DIGNITATES AND KAVOD:
TWO THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS
IN CATALAN MYSTICISM*

I

The affinities between Ramon Lull and Jewish mysticism have been dealt with by several scholars.¹ Two basic issues have been addressed in this context: the combinatorial theory of the Catalan mystic and his view of the *dignitates*. The first topic involves the question of the possible impact of *Sefer Yetzirah*, the «Book of Formation», that is the main source of the medieval Jewish theory of combination of letters. The assumption that such a Jewish theory had a certain impact on the Lullian *ars combinatoria*, has been advanced by several scholars: Gershom Scholem,² Frances A. Yates,³ more recently Mario Satz,⁴ but more eminently Erhard W. Platzeck.⁵ It seems however, that it was Pico della Mirandola who had been the first to point out the affinity between the combinatory Kabbalah and Lull’s views.⁶ More recently I have attempted to point out the possible influence of a very peculiar type of Kabbalah, which combined the combinatorial theory of *Sefer Yetzirah* with some sephirotic theories as formulated by Catalan Kabbalists, especially Rabbi Ezra of Gerona. In an anonymous commentary on the Jewish prayer, apparently

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¹ The lecture was originally delivered at a congress on Ramon Lull in Valencia, in 1993.
composed in Catalonia in the sixties or the seventies of the 13th century, I have found the use of three concentric circles, where the Hebrew alphabets have been inscribed, together with a table where the theological significance of each of the letters have been detailed. In a note printed some years ago, I proposed to see in those drawings, or their possible Jewish mystical sources or parallels, a plausible source for Lull’s more famous use of the same types of devices in order to extract theological and scientific truths. There an effort was made to emphasize not only the similarity between the sources I have discussed but also the question of their availability in time and space.

In other words, in order to propose a more solid link between two phenomena, the existence of the two topics in a geographical vicinity in the same period may constitute an important finding. This methodological finding seems to me important insofar as the other topic is involved. It would be, accordingly, more reasonable to look for those specific theosophical theories embraced by the Catalan Kabbalists as the more plausible sources of Lull, if at all, before someone resorts to an explanation, that in itself may also be correct, that forms of Kabbalistic thought found outside the Catalan regions might have been the source of Lull’s views. To put it differently, the better understanding of the history of the Kabbalah in the immediate vicinity of the Christian mystic may contribute to a more precise understanding of his affinities to Jewish sources. However, this proposal is still a desideratum: modern scholarship of Kabbalah had not yet delineated, in a detailed manner, the various trends in Catalan Kabbalah. This is a desideratum, important in itself as it deals with a main concept permeating discussions in a major phase in the history of Jewish Kabbalah, but also having some possible implications for non-Jewish thought. In more concrete terms, it would also be reasonable to treat the possible similarities between the theory of dignitates, as found in some of Lullian sources, and the Kabbalistic theory of sephirot found in Catalonia. This suggestion means that most of the scholarly proposals to understand Lull’s dignitates, which resorted to the standard theory of ten sephirot did not take in account the specific Kabbalistic theories advanced before Lull, but recoursed, in some cases to the Zoharic theosophy, formulated in Castile, in the period later than the decades when Catalan Kabbalah was formulated.

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Let me be more specific; In his «Algunas relaciones entre la doctrina juliana y la Cabala» José M. Millás Valldecorsa has drawn the parallel between the Lullian dignitates, conceived as real entities within the divine nature, and identical with this nature, and the Kabbalistic sephirot. All scholars who agreed with this pertinent comparison, accepted the more general and widespread view of the divine realm as composed of ten sephirot and the higher, hidden deity, called in many sources by the name 'Ein Sof, the infinite God. Indeed, this is a very important form of Kabbalistic theosophy, found in early Kabbalistic sources in Catalonia even before Lull’s birth and in his lifetime and afterwards elsewhere in the Kabbalistic literature. However, the discrepancy between the nine dignitates in some later Lullian texts or sixteen in earlier ones - but never ten - and the ten sephirot contributed to the marginalization of the theory about the possible Kabbalistic source of the dignitates in more recent scholarship. Both the theory advanced by E.W. Platzeck, as to the Augustinian source of Lull, or Erigenian origin of Lull as proposed by Yates have contributed to the neglect of research regarding the possible nexus between dignitates and sephirot. Following Yates’ great authority, no other than the famous Gershom Scholem, accepted her conclusion when he indicated that «I could not convince myself of any historical influences of the Kabbalah on Ramon Lull’s doctrine of the dignitates of the deity...As regards the names and the structure of the sefirot and the dignitates, the correspondence is only superficial and slight, and in part the almost necessary consequence of the enumeration of the divine attributes. Precisely the number ten plays no role at all with Lull.» It seems that the trend of modern scholarship is definitively not in favor of the Kabbalistic source of the dignitates. I too have joined this recent unanimity when I stated that «it seems that the influence of the theosophical Kabbalah on Lull’s conception of dignitates Dei can be neglected.» However I had, fortunately enough, qualified my agreement

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9 ibidem, pp. 246ff; Satz, ibidem.
11 ibidem, pp. 78-121.
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to this view by mentioning that it is conditioned by the known material, and «if further studies will not unfold new material.»

Here I would like to introduce again the plausibility of the Kabbalistic source of some aspects of the Lullian theory of dignitates, on the basis of some new manuscript material and a new reading of already known Kabbalistic texts. Since these texts were composed before Lull started his literary activity and were known or some of them even composed in Catalonia, I take this opportunity to expose a theosophical theory embraced by some Kabbalists, that was less dealt with by modern scholarship.

Unlike the majority of Kabbalists throughout centuries, some early Kabbalists claimed that the first sephirah, commonly known as Keter, the crown, is identical to the causa causarum, a stand that admits the existence of ten sephirot, but assumes that the first one transcends qualitatively the other lower nine. This view is found in a text, found in several manuscripts, which belongs, in my opinion, to none other than one of the first Kabbalists, Rabbi Ya'akov ben Saul, known as the Nazarite, a Provencal Kabbalist of 12th century, living for part of his life in Lunel.

This is a short anonymous text, found in the immediate vicinity of the few vestiges of the teachings of Rabbi Jacob, and those of Rabbi Abraham ben David, known as the Rabad, and this vicinity, together with the conceptual consonance of the terminology of this short text to those statements brought in the name of Rabbi Jacob, brought me to the conclusion as to its authorship, and thus to the possibility that this is a very early Kabbalistic text: 'Illat ha- 'Ilot, Hokhmah, Binah, Hesed, Pahad, Tiferet, Netzah, Hod, Berit, Malkhut.

If my conjecture as to the identity of the author of this enumeration of the divine entities is correct, then at the very beginning of the Kabbalah in Europe the philosophical concept Causa causarum stands at the beginning of a list that includes nine additional appellations of the sephirot, while the name of the first sephirah, Keter, is not mentioned at all.

This Provencal Kabbalist was the contemporary of another one, the already mentioned Rabad. Unlike the latter, Rabbi Jacob the Nazarite is not known to have established a Kabbalistic school that might have continued his teachings. The Rabad's views however, were elaborated in Provence, by his son, the famous Isaac the Blind, and his grand-son, Rabbi Asher ben David, as well as by some Catalan

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14 ibidem. See also now Hames, Judaism and Ramon Llull, pp. 93ff.
15 On this figure see Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah, pp. 37, 207-209, 229-233.
16 See Carlo Bernheimer, Codices Hebræici Bybliothecae Ambrosianæ (Florentia, 1933), p. 57.
Kabbalists living in Gerona. This school is characterized, inter alia, by the doctrine of the Deus absconditus, the infinite, Ein Sof, that transcends the spiritual entities named sephirot, which are conceived to be ten. In this Kabbalistic school, the prevailing view of the nature of the sephirot is that they are the instruments, the tools of the divine activities, or alternatively the vessels where the divine power dwells, or again, the modi of the divine revelation.

However, it seems that Rabbi Jacob’s speculations did not disappear. There were early Kabbalists, apparently in Gerona of the early 13th century, who did not accept the view of the school of Rabbi Isaac the Blind as to the existence of a transcendental trans-sephirotic Godhead. One of them claimed, for example, that there is no entity higher than the first sephirah, and that no one should separate the sephirot from each other, since they are united, implying that they are divine. In other words, it seems that there is a certain nexus between the theosophy that assumes that there is a transcendent trans-sephirotic source of the sephirot and the view that they are the instruments of Its manifestation and of the creation of the world.

On the other hand, the view that there is no transcendental entity beyond the sephirot is related to the view that they constitute the divinity. In a manner similar to the Christian Trinity, where the divine personae are three but are nevertheless conceived to be one, the sephirot are conceived of as ten, but constituting one divine configuration. The sephirot are conceived, in those fewer texts, as constituting the very essence of the divine, which means that the divinity comprises those sephirot. The most important exponent of this essentialistic approach to the nature of the sephirot was, nevertheless, not an obscure figure, or some anonymous text, but one of the most famous of the Catalan Kabbalists, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, better known as Nahmanides [1194-1270], who lived for the greatest part of his life in Gerona. In his Kabbalistic hints, and more expressly in those from his entourage, the essentialistic stand regarding the sephirot was exposed. Moreover,
one of the most elaborated discussions of Nahmanides’ concerning the emergence of the sephirotic realm, may be plausibly understood as assuming that the first sephirah, Keter, is conceived to be an infinite entity, which is not created, but is the source of the other nine sephirot. Indeed, in some instances, in this source of Nahmanides, it is reasonable to assume that he believed that there is an aspect of this sephirah that is unknown to us, davar ne’elam, «a hidden entity» but Nahmanides never uses the term ‘EIN SOF as a noun or an appellation for a transcendental stratum within the divine. Moreover, as I have proposed in a separate study, it is very plausible that the first sephirah was conceived to have withdrawn from the space of the sephirotic realm in order to create the locus of the future emanation of the nine other sephirot. Though Nahmanides does not introduce the term Causa causarum as distinct from the nine other sephirot, as Rabbi Jacob had done, the idea of a sharp difference between the first sephirah and the other nine is accentuated by the occurrence of the concept of Tzimtzum whose career in the history of the Kabbalah still waits more detailed analyses. The conception of a chasm between the first and the nine is crucial for the proper understanding of Nahmanides’ theosophy.

It is in this context that Nahmanides uses, time and again, the term Kavod, in order to designate each of the sephirot:

The supernal Keter, blessed be He, is fuller than the heart can contemplate His glory [kevodo], and he comprised the essence of the glory ... and He made from them the essence of the glory hinted at by the [divine] name Yod He’ and this glory is called Hokhmah ... and the well was flowing and he made the essence of the glory named ... Binah, and the well flowed again and created the essence of the glory named Gedullah and Gevrurah ... and He made a glory named ‘Elohim Hayyim, which are Netzah and Hod ... and the well flowed and created a glory.

26 ibidem, pp. 63-64. See also Hames, Judaism and Ramon Lulll, pp. 38-39.
27 The text, found in Nahmanides’ authentic Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah, has been printed by Gershom Scholem, Peraqim le-Toldot Sifrut ha-Qabbalah (Jerusalem, 1931), pp. 103-105; see also p. 108. For an analysis see Idel, ibidem, pp. 60-68. The final phrase of the text cited here stands for the last sephirah, Makhut, designated in other discussions of this Kabbalist as the created glory, Kavod nivra’. See Elliot Wolfson, «By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides’ Kabbalistic Hermeneutic», AJS Review 14 (1989), pp. 136-138, 147; idem, «The Secret of the Garment in Nahmanides», Daat 24 (1990), pp. XXV-XLIX; idel, ibidem, p. 65.
We may easily detect the resort to the collective term of glory insofar as the description of almost all of the ten sephirot is concerned. The Hebrew term translated by glory is *Kavod* and it is indeed a Biblical theological concept standing for the divine theophany. However, in Hebrew, the concept of glory is not the only possible way to understand this concept. It involves also the connotation of honor and dignity. In other words, though a translation of the reference to the sephirot as *Kavod* is regularly understood as referring to the multiple glories of the divine, the translation of this term as standing for ontological dignities is not a far fetched rendering. Thus, at the middle of the 13th century, a Kabbalistic theosophy has been formulated in Gerona, that uses the term *Kavod* as a technical term, within a system that emphasizes the distinction between the first sephirot, described as glory, and the other nine.

**III**

Nahmanides was a leading figure in Jewish Catalan life in the second half of the 13th century. He was well acquainted with Christian thought and participated in a well-known religious controversy in Barcelona before he left Spain, and he

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was in good relations with the king of Aragon. Nevertheless, his basic approach in matters of Kabbalah was of an extreme esotericism, insofar as he believed that the Kabbalistic secrets should be transmitted only to a few, well-trained persons among the Jews.\footnote{M. Idel, «We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This», in Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 51-73; Daniel Abrams, «Orality in the Kabbalistic School of Nahmanides: Preserving and Interpreting Esoteric Traditions and Texts», Jewish Studies Quarterly 3 (1996), pp. 85-102; Hames, Judaism in Ramon Lull, pp. 55-57.} This fact complicates the possibility of his theosophy becoming known outside an immediate circle of persons belonging to the Jewish elite who were in direct contact with him. They adopted too, an esoteric approach. Nevertheless, his most important disciple, and the recipient of his Kabbalistic secrets, was a leading Rabbi active in Barcelona in the lifetime of Lull: it is Rabbi Shlomo ben Abraham ibn Adret, known in the Jewish literature as Rashba. He was an exact contemporary of Lull. In an incipit of a lost letter, printed by Millás Vallicrosa, three names are mentioned «Abram Denaret,» «Rabbi Aaron,» and «Rabbi Ben Jue Salomon.»\footnote{Idel, «Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah», p. 173.} As Millás Vallicrosa has already indicated, the first name probably refers to Shlomo ibn Adret.\footnote{Ibidem, pp. 173-174.} This may be an indication that some type of relation between Lull and his contemporary Jewish theologians should be assumed. It seems, therefore, that Nahmanides' secret doctrine transpired beyond the close circle of his immediate followers. In any case, a contemporary of ibn Adret and Lull, and a person who was not a student of Nahmanides, Abraham Abulafia, describes in the eighties of the 13th century, the doctrine of some Kabbalists, who claim that there is nothing beyond, namely higher than the ten sephirot, and the view that the ten sephirot are the divinity.\footnote{Ve-Zot li-Yehudah, ed. Adolph Jellinek, Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik (Leipzig, 1854), vol. I, p. 19; Idel, Kabbalah, New Perspectives, pp. 121; idem, «Prayer in Provençal Kabbalah», p. 276 note 51.} Though written in Sicily, this statement is addressed to Rabbi Yehudah Salmon, who is probably identical to «Rabbi Ben Jue Salomon» mentioned by Lull. The fact that such a view was the subject of a correspondence between two Kabbalists, living in different countries, shows that the spell of secrecy that covered Nahmanides' theosophy was not impenetrable. Indeed, as I pointed out elsewhere, already at the very beginning of the eighties of this century Nahmanides' most important text, presenting the view of the sephirot as Kavod, was brought by Abulafia to Rome, and copied there.\footnote{«Abraham Abulafia and Menahem ben Benjamin in Rome: The Beginnings of Kabbalah in Italy» (forthcoming).}
Abulafia was, at least from the early seventies, a Kabbalist who, unlike Nahmanides, was less concerned with keeping his esoteric teachings secret, even less so if these teachings belong to Kabbalistic schools that were conceived as representing a form of Kabbalah 'lower' than his. In the middle of the eighties, he boasted that he discussed his Kabbalistic and messianic messages not only with Jews but also with Christians. Though I would not say that this ecstatic Kabbalist is indeed the source or the mediator of Nahmanides' vision of the sephirot as Kavod, the above details on Abulafia's attitude and activity may point to a possibility that Nahmanides' secrets transpired beyond the very small circle of his students, only shortly after the death of the master in 1270. After all, Abulafia himself received a copy of Nahmanides' Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah from somebody in Barcelona, sometime in the early seventies.

In suggesting that Nahmanides' resort to the term Kavod for pointing to each and every sephirot as a possible source for Lull's elusive term dignitates, I am aware that the specific cognomens of the sephirot and the dignitates differ, and I assume that the names for the dignitates were adopted from the Latin tradition, as pointed out by Yates. However, despite this fact, I do not see, for the time being, a better explanation for the emergence of Lull's dignitates than Nahmanides' term.

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38 ed., A. Jellinek, «'Sefer Ha-Ot', Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia», in Jubelschrift zum Siebzigsten Geburtstage des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz (Breslau, 1887), p. 76 [Hebrew].
39 See note 10 above.
40 In this context it is important to point out Rabbi Sabbetai Donnolo's use of the term Kavod as the locus of the ten sephirot. Cf. Wolfson, «The Theosophy of Sabbetai Donnolo». 
RESUM

This note proposes the possibility of the impact of the Kabbalistic theory of Kavod, as a designation of each of the ten sefirot, on Ramon Lull’s theory of dignitates. The Kabbalistic theory was presented in a Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah authored by the renown Catalan master Moses ben Nahman, known as Nahmanides, active in Gerona during the second third of the 13th century.