *Hebrew Story*, pp. 69–78), although Yassif regards them as usual folktales. (Compare also S. T. Lachs, "The Alphabet of Ben Sira: A Study in Folk-Literature," *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies* 2 [1973]: 9–28). It is my intention to analyze the problem in detail elsewhere; but it is necessary to point out here that the whole story does not make sense if it is not understood as an expression of Lilith's bitterness toward God for the role assigned to her (in talmudic literature) of a baby-killer.

21. Deut. 24:4. Naturally, this whole "halakhic" discussion does not have any basis in actual Jewish law.

22. Yassif, "Pseudo-Ben Sira," pp. 23–24. This version is similar to (but not identical; the "great demon" is missing) the one published by Moritz Steinschneider in his edition, *Alphabetum Siracidis* (Berlin, 1858), p. 23.

with the drama of the Garden of Eden, as described in the *Pirquei de-Rabbi 'Eli'ezer* and strengthened, in the eyes of the early kabbalists, by the inclusion of that description in the text of the *Book Bahir*.²³ It is impossible to decide exactly when and where Samael was identified with the "Great Demon," and whether Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen had any part in that process. But there can be no doubt that it was Rabbi Isaac who gave the story of Samael and Lilith a new mythological dimension, uplifting it from the level of narrative gossip, as it was in the edited version of Pseudo-Ben Sira, and made it a part of cosmic, and even divine, history. The following passage is one example of his treatment of this subject:

And now we shall speak about that third Air.²⁴ The masters of tradition²⁵ said that a tradition was transmitted to their fathers that this Air is divided into three parts, an upper one, a middle one, and a lower one. The upper one was given to Asmodeus,²⁶ the great king of the demons, and he does not have permission to accuse or cause harm except on Mondays, as the masters of the tradition had mentioned. And we, with the help of our Creator, shall expand in this treatise [on this subject] to the extent that we can. Now Asmodeus, even though he is called "the great king," is subservient to Samael, and he is called "the great prince," when compared with the emanations above him, and "king of kings" when compared with the emanated powers below him. And Asmodeus is governed by him and serves him. The Grand Old Lilith²⁷ is the mate of Samael, the great prince and the great king of all demons. Asmodeus, the king of the demons, has as a mate Younger Lilith. The masters of this tradition discuss and point out many wonderful details concerning the form of Samael and the form of Asmodeus and the image of Lilith, the bride of Samael and of Lilith, the bride of Asmodeus. Happy is he who merits this knowledge.²⁸

The author goes on to describe a lower pair of a demon and his mate, and associates these couples with some of the most cruel afflictions of this world, including leprosy and hydrophobia, in a very detailed description.

The way this myth was constructed is clearer in another chapter of that treatise:

23. *Bahir*, sec. 200 (and *Pirquei de-Rabbi 'Eli'ezer*, chap. 13).

24. Concerning these "airs," see below.

25. The author here constantly uses the term "qabalah," which I did not translate as "mystical" but, in the sense that the author seems to try to convey, ancient tradition.

26. Concerning Ashmedai, see Margulies, *Malakhei 'Elyon*, pp. 215–21; G. Scholem, "Yedi'ot hadashot 'al 'Ashmedai ve-Lilit," *Tarbiz* 19 (1948): 165–75.

27. *Lilit sabbeta rabbeta*.

28. Scholem, *Qabbalat*, p. 93 (*Madda'ei ha-Yahadut*, p. 255).

In answer to your question concerning Lilith, I shall explain to you that most important part. There is a tradition received from the early sages who made use²⁹ of the *Use of the Lesser Palaces*³⁰ which is the *Use of Demons*³¹ which is like a ladder by which one can transcend to the various degrees of prophecy and their powers.³² In these sources it is explained that Samael and Lilith were born as a hermaphrodite,³³ just like Adam and Eve, who were also born in this manner, reflecting what is above.³⁴ This is the account of Lilith which was received by the sages in the *Use of the Palaces*. The Elder Lilith³⁵ is the wife of Samael. Both of them were born at the same hour, in the image of Adam and Eve, intertwined in each other. And Asmodeus, the great king of the demons, has as a wife the Younger Lilith, the daughter of the king, whose name is Kafzefoni,³⁶ and the name of his wife is Mehetabel daughter of Matred,³⁷ and their daughter is Lilith. This is the exact text of what is written in the chapters of the *Lesser Heikhalot*³⁸ as we have received it, word for word and letter for letter. And the scholars in this science have a very esoteric tradition from the ancient sages who found it stated in those chapters that Samael, the greatest prince of them all, is very jealous of Asmodeus the king of the demons because of this Lilith who is called Lilith the Maiden,³⁹ who is in the form of a beautiful woman from her head to her waist, and from the waist down she is burning fire; like mother like daughter.⁴⁰

This paragraph clearly states Rabbi Isaac's sources, connected with the Aramaic mystical text describing Rabbi Akiba's ascent to the Heavenly Palaces, the Heikhalot Zutartei.⁴¹ Since this text is known to us in several

29. *Shimmusha*, meaning: magical use.

30. *Shimmusha de-heikhalei zu'artei*.

31. *Shimmusha de-shedei*.

32. Meaning that the "magical use" of the "air of demons" is connected with the process of attaining prophecy; see below.

33. See above, n. 5.

34. Meaning that the creation in this way reflects the bisexuality in the structure of the spiritual, or even divine, worlds.

35. It should be noted that in this section, as in several others in the treatise, the author turns to the Aramaic language to express the great, ancient traditions. He relies here on the ancient mystical text, Heikhalot Zu'artei, which was really written mostly in Aramaic, but of course it does not contain any hint of the material referred to by Rabbi Isaac.

36. The element "şefoni" seems to be the meaningful part of this name (i.e., from the north—evil).

37. See Genesis 36:39. The kings of Edom mentioned in this chapter were interpreted as evil powers in later kabbalah, especially in the Zohar.

38. See above, n. 35, and below, n. 41.

39. *Lilit 'ulemta*.

40. Scholem, *Qabbalat*, pp. 98–99 (*Madda'ei ha-Yahadut*, pp. 260–61).

41. This work is found in several manuscripts, and was partly published in Solomon

versions, it is easy to discover that Rabbi Isaac's reliance on it is completely apocryphal. Even if one may suggest that portions of this early mystical work were lost, it is still inconceivable that such a fascinating story was included in it (or anywhere else, for that matter), and no other source bothered to mention it until Rabbi Isaac cited it. There can be little doubt that the language of this paragraph is intended to enhance Rabbi Isaac's credibility concerning the previous descriptions of the Liliths, the mother and the daughter, and their relationships with their husbands, the kings of the demons. A mythological narrative was created here, most probably by Rabbi Isaac himself, who made use of various materials which were before him but changed their character completely. The ancient story concerning Lilith being Adam's first wife was not suitable to Rabbi Isaac's purposes because Samael did not take any significant part in it. He used the later edition of the Pseudo-Ben Sira to introduce Samael into the story, not as Lilith's second husband but as her original mate, creating a kind of parallelism between Adam and Eve and Lilith and Samael. This principle of parallel pairs was carried both forward and backward—reflecting the bisexual nature of the divine world (God and the Shekhinah) as well as the lower demonic pairs, like Lilith and Asmodeus or Kafzefoni and Mehetabel.

As Rabbi Isaac's concept of the divine world is mythical and dynamic, so are his views concerning the demonic world; an element of strife is introduced by the fight of Samael and Asmodeus over the Younger Lilith. This myth is carried on in a subsequent description until Rabbi Isaac's main concern—the final battle between good and evil—is reached.⁴²

The possibility that further sources of Rabbi Isaac's myth concerning the demons will be discovered has to be taken into account, but even so it is quite clear that it was Rabbi Isaac who moulded previous traditions into a new narrative myth, expressing his vision of the world and contributing to his theology.

III

An attempt to clarify Rabbi Isaac's mysterious reference to the "third air," and the "air of the use of the demons"⁴³ leads us to another group of

Musajoff's *Merkavah Shelemah* (Jerusalem, 1926), pp. 6a–8b. Several sections were translated by G. Scholem in his *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960).

42. See below.

43. See above.

sources which helped Rabbi Isaac create his mythology of the evil powers—the theological works of the Ashkenazi Hasidim. Rabbi Isaac mentioned in his treatise at least twice that he had connections with the Jewish sages in Germany,⁴⁴ and it seems that in the second half of the thirteenth century several kabbalists emphasized such a connection as a source of their teachings.⁴⁵ This is not surprising, since the masters of this pietistic movement were respected throughout the Jewish world because of their ethical teachings, their interpretations of the prayers, their pronouncements on Jewish law, and their direct connection with early traditions received from the east.⁴⁶ These traditions had an element of magical knowledge and the performance of miracles, associated with several of the ancestors of Ashkenazi Hasidism,⁴⁷ and reflected in Rabbi Isaac's treatise in the story about the magical flight of Rabbi Eleazar of Worms riding a cloud.⁴⁸ It is no wonder, therefore, that the Ashkenazi Hasidim, especially Rabbi Judah the Pious (d. 1217), and his disciple, Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (d. ca. 1230),⁴⁹ were regarded by Rabbi Isaac and by some other kabbalist as an authoritative source for esoteric knowledge, with some emphasis on magical and demonological aspects of that tradition.

While it is quite clear that the concepts of the various "airs" between the earth and the divine world reflect the influence of terms from the Book of

44. Rabbi Isaac stated that he and his brother met in Narbonne with a disciple of Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (see Scholem's introduction to the texts, *Gnosticism*, p. 8), and among other things he tells a hagiographic story about Rabbi Eleazar (chap. 10, p. 92). This story is told immediately after the statement concerning the use of the "demon's air" for the purpose of prophecy.

45. A clear example of such an attitude toward the Ashkenazi Hasidim is to be found in the "Epistle of Worms," included by Rabbi Shem Tov Ibn Gaon in his kabbalistic treatise "Baddei ha-'Aron" (written in Palestine early in the fourteenth century), MS Paris 840. These examples attest to the fact that kabbalists in Spain used the reputation of the Ashkenazi Hasidim as great mystics and recipients of ancient traditions to enhance their own credibility.

46. Especially via Southern Italy; the arrival of Rabbi Aaron ben Samuel of Baghdad in Italy in the eighth century is regarded as the source of Ashkenazi hasidic prayer mysticism. See my *The Esoteric Theology of the Ashkenazi Hasidim* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1968), pp. 13–20.

47. Rabbi Aaron of Baghdad is presented in the Megillat 'Aḥima'aš as a magician as well as a mystic. A summary of these traditions is to be found in my paper: "The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Europe," *The World History of the Jewish People: The Dark Ages*, ed. Cecil Roth (Tel Aviv, 1969), pp. 282–90.

48. Scholem, *Qabbalat*, p. 92. It should be noted that this story not only praises Rabbi Eleazar for his piety and his supernatural knowledge, but also states that he failed once in reciting the right formula, fell off the cloud, suffered injury, and remained crippled until his last day.

49. Concerning the date of his death see my *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv-Ramat Gan, 1975), p. 69.

Creation (Sefer Yeşirah) and the commentaries on that book, especially that of Rav Saadia Gaon,⁵⁰ upon Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen, the connection between the “third air” and both prophecy and demonology poses a serious problem. In Rabbi Isaac’s work, the demons represent cosmic and divine elements of evil, while in the sizable literature of the Ashkenazi Hasidim on this subject one cannot find any dualistic element: the demons represent a natural power which is an integral part of the created world, and their actions conform to the decrees of God exactly as do those of angels.⁵¹ Still, there is a connection between Rabbi Isaac’s myth and the Ashkenazi hasidic speculations, for it was the pietists in the late twelfth century and the early thirteenth who stressed the link between visions of demons and the phenomenon of prophecy.

Several discussions of problems concerning prophecy in Ashkenazi hasidic esoteric literature deal with a phenomenon traditionally called in Hebrew *sarei kos ve-sarei bohen*,⁵² “the princes of the glass and the princes of the thumb.” The term refers to a universal practice of divination, using a thin layer of oil spread upon a bright surface, which may be a piece of glass, a sword, a mirror or even a fingernail—all materials often mentioned in this connection in Hebrew descriptions. The belief was that demons can be compelled to reveal themselves on such surfaces, and when they are asked questions by a professional sorcerer (usually a non-Jew) they must reveal secrets. This practice was used to solve many everyday problems, most often to find lost articles or to catch a thief (generally to reveal where stolen goods were hidden).⁵³ The sorcerer or the witch would receive a request, the owner of the lost goods would usually participate in the ceremony, and when the right demon, who was responsible for that area was brought by the force of incantations, an answer would be revealed.

This common practice seems to have been very well known in medieval

50. This stratification of “airs” or “winds” is based on Sefer Yeşirah, chap. 1, secs. 9–10. Following Rav Saadia, Rabbi Eleazar of Worms in his commentary (Przemysl, 1883) described this heirarchy in detail (see especially p. 3c).

51. See my *Esoteric Theology*, pp. 184–90.

52. See Samuel Daiches, *Babylonian Oil Magic in the Talmud and Later Jewish Literature* (London, 1913); Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, (New York, 1939), pp. 219–22, 307–8; and my study, “Sarei kos ve-sarei bohen,” *Tarbiz* 32 (1963): 359–69 (reprinted in *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature*, pp. 34–43).

53. The Ashkenazi Hasidim also used some more “prophetic” means to achieve this; compare the story told by Rabbi Judah the Pious concerning the discovery of a thief in *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature*, pp. 10–12.

Germany,⁵⁴ probably after it had been brought from the east to Europe by the Arabs. The Ashkenazi Hasidim refer to it as a commonplace occurrence which does not have to be described and discussed in detail; no doubt the readers were familiar with it. The problem, however, is that of the relationship between this elementary form of magic and prophecy. It seems that here the Ashkenazi Hasidim found an unnoticed element in this practice which conformed easily to their theology.

The key detail in this magical practice was that neither the sorcerer nor the person requesting the practice could see the demons in the thin layer of oil. The demon could be seen only by a child, a small boy or a virgin girl. The adults surrounding the bright surface did not see anything, but the child would describe in great detail what he saw in the oil—a demon dressed in a certain manner having a certain identifying mark. Often the sorcerer would instruct the child to send that demon back and ask another one to come, until the right demon appeared. The ability of the child to perceive things hidden even from professional magicians was the key to the success of the whole practice.

This detail was the cause for the intensive interest of the Ashkenazi Hasidim in this practice, because it seemed to illustrate the central problem in their concept of prophecy. The pietists relied upon the famous dictum of Rav Saadia Gaon, who stated that what the prophets had seen was a created angel, called the divine Glory (*kavod*).⁵⁵ But only one faction among the medieval esotericists accepted Saadia's view; others held different opinions. Some claimed that the whole process of prophecy is an internal, psychological one, and no element of external revelation is involved; the prophets described their dreams and their inner thoughts when they described divine revelation. Others—and these include the main teachers of the Ashkenazi Hasidic school, like Rabbi Judah the Pious and Rabbi Eleazar of Worms—held, following Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's interpretation of prophecy,⁵⁶ that the prophets did indeed see a divine revelation, and the revealed power is called the divine Glory. But this Glory is not a created angel, but a divine power, emanated from God, a spiritual being which is not bound by the laws of creation.

54. Lynn Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York, 1923), 2: 161, 168, 320, 354, 364–65, and 1: 774. Compare Rashi to Sanhedrin 67b and 101a.

55. Dan, *Esoteric Theology*, pp. 104–18.

56. In the twelfth chapter of his *Yesod mora*, as well as in his commentary to Exod. 33; see Dan, *Esoteric Theology*, pp. 113–16.

This controversy, which holds a central place in the esoteric theology of the Ashkenazi hasidic movement,⁵⁷ brought into discussion as a central theme the magical practice of *sarei kos* and *sarei bohen*, because at least two views could be supported by the procedure of this divinatory practice. Those who believed prophecy to be an internal, psychological process claimed that the demons invoked in this way have no real existence, they are nothing but dreams and imaginary visions, even though many people believe in their material existence. Others, like Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Eleazar claimed that this practice proves conclusively that prophecy is a real phenomenon, but that the revealed power is divine and not created. In biblical descriptions of prophetic visions there are some occurrences in which one person—the prophet himself—did see something—while other people standing beside him did not see anything, as in the case of Elisha and his servant when the city was surrounded by chariots of fire.⁵⁸ This proves, according to them, that the vision could not be natural, because natural phenomena can be seen either by all or by no one, being subservient to natural law; divine powers can have supernatural revelation of a selective kind, revealing themselves to a certain person while remaining hidden from others. Thus Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Eleazar proved that Rav Saadia's concept of created Glory was insufficient in explaining the process of prophecy, and only Ibn Ezra's description of the divine, emanated Glory can explain the facts. To this they added the fact that God implanted a miracle within the created world which can serve as a proof of this concept,⁵⁹ namely, the fact that only a child can see the demons when divination is practiced, while all others standing around see nothing; what can be done by every common witch can also be performed by the divine Glory, and therefore neither those who claim that prophecy is an imaginary process nor those who claim that a created angel is revealed can be right.

When Rabbi Eleazar explained the creation of the throne of Glory, he wrote:⁶⁰ "Another reason for its creation is for visions, for it is seen by the

57. Dan, *Esoteric Theology*, pp. 129–43, based on the detailed discussion in the first part of Bodl. MS Opp. 540, part of which was published in Dan, *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature*, pp. 148–87.

58. Dan, *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature*, pp. 165–66; 2 Kings 6:15–17.

59. This is one example for the use of a basic Ashkenazi hasidic theological idea, that God's miracles were implanted in the world to teach the righteous God's ways; see Dan, *Esoteric Theology*, pp. 88–93.

60. *Hokhmat ha-nefesh* (Lemberg, 1876), p. 18c–d (the pagination in this edition is completely arbitrary and wrong; this page is marked as p. 20. In the Safed edition, reprinted exactly

prophets in visions which include a divine message . . . and the Creator changes the visions according to His will.⁶¹ I shall give you an example, as they evoke *sarei bohen* with a child and he sees in them what his master wishes. The Creator created visions, to teach the prophets the content of His decrees . . . And among the philosophers⁶² there was a controversy about *sarei bohen* and *sarei kos*. Some of them said that the supervising angel⁶³ enters into the heart and creates thoughts in a person's heart and the child's, and changes his thoughts and gives him knowledge⁶⁴ which takes form in his mind like a thief and the stolen goods, and he sees everything, but he really does not see anything."

After reviewing this attitude, Rabbi Eleazar goes on to compare other interpretations, as does Rabbi Judah the Pious several times in his theological works.⁶⁵ In one place Rabbi Judah brings this practice as one example of the principle of *zekher 'asah le-nifle'otav*, the principle that states that every miraculous power of God has a "sign" or "remnant" in the world to prove God's powers⁶⁶ and concludes: "Do not be surprised because God's voice enters the prophet's ears and is not heard by others around him, for it is like a person talking into a tube, the other end of which is in someone else's ear, and, when he talks into it, one hears and the others do not hear. In the same way one sees divine visions and others do not. Is it not true that some people see in the fingernail and in the *sarei kos* and others do not see? In the same way do not be surprised about the visions of the prophets. For it is like a mirror, one can look into one and see everything that is in the opposite direction; so it is with *sarei kos* and *sarei bohen*—everything they see they see like a person looking into a mirror seeing a reverse image."⁶⁷

The Ashkenazi Hasidim used the analogy of this magical practice concerning several theological problems, but the comparison to prophecy is the

word for word and line for line, the pagination has been corrected, and this is the pagination used here). See Dan, *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature*, pp. 39–41.

61. According to the author, the changes in the visions are supernatural and therefore reflect divine characteristics.

62. "Philosophers" in this text means "sages," including Jews, and has nothing to do with Greek, Arabic or even Jewish philosophy, to which the Ashkenazi Hasidim were in fierce opposition. See Dan, *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature*, pp. 31–33.

63. According to their concept of divine providence, there is a supervising angel (*memunneh*), who directs the fate of each person; see Dan, *Esoteric Theology*, pp. 235–40.

64. The reading of this sentence in the manuscript is doubtful.

65. See Dan, *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature*, pp. 41–43.

66. Dan, *Esoteric Theology*, pp. 88–93.

67. Dan, *Studies in Ashkenazi Hasidic Literature*, pp. 171–72.

most frequent and insistent one. It is quite clear in the writings of these pietists that they never imagined an actual connection existing between the realms of demons and magic and the prophetic phenomenon; all their efforts were directed at analyzing the analogy between this practice and prophecy, based upon their monistic concept that the world of demons is an integral part of the world created by God, refuting any possibility of a dualistic attitude.

When seeking a source for Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen's description of the "demonic air" which is described as the "air of prophecy" one cannot neglect the possibility that the Ashkenazi Hasidim's analogy somehow turned into fact in Spain, two generations after Rabbi Judah's and Rabbi Eleazar's works were written. It is quite clear from Rabbi Isaac's references to the Ashkenazi Hasidim that he was not a direct disciple of their school, and those ideas of theirs which did reach him did so through intermediaries, about whom we have no definite knowledge whether they really knew this esoteric doctrine from a first-hand source. It seems probable, therefore, that the information that reached the Spanish kabbalist was far from accurate, and Rabbi Isaac could interpret it to mean that there is an actual connection between the process of prophecy and magical divination by the revelation of demons. If this was so, it was possible to conclude that the prophetic vision and the "use" (*shimmusha*) of demons originate from the same cosmic source, the "third air" in his mythical description.

It should be noted that the difference between *sarei bohen* and *shimmusha de-shedei* could be much smaller than it seems if we take into account the possibility that Rabbi Judah the Pious and his disciples did not speak about *sarei bohen* but about *shedei bohen*, that is, not "Princes of the Thumb" but "Demons of the Thumb." The Hebrew letters can easily be confused, and in one homiletical discussion by Rabbi Judah of the talmudic section referring to these powers it is evident that he read "demons" and not "princes."⁶⁸

It is probable, therefore, that Rabbi Isaac used inaccurate traditions originating in the schools of the Ashkenazi Hasidim to describe his concept of the world and the place of demons in it. It is possible, therefore, that he used the same sources, in a similar creative way, to devise his myth of the

68. A homily by Rabbi Judah the Pious (Bodl. MS Opp. 540, fol. 84v) explains the *leshad ha-shemen* ("a cake baked in oil") in Num. 11:8 as referring to these "princes," so that it is clear that he called them "shedim" and not "sarim." Prof. E. E. Urbach kindly informed me that in the commentaries in medieval halakhic literature concerning the relevant passages in Sanhedrin (above, n. 54), the halakhists often refer to "shedim."

“destroyed worlds,” which, unlike the “air of the use of demons” has a crucial place in his concept of evil and the creation of a mythological demonology.

IV

Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen began his story of the origins of evil by describing a detailed myth concerning the “destroyed worlds,” worlds which were created before our world but could not exist. The importance which he attributes to this myth is clear from the long opening statement, telling how this tradition had reached him: “Now we shall turn to speak about the system of the evil powers which are in heaven, of those which were created and then annihilated suddenly. When I was in the great city of Arles, masters of this tradition showed me a booklet, a very old one, the writing in it being rough and different from our writing. It was transmitted in the name of a great rabbi and a gaon called Rabbi Maşliaḥ, for the old gaon, our Rabbi Pelaṭiah, was from the holy city of Jerusalem, and it was brought by a great scholar and Hasid called Rabbi Gershom of Damascus. He was from the city of Damascus and lived in Arles about two years, and people there told stories about his great wisdom and wealth. He showed that booklet to the great sages of that age, and I copied some things from it—things which the sages of that generation had understood, for they were not familiar with that particular writing like those earlier sages who learned it from that scholar and Hasid.”⁶⁹

After this story, which does not include even one name or fact that can be verified by any other source, Rabbi Isaac describes the emanation of the first evil powers from a curtain below the third sefirah in the kabbalistic system, which he calls, like many early kabbalists before him, Teshuvah (repentance). The first three evil worlds to be emanated were destroyed, and Rabbi Isaac’s discussion of this is based on the talmudic and midrashic traditions about the earlier worlds—the one in the midrash stating that before God created this world he used to create other worlds and destroy them⁷⁰ and the talmudic tradition about the generations which were annihilated,

69. Scholem, *Qabbalot*, pp. 86–87.

70. Genesis Rabbah 9:2, ed. Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck (Berlin-Jerusalem, 1903), p. 68 and compare Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:11.

974 in number.⁷¹ Rabbi Isaac even goes further in homiletical treatment of the subject, by ascribing names to the princes ruling these lost worlds—Qamtiel, Beliel and 'Ittiel, names derived from the verse in Job which served as a basis for the talmudic homily.⁷²

The basic elements of this myth were taken, therefore, from well-known Hebrew homilies in popular sources. The major new twist given to the myth by Rabbi Isaac is centered on one element, which is completely new here; those previous worlds or generations were evil, and they were destroyed (*nimhu*, *qummeṭu*—the terms used by the midrash, which seem to be used by Rabbi Isaac in the sense of “inverse emanation.” Their emanation was reversed⁷³) because they were much too evil. It is impossible to state that they were destroyed because they contained a satanic element, for Rabbi Isaac’s description of our world stresses the existence and the power of the satanic element in it; the destruction was caused by their being totally evil, whereas when our world was created some angelic and good powers were emanated as well.

When seeking Rabbi Isaac’s sources for this myth we must concentrate on these two motifs: the identification of the destroyed worlds and generations as evil, and this evil as the cause of their destruction, while the existing world contains some good beside the evil element. Such a homily, containing exactly these motifs, is contained in Rabbi Eleazar of Worms’ *Hokhmat ha-nefesh*.⁷⁴

The subject discussed by Rabbi Eleazar is the purpose of the creation of the world:

Why did He create the world, for the Creator does not need the created and has no benefit from them, so why did He create the world? Before anything was created there were only He and His name alone, and He existed without any created being, so why did He need His creatures? Before the creation He did not need them [and he does not need them now]?

The truth is that God did not create the world for His own sake, for He has no benefit from a worthless world, but He said: “If I should create a world

71. Ḥagigah 13b–14a.

72. Job 22:16.

73. According to Rabbi Isaac (Scholem, *Qabbalat*, p. 88), they were emanated as spiritual worlds, and their end came in a spiritual manner, like the burning tip in an oil lamp which is plunged into the oil in order to stop its burning.

74. *Hokhmat ha-nefesh*, p. 10c–d.

without the Evil Yeşer⁷⁵ there will be no wonder if the creatures will be as good as the Ministering Angels;⁷⁶ and if I put into them a strong Evil Yeşer, they might be unable to overcome this Yeşer. Still, I might find two righteous people among them, like David.” He thus created worlds and destroyed them, for He did not find righteous people like David . . . and when He saw that there were no such righteous as David, He destroyed them.

He said: “The fact that there is not even one good person among all these is because I created the Evil Yeşer too strong in them . . .” and the Creator said: “The reason why I created such a strong Yeşer in them is, that if two [righteous] are found, He would be ungrateful if he did not create them. But he said: I created it too strong, therefore there is no good in them; I shall now create human beings with another Yeşer, the Good Yeşer.

Rabbi Eleazar’s extensive homily includes references to many verses which he interprets as describing the destroyed worlds, and he goes on to analyze the destroyed generations, and the evildoers of the period of the deluge. His main argument is quite clear, relying to a certain extent on the midrashic treatment of the subject, but expressing some of the most important theological concepts of the Ashkenazi hasidic movement. Righteousness, according to these pietists, can be measured only by means of the opposition which one has to overcome; there can be no righteousness where the only drive is a good one. For this reason, the angels are not regarded as righteous. If so, ideal righteousness, the highest possible religious achievement, is one which is demonstrated against impossible odds, without any divine help, like a created person who has only an Evil Yeşer in him and still succeeds, to some extent, to overcome it and be righteous (this might be the reason why the example of righteousness given is David; it cannot be doubted that he had a very strong evil inclination). The fact is that creation by Evil Yeşer alone did not produce even one such person; still, God had to create these unsuccessful worlds, for he could not damn them into non-existence before the evil was performed. If even two righteous persons were to overcome all the obstacles and do some good in those evil worlds, God would have been ungrateful if he did not create them.⁷⁷

The creation of our world is therefore described as a compromise, a

75. That is, in a perfect way.

76. This is based on the text in *Genesis Rabbah*, chap. 3, sec. 9.

77. Similar ideas were expressed elsewhere in the thirteenth century, as in the mystical “*Sefer Ha-ḥayyim*” (MSS Brit. Lib. Or. 1055, Munich 209). See Dan, *Esoteric Theology*, pp. 230–35 and compare *Sefer ha-yashar* (Venice, 1544), chap. 1.

reluctant one, by God. He decided to add a Good Yeşer to help human beings become righteous. This, of course, degrades their righteousness, for it is now achieved with divine help, and not by overcoming maximum difficulties. Still, this compromise is the only way to create a world that could exist, after the repeated failures of the previous period. Obviously, according to Rabbi Eleazar a world cannot exist unless there are in it at least two righteous persons. (It is possible to surmise that such existence is dependent also on the extent of their righteousness, which is smaller in our world than it could have been in the Evil Yeşer worlds; it means, paradoxically enough, that the powers of existence of this world are lesser than in the ancient destroyed ones; if one of those could exist, it would have been much more valid than our own.)

Rabbi Eleazar's interpretation of the myth of the destroyed worlds is one according to which God tried at first to create "ideal" worlds which would be completely evil, and thus would be able to produce ideal, complete righteousness. Failing in that, he created a mixed world, in which good and evil are combined, and which successfully produces from time to time righteous persons which justify its existence. It is quite clear that there is no trace of a dualistic attitude in Rabbi Eleazar's theology. Evil comes from God directly, and it fulfills a divine function. The extent of evil in every phase of the creation is decided by God, according to his divine plan, which is a perfectly good one—to produce righteousness. Evil is a necessary means to bring righteousness forward, to test it in the most difficult circumstances,⁷⁸ and to justify the existence of the world by it. Rabbi Eleazar's achievement in this formulation includes an explanation of the evil character of this world: it is necessary for the sake of the righteous, who could not otherwise show their true nature. But this explanation of the meaning of evil does not include any dualistic or gnostic inclination.

This theology includes the basic elements of Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen's myth of the destroyed worlds: The previous worlds were completely evil—they were destroyed because of their completely evil nature. The theology is radically different from Rabbi Eleazar's, for Rabbi Isaac does not offer an explanation as to why these worlds should have been evil according to the divine plan, but it seems that one can safely surmise that Rabbi Isaac's myth was produced under the impact of Rabbi Eleazar's radical theology, which was given a completely new twist in the framework of Rabbi Isaac's mytho-

78. See my discussion of their ethical attitude in *Hebrew Ethical and Homiletical Literature* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 121–45.

logical concept of evil, which is so different from Rabbi Eleazar's instrumental one.

Rabbi Eleazar's system does not include an element of strife, except the struggle within the soul of the Hasid who is trying to become righteous. Rabbi Isaac's myth is based to a very large extent on descriptions of mythical struggle:

These souls,⁷⁹ which are angelic emanations, existed potentially within the depth of the Emanator, hidden from everything, but before they could come out of their potential existence into reality, another world was emanated, from strange forms and destructive appearances. The name of the ruler of this emanation, a prince over all its forces, is Qamtiel. These are the Cruel Ones, who began to rebuke and to disrupt the emanation. Immediately there exuded a decree from the Prince of Repentance, who is called Karoziel,⁸⁰ who is also called the Echo of Repentance, and said: "Masokhiel, Masokhiel,⁸¹ destroy what you have created and collect your emanations back to you, for it is not the wish of the King of Kings, blessed be He, that these emanations will exist in the worlds. They returned and were annihilated; in the same way that they were emanated they atrophied. Scholars explained this process by an example—like a string saturated in oil which is burning by the oil it constantly absorbs; when you wish to turn it off, you sink it into the oil which makes it burn; the same oil which makes it give light turns it back to nothing.

After this, another world was emanated, from strange forms and foreign appearances, the name of the ruler of their emanation and the prince of their forces is Beliel. These were worse than the first ones in rebuking and disrupting all kinds of emanation, until a decree came forth from the King of Kings, and they were annulled in a moment like the first ones. After that a third world was emanated from strange forms, stranger than the first and the second; the name of its ruler and prince of their forces is 'Ittiel. These are worst of all. It is their wish and ambition to be on top of the divine, to distort and cut the divine tree with all its branches, until there came a decree from the divine Will that it will be annihilated like the first and second ones, and it was decreed and decided that such an emanation will never again come to the world's air, will never be remembered or mentioned. These are the worlds about which the ancient sages said that God was creating worlds and destroying them.⁸²

79. Meaning: spiritual emanations.

80. From the Hebrew *karoz*, crier.

81. From the Hebrew *masakh*, curtain.

82. Scholem, *Qabbalat*, pp. 87–88.

The difference between this mythical description and Rabbi Eleazar's homily is as clear as the similarities. Rabbi Eleazar's monism is replaced by a stark dualism in this realm, and the relatively systematic inquiry into the problems of the creation and divine providence is replaced by an unexplained myth, visionary rather than explanatory. Still, the idea that the destroyed worlds were ones of unmitigated evil, which caused their destruction, to be replaced by a world in which good and evil are combined, is based on Rabbi Eleazar's speculation.

V

The comparison between Rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen's treatise on the "Left Emanations" and those sources which we can identify with some extent of certainty does not diminish the impact of Rabbi Isaac's original concepts, but rather enhances it. These sources do not constitute basic elements of his mythological worldview, but only materials used when building the innovative kabbalistic system which was destined to have a major impact upon later kabbalists, especially the author of the Zohar. Though one can never be certain that most of the relevant sources have been found and properly analyzed, the three clear examples described above can at least offer the major outlines of the structure of Rabbi Isaac's use of previous sources. These outlines seem to suggest that Rabbi Isaac did rely on previous material in secondary motifs, whereas his basic attitudes cannot be found to date in any known Hebrew work.

If this is the situation at the present stage of the study of Rabbi Isaac's theology, the main questions remain: What drove Rabbi Isaac to create this novel attitude toward the world, creation, Satan, Samael, Lilith, demons, divination, and the destroyed worlds? What is the underlying mythical or mystical vision which brought forth this new combination of older material, painted in daring, new colors? In other words: What is the basic difference between Rabbi Isaac's concept of evil and that of all other Jewish writers before him?

In chapter nineteen of his treatise, after the detailed description of Samael and Lilith and the fight between Asmodeus and Samael over the "Younger Lilith," Rabbi Isaac states:

It is said that from Asmodeus and his wife Lilith a great prince was born in

heaven, the ruler of eighty thousand destructive demons, and he is called Ḥarba de-'Ashmedai Malka ("The Sword of the King Asmodeus"), and his name is Alpafonias,⁸³ and his face burns like fire. He is also called Gorigor,⁸⁴ [for] he antagonizes and fights the princes⁸⁵ of Judah, who is called Gur Aryeh Yehudah. And from the same form from which that destroyer was born, another prince was born in heaven,⁸⁶ from the source of Malkhut,⁸⁷ who is called Ḥarba di-Meshiḥa ("The Sword of the Messiah"), and he too has two names, Meshiḥiel and Kokhviel.⁸⁸ When the time comes, and God wishes it, this sword will come out of its sheath, and the prophecies will come true: "For My sword hath drunk its fill in heaven; behold, it shall come down upon Edom."⁸⁹ "There shall step forth a star out of Jacob,"⁹⁰ amen. Soon in our time we shall have the privilege of seeing the face of the righteous messiah, we and all our people.⁹¹

In the last paragraph where the myth of Samael and Lilith is developed, Rabbi Isaac states:

I shall now teach you a wonderful, unknown thing. You already know that Evil Samael and Wicked Lilith are like a sexual pair, who by means of an intermediary⁹² receive an emanation of evil and wickedness, one from the other, and emanate it onwards. I shall explain this relying on the esoteric meaning of the verse: "In that day the Lord with His sore and great and strong sword will punish leviathan the slant serpent and leviathan the tortuous serpent"—meaning Lilith—"and He will slay the dragon that is in the sea."⁹³ As there is a pure leviathan in the sea and he is called a serpent, so there is a great impure serpent in the sea, in the usual sense of the term. And it is the same above [in the divine world], in a secret way. And the heavenly serpent is a blind prince,⁹⁴ who is like an intermediary between Samael and Lilith and his

83. The form of this name is quite mysterious, but it seems that it might contain the Hebrew element, *penei 'esh* ("fiery face"), which is included in the description of this power.

84. The Hebrew element *gur* ("cub") is evident here as a scion of Judah.

85. It should be "prince" in the singular.

86. The author follows the same structure of parallel births, as he had stated concerning Adam and Eve and Samael and Lilith.

87. "Malkhut," Kingdom, has here a double meaning, both as the tenth sefirah in the kabbalistic system and as a symbol of the Kingdom of Judah.

88. Based on the verse in Numbers 24:17 which was interpreted as referring to the messiah.

89. Isaiah 34:5.

90. Numbers 24:17.

91. Scholem, *Qabbalat*, p. 99.

92. This term is used here in a derogatory sense—an intermediary who leads one to sin.

93. Isaiah 27:1, and compare Bava Batra 74b. See Scholem's note, *Qabbalat*, p. 100, n. 5.

94. Samael's name is obviously interpreted here by Rabbi Isaac as derived from *suma* =blind.

name is Tanin'iver (Blind Serpent) . . . and he is the one who brings about the union between Samael and Lilith. If he were created in the fullness of his emanation he would have destroyed the whole world in one moment . . . When there is a divine wish, and the emanation of Samael and Lilith diminishes somewhat the emanation achieved by the Blind Prince, they will be completely annihilated by Gabriel, the prince of power, who invokes war against them with the help of the prince of mercy, then the esoteric meaning of the verse we have quoted will come true.⁹⁵

The concluding paragraphs of the treatise deal exclusively with this same subject. The final destruction of the powers of evil, Samael, Lilith and the serpent, by messianic powers, and a glowing description of messianic times, after evil has been overcome, conclude the treatise.

If we try now to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this section, we have to take into account the full scope of the myth told by Rabbi Isaac. In this way it will become evident that Rabbi Isaac did not combine the motifs he borrowed from earlier sources to produce a new description of the creation, or even to explain the existence of evil in the world in the past and in the present. The myth he presented in this treatise is a coherent one, starting with the powers of evil which preceded the creation and concluding with the description of the messianic victory over evil.

One of the basic characteristics of this myth is the consistent attempt to produce parallelisms, to describe all existence in terms of two similar antagonistic powers. This is evident both within the realm of evil—Asmodeus and Samael, the Older Lilith and the Younger Lilith—as well as in the relations between the evil powers and the good. The Sword of Asmodeus is reflected in the Sword of the Messiah; the pure leviathan is reflected in the evil leviathan, and so forth. Even the creation of Samael and Lilith is a parallel to the creation of Adam and Eve. Rabbi Isaac did not hesitate to depart radically from the content of his sources in order to achieve this, as he did in this last detail, forsaking the myth of Lilith as Adam's first wife in order to be able to present a complete parallel between the two pairs.

This basic attitude brings into focus the meaning of the title of the treatise, a meaning easily neglected because this idea became after Rabbi Isaac one of the most famous characteristics of kabbalistic thought—"Left Emanation," called by the Zohar *siṭra 'ahra* (= "The Other Side," meaning Evil).⁹⁶ Rabbi Isaac's concept of two systems of divine emanations, similar

95. Scholem, *Qabbalat*, pp. 101–2.

96. "Other" in the Zoharic terminology concerning evil means both "left" and "evil," while

in many details but one of good and one of evil, was not an idea standing alone, but an integral part of a mythological worldview which felt that all existence is governed by the antagonism between pairs of similar structure and conflicting content. This attitude can be found in almost every paragraph of this treatise.

As the examples translated above show, these pairs are in continuous conflict, both within the realm of evil and between the evil system and the good one. It seems that in this mythology the parallel pairs should by nature fight each other, and that this struggle will not cease until one side is completely annihilated and true unity will reign in the divine and earthly worlds. Thus, it is not just a dualistic mythology, but one which is marked by an internal structure which necessitates continuous struggle.

It seems that the outcome of this struggle might be the key to the main drive behind the creation of this myth, namely, the messianic victory and the annihilation of evil. It should be stressed that this treatise by Rabbi Isaac can be regarded as the first Hebrew apocalypse to be written in medieval Europe, and certainly it is the first treatment by a kabbalist of the messianic motif in any detail. The dualistic character of the work, its gnostic undertones and its stark demonological mythology are means to express the basic apocalyptic theme: the struggle between good and evil will come to its conclusion when the messianic sword is raised and destroys the powers of evil. The history of these powers is told in detail in order to lay the foundations of the story of the final victory over those powers.

Messianism was not the main subject, nor the main concern, of kabbalistic writers in the first hundred years of the kabbalah, nor even in the writings of nonkabbalistic authors of that period. The original vision of Rabbi Isaac should be seen against this background, and his main innovation should be seen as a whole: a mythology of evil expressing a messianic apocalypse.⁹⁷

siṭra, "side," refers to the system of emanations. See G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 122–27, and Isaiah Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1949), 1: 288–92.

97. It is possible to compare this process to a somewhat similar one which occurred several centuries before Rabbi Isaac, namely, the description of the evil power, Armilos, in the Book of Zerubbabel (see Yehudah Even-Shmuel, *Midreshei ge'ulah*, [Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1954], pp. 56–88, and compare my discussion in *The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages*, pp. 33–46). In this case too we have a mythical description of an evil power, the son of Satan and a beautiful stone statue in Rome, who became the spiritual as well as political leader of the world and threatened to destroy the people of Israel. The original mythology of the power of evil is closely connected with the emergence of a new mythology of the messiah and a detailed description of messianic victories.