

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 combinatory 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 combinatory 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 For an important discussion of the different relations between Lull and Judaism and vice-versa, see Harvey J. Hames' important Ph.D. thesis, *Judaism in Ramon Lull (1232-1316)*, (Cambridge University, 1996).

² «Considérations sur l'histoire des débuts de la Kabbale chrétienne», in *Kabbalistes Chrétiens* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979), p. 41, note 10.

³ *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago and London, 1979), p. 96.

⁴ «Raymond Lulle et la Kabbalah dans l'Espagne du XIII siècle», in *Raymond Lulle: Christianism, Judaïsme, Islam* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1986), pp. 59-69.

⁵ «Descubrimiento y esencia del arte del Bto. Ramón Llull», *EL* 8 (1964), pp. 137-154; idem, *Raimund Lull* (Roma-Dusseldorf, 1962-1964), vol. 1, pp. 327-336.

⁶ *Opera Omnia* (Basle, 1572), p. 180; *ibid.*, pp. 108, 181.

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.⁷ 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 resorted, in some cases to the Zoharic theosophy, formulated in Castile, in the period later than the decades when Catalan Kabbalah was formulated.

⁷ M. Idel, «Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah: A Preliminary Observation», *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988), pp. 170-174. Cf. also Umberto Eco, «Pourquoi Lulle n'était pas un kabbaliste», *Magie du livre, Livres de magie, Aries* 15 (Paris, 1993), pp. 85-93.

II

Let me be more specific; In his «*Algunas relaciones entre la doctrina luliana y la Cabala*»⁸ José M. Millás Vallicrosa 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*.⁹ 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,¹⁰ or Eriegenian origin of Lull as proposed by Yates¹¹ 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 conclusion¹² 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 *sefiroth* 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.»¹³ However I had, fortunately enough, qualified my agreement

⁸ *Sefarad* 18 (1958), pp. 241-253.

⁹ *ibidem*, pp. 246ff; Satz, *ibidem*.

¹⁰ Frances A. Yates, *Lull and Bruno - Collected Essays*, vol. 1 (London, Boston and Henley, 1982), pp. 80, 101.

¹¹ *ibidem*, pp. 78-121.

¹² *Origins of the Kabbalah*, tr. A. Arkush, ed. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, (Princeton, 1987), p. 389, note 60.

¹³ Idel, «Ramon Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah», p. 170.

to this view by mentioning that it is conditioned by the known material, and «if further studies will not unfold new material.»¹⁴

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 Provençal Kabbalist of 12th century, living for part of his life in Lunel.¹⁵ 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-'Illot, Hokhmah, Binah, Hesed, Pahad, Tiferet, Netzah, Hod, Berit, Malkhut*.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

This Provençal 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

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 Hebraici Bybliothecae Ambrosianae* (Florentia, 1933), p. 57.

¹⁷ More on this text see M. Idel, «The Prayer in Provençal Kabbalah», *Tarbiz* 62 (1993) p. 274 [Hebrew].

Kabbalists living in Gerona.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ Moreover,

¹⁸ On the Geronese school see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 365-440.

¹⁹ See especially Scholem, *ibidem*, pp. 130-131, 265-269, 442-444.

²⁰ See Ephraim Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature*, ed. J. Hacker (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 302-315 [Hebrew]; M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 141-144.

²¹ See Gershom Scholem, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah* (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1948), p. 254.

²² This comparison has already been drawn by a 13th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, in a text referred to below.

²³ See Gottlieb, *Studies*, pp. 295-302; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 137-141.

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.²⁴ 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*.²⁵ 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.²⁶

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 *Gevurah* ... and He made a glory named '*Elohim Hayyim*, which are *Netzah* and *Hod* ... and the well flowed and created a glory.²⁷

²⁴ See M. Idel, «On the Concept of Zimzum in Kabbalah and its Research», in *Lurianic Kabbalah* ed. R. Elior and Y. Liebes (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 61-63 [Hebrew]; idem, «The Prayer in Provençal Kabbalah», pp. 272-276.

²⁵ Idel, «On the Concept», pp. 61-65.

²⁶ *ibidem*, pp. 63-64. See also Hames, *Judaism and Ramon Llull*, 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*, *Malkhut*, 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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 *sephirah*, 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 thought³⁰ and participated in a well-known religious controversy in Barcelona before he left Spain, and he

²⁸ See e.g. James Barr, «Theophany and Anthropomorphism in the Old Testament», *Supplement to Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. VII (Oxford, 1959), pp. 31-38; Alexander Altmann, «Saadya's Theory of Revelation: Its Origin and Background», *Saadya Studies*, ed. E.I. Rosenthal (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1943), pp. 4-25; Elliot R. Wolfson, «The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo, with Special Emphasis on the Doctrine of the Sefirot in *Sefer Hakhmoni*», *Jewish History* 6 (1992) = *The Frank Talmage Memorial*, pp. 281-316; idem, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) index, sub voce 'divine glory'; Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 97-98, 164, 180, 228, 407; Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1968), pp. 104-168 [Hebrew]; M. Idel, «Une figure d'homme au-dessus des sefirot (à propos de la doctrine des "éclats" de R. David ben Yehouda he-Hassid et ses développements)», tr. Charles Mopsik, *Pardes* 8 (1988), pp. 131-150; idem, «On the Concept», pp. 65-68, 74-77.

²⁹ See Numbers 24:11. See *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and Ch. A. Briggs (Oxford, 1898), p. 459.

³⁰ See Shlomo Pines, «Nahmanides on Adam in the Garden of Eden in the Context of Other Interpretations of Genesis, Chapters 2 and 3», *Exile and Diaspora, Studies in the History of Jewish People Presented to Prof. H. Beinart*, ed. A. Mirsky, A. Grossman, and Y. Kaplan (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 159-164 [Hebrew]; Amos Funkenstein, «Nahmanides' Symbolical Reading of History» in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. J. Dan and F. Talmage (Cambridge, Mass.: Association of Jewish Studies, 1982), pp. 129-150.

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.³¹ 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.»³² As Millás Vallicrosa has already indicated, the first name probably refers to Shlomo ibn Adret.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵

³¹ 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 Llull*, pp. 55-57.

³² Idel, «Lull and Ecstatic Kabbalah», p. 173.

³³ *ibidem*, pp. 173-174.

³⁴ *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 Provencal Kabbalah», p. 276 note 51.

³⁵ «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,³⁶ even less so if these teachings belong to Kabbalistic schools that were conceived as representing a form of Kabbalah 'lower' than his.³⁷ In the middle of the eighties, he boasted that he discussed his Kabbalistic and messianic messages not only with Jews but also with Christians.³⁸ 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 *sephirah* 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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³⁶ See his *Sefer 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, Ms. Oxford 1580, fol. 55a.

³⁷ M. Idel, «Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names», *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, & Typology*, ed. R. A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 108-111; Elliot R. Wolfson, «The Doctrine of Sefirot in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia», *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2 (1995), pp. 336-371; vol. 3 (1996), pp. 47-84.

³⁸ ed., A. Jellinek, «'Sefer Ha-Ot', Apokalypse des Pseudo-Propheten und Pseudo-Messias Abraham Abulafia», in *Jubelschrift zum Siebzigstengeburtstage 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.