

Adam Kadmon & the Anthropos

The Primordial Human as Cosmology in
Jewish Mysticism and Gnostic Scripture

Two traditions, one figure. The Kabbalists called him Adam Kadmon and said: repair him. The Gnostics called him the Anthropos and said: remember him. This book reads both, in their own words, and lets them argue.

An exploration in comparative cosmology

Adam Kadmon · Anthropos · Kabbalah · Gnosticism · Sefer Yetzirah · Zohar · Lurianic Kabbalah
· Nag Hammadi · Apocryphon of John · Poimandres · Pleroma · Sefirot · Tzimtzum · Yaldabaoth

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Prelude: The Figure Who Is at Once a Person, a World, and a Map of God

The primordial human is at once a person, a world, and a map of God.

This book follows one figure across two traditions that never agreed about anything, and finds that both of them drew him in the same shape.

Preface: The Human Being as a Diagram of Everything

There is a moment in the *Apocryphon of John*, a Gnostic text buried in Egypt for sixteen centuries and recovered by a farmer's spade in 1945, when the highest reality in the universe is described not as a king, not as a fire, not as a number — but as a human being. "The monad is a monarchy with nothing above it," the text says, and then it names what the invisible Spirit sees when it looks at itself: *the perfect Anthropos*, the human of the Pleroma, the archetype of every human face that would ever be sculpted in clay.

There is a moment in the *Zohar*, the great medieval book of Jewish mystical theology, when the shape of the cosmos before anything was differentiated is described in the same way. Before the sefirot emerge as distinct qualities, before the worlds separate from one another, there is a single configuration: *Adam Kadmon*, the Primordial Human, whose "head" is one height, whose "arms" stretch to two sides, whose "body" is the middle line of reality, whose "crown" is the unknowable.

Two traditions, one Syrian-Palestinian and one Greek-Egyptian, one Aramaic and one Coptic, one polemically Jewish and one polemically anti-cosmic, arrive at the same astonishing proposition from opposite directions. The deepest structure of reality — the thing you would draw if you had to draw everything — has the shape of a human body. Not a human body as we know it from the

mirror, but the *Urbild*: the body from which bodies are copied, the form that is prior to form, the person that is prior to persons.

This book is about that figure.

It is not a book about whether the Kabbalists or the Gnostics were right. That is not a question that scripture, philology, or history can settle, and pretending otherwise would be either dishonest or dull. It is a book about what happens when two ancient communities of interpreters, working on overlapping scriptural material and living in overlapping worlds, both decide that the human form is the key to cosmology — and then arrive at conclusions so similar in structure and so opposite in mood.

What this book does

It reads the primary texts closely and quotes them. For the Jewish material that means Genesis in Hebrew, the early midrashic collections, *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Shi'ur Komah* fragments and the *Hekhalot* literature, the *Zohar*, and the Lurianic corpus with its later interpreters. For the Gnostic material it means the Nag Hammadi codices — above all the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Tripartite Tractate* — together with the Hermetic *Poimandres*, the reports of the heresiologists who preserved what the Gnostics themselves did not, and the later Mandaean and Manichaean literatures where the same figure survives.

It distinguishes, at every point, between four different things that are routinely confused:

1. **What a text says.** The actual words, in the actual languages, in the actual manuscript.
2. **What a tradition says the text says.** The commentary tradition, which is often more interesting and always more influential.
3. **What a modern scholar infers.** The historical-critical reconstruction, with all its uncertainties openly marked.
4. **What the author of this book is expanding.** The constructive theological or cosmological move, which is flagged as such and never smuggled in as if it were the first three.

That fourth category is deliberate. You asked for reasonable expansions, and a book about a figure called "the Human" that refuses to think beyond its footnotes would be a betrayal of its subject. But an expansion is only worth anything if you can see where the sources stop. So expansions will be marked — usually with a phrase like *the text does not say this* or *this is an inference, not a citation*.

What this book does not do

It does not harmonize. The temptation, with two traditions this structurally similar, is to collapse them into a single perennial philosophy: *everyone was really saying the same thing about the cosmic human*. That is false, and the falseness is the most interesting part.

The Kabbalist's Adam Kadmon is the *inside* of God — the first configuration of divinity after withdrawal, and therefore the most holy thing that exists, the pattern of the commandments, the reason Israel's ritual has cosmic effect. The Gnostic's Anthropos is the *victim* of a catastrophe — a divine figure who

descends into a world made by incompetent or malicious powers, and whose image in us is the one thing those powers could never quite replicate. For the Kabbalist, the body is a disclosure. For the Gnostic, the body is a prison that nevertheless remembers its architect.

Both say: *the human being is the shape of the cosmos*. One says it as praise. The other says it as diagnosis. The distance between those two utterances is the whole argument of this book.

It does not adjudicate between traditions as if they were competing hypotheses to be scored. Where a text is ambiguous, the ambiguity gets stated. Where a doctrine is attested in three incompatible versions, all three appear. Where a tradition's own insiders disagreed — and they disagreed constantly — the disagreement is presented as a feature of the tradition, not a defect in the summary.

And it does not pretend that "the Gnostics" were one thing. The category is a heresiologists' invention, and modern scholarship has spent a century pulling it apart. What we have is a cluster of schools — Sethian, Valentinian, Hermetic, Thomasine, later Mandaean and Manichaean — who shared vocabulary, shared scriptures, and quarreled bitterly about what any of it meant.

How to read the parts

Part One sets the problem. Why does a primordial human appear across so many cosmologies? What are the recurrent structural roles that such a figure can occupy? Which questions are cosmological, and which are only dressed as cosmology?

Part Two is the Jewish material. It follows one thread — Adam Kadmon — from the two creation accounts in Genesis through the rabbinic Adam, the measurement mysticism of *Shi'ur Komah*, the ten *sefirot belimah* of *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Zohar*'s androgynous primordial Adam, and the fully developed Lurianic system, down to its critics, its Hasidic rehabilitation, and its appropriation by Christian Kabbalists.

Part Three is the Gnostic material. It follows the Anthropos from the unknowable Father's self-perception in the *Apocryphon of John*, through the Sethian and Valentinian systems, into the Hermetic *Poimandres*, and out to the Mandaean and Manichaean descendants where the figure becomes an ethical drama about the soul's escape.

Part Four puts them in one room. It compares their cosmogonies side by side, states plainly what they share and what cannot be reconciled, examines the gender question where the two traditions diverge most sharply, and ends with what each tradition says the primordial human is *for*.

Three appendices follow: a glossary of terms in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Coptic; a timeline; and a table mapping the sefirot against the aeons, which is offered as a study aid and an explicit oversimplification.

A note on citation. Scriptural quotations are given in English with the Hebrew or Greek term in parentheses where the wording matters. Where a translation is contested, more than one rendering is shown. Rabbinic and mystical sources are cited by the standard conventions — *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:1, *Zohar* I:20b, *Etz Chaim* 1:2 — so that a reader with access to the sources can check the claim. The Nag Hammadi texts are cited by tractate, codex, and page. Chapter and

verse for the Hebrew Bible follow the Masoretic numbering, which occasionally differs from Christian editions by a verse in the Psalms and by a chapter in Malachi.

A last word before the first word

Cosmology is never only about the cosmos. Every account of how the universe is built is also an account of where you are standing in it, what you can know, what you owe, and what you can hope for. The reason two traditions as different as the *Zohar* and the *Apocryphon of John* both reached for the human form is not that they were primitive, or poetic, or confused. It is that a cosmology has to answer a question that no diagram of spheres and lights can answer on its own: *what is the knower's place in the known?*

The Adam Kadmon and the Anthropos are two ancient civilization's answers to that question. They are incompatible. They are both extraordinary. This book holds them up together, in their own words, and lets them argue.

Part One: The Problem of the Primordial Human

Part One

Setting the problem. Why a cosmology might be built around a body, what roles a primordial human can occupy in such a system, and where the pressure that produced both traditions is located in scripture.

Part One: The Problem of the Primordial Human

Chapter 1: *Why a Human Shape for the Universe?*

Setting the problem. Why a cosmology might be built around a body, what roles a primordial human can occupy in such a system, and where the pressure that produced both traditions is located in scripture.

Begin with a question that sounds naive and is not: *why would anyone build a cosmology around a body?*

A cosmology has work to do. It must explain why there is something rather than nothing, why the something has the structure it has, why that structure produces beings capable of asking about it, and why those beings so often feel that they are in the wrong place. A cosmology must also, if it is to be lived in rather than merely admired, provide a map: a way of locating oneself, one's obligations, one's dangers, and one's route home.

Now consider the two most economical ways to build such a system. You can build it **downward** from a first principle — the One, the Good, the Absolute, the Unmoved Mover — and derive everything else by a chain of necessity or emanation. Or you can build it **upward** from the structure of the knower, treating the self, with its faculties and its fractures, as the microcosm that discloses the macrocosm. Most traditions do both, and the interesting differences are in the order of priority.

The primordial human is what happens when a tradition takes the second route and then discovers that the first route leads to the same place. It is the point at which *anthropology becomes a branch of physics* — or, more precisely, at which the two are declared to be the same discipline studied from opposite ends.

The structural roles a primordial human can occupy

It helps to notice that "primordial human" is not one idea. Across the materials this book examines — and across the wider family of ancient Near Eastern, Iranian, Indian, and Hellenistic cosmologies that form the background — the figure appears in at least five structurally distinct roles. These roles can be combined, and often are, but they are not identical, and confusing them produces most of the bad comparative writing on the subject.

Role one: the blueprint. The primordial human is the plan according to which the world is made. The world is not made *for* humans in the trivial sense of being a stage for their comfort; it is made *according to* the human, the way a building is made according to an architect's drawing. Here the figure is a formal cause. Its body is a diagram of the dimensions of reality; its limbs are the directions of space; its faculties are the levels of being.

The clearest Jewish version of this role is *Sefer Yetzirah*, where the world is constituted by "thirty-two wonderful paths" and sealed in six directions, and where the correspondence between the human body and the cosmos is not a metaphor but a method of construction. The clearest Gnostic version is the *Apocryphon of John*, where the Archons attempt to construct the first human

being by copying the image they have seen reflected in the waters — a copy of a copy.

Role two: the fallen divine being. The primordial human is a being from a higher order who descends, is sent, or falls into the lower order, and whose presence in the lower order is the reason the lower order can be redeemed. Here the figure is an efficient cause of salvation, and the cosmology is really a soteriology with a diagram attached. This role is dominant in the Hermetic *Poimandres*, where Anthropos descends through the seven spheres, sees his reflection in the watery nature below, and falls in love with it.

Role three: the archetype. The primordial human is the heavenly original of which earthly humans are copies — a Platonic move. The archetype may be a person, an aeon, a collective, or a name. Its function is to explain why human beings are both abject and exalted: they are copies, therefore flawed; they are copies of *that*, therefore capable of return.

Role four: the corporate person. The primordial human is everybody. Adam contains all souls; the body is a polity; the first human is a "common person" (*adam ha-kolel*) whose limbs are individuals and nations. The cosmology is then simultaneously a sociology. This role is explicit in the *Zohar* and the Lurianic corpus, and it is the hidden logic behind every tradition that treats Israel, the Church, or humanity as a single body descended from a single ancestor.

Role five: the redeemed redeemer. The primordial human rises, reverses the descent, and becomes the mechanism of cosmic repair. The figure is both the disease and the cure. This role appears in the Gnostic doctrine of the saved

savior, in the Manichaean Jesus, and — transposed into a different key — in the Jewish messianic idea, where the anointed one is sometimes described as the completion or restoration of Adam.

A tradition's overall character is largely determined by which roles it foregrounds. But the roles are not doctrines; they are *positions in a system*. Two traditions can share all five and still be irreconcilable, because they can assign opposite valences to each.

The polarity problem

Suppose you accept that the human form is the shape of the cosmos. You have immediately created a problem.

If the cosmos is good, then the human body is a revelation, and the physical world participates in the divine. Embodiment is a form of knowledge. Ritual is cosmically effective because the body is a diagram of the realms. This is the fundamental instinct of most of the Jewish mystical material examined in Part Two.

If the cosmos is not good — if the world is the work of inferior powers, or of a catastrophe, or of a necessary but regrettable contraction — then the human form is a *trap*. The body is a prison shaped like the divine, which is exactly what makes it deceptive. The physical world is not a revelation but an obstruction, and ritual, far from repairing the cosmos, risks binding the soul more tightly to the powers that rule it. This is the fundamental instinct of much of the Gnostic material examined in Part Three.

Note carefully what is shared and what is not. Both accounts agree that the human body encodes the structure of reality. Both agree that the human being is the place where the cosmos becomes aware of itself. They disagree about whether that is good news.

This single disagreement — *disclosure or prison?* — is the axis on which the entire comparison in Part Four turns. It is not a disagreement about facts. It is a disagreement about value, and it is therefore not resolvable by any amount of textual scholarship. What scholarship can do is show exactly where the disagreement is located: not in the cosmology, but in the *evaluation* of the cosmology.

The scriptural pressure point

Both traditions are, in a complicated sense, exegesis. Both are reading a small set of texts with enormous intensity, and the text that matters most is one that was already strange before anyone interpreted it.

Genesis 1:26–27, in the Hebrew, reads roughly:

And God said: Let us make (נַעֲשֶׂה, na'aseh) a human (adam) in our image (betzalmenu), according to our likeness (kidmutenu), and let them rule... And God created the human (ha-adam) in his image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Even before interpretation, this passage is loaded to the point of instability. There is a plural deliberation — *let us make* — addressed to whom? There are two terms, *image* and *likeness*, which may or may not be synonymous. There is a shift from singular to plural within a single sentence: *he created him; male and female he created them*. And there is the peculiar fact that the human being is named *adam*, which is also the ordinary Hebrew word for humanity and the collective noun for humankind, and which is related to *adamah*, the ground.

Genesis 2 tells a second, apparently different story: God forms *ha-adam* from the dust of the *adamah*, breathes into his nostrils the breath of life, plants a garden, and only later divides the human into two. If you read the two chapters as one continuous narrative, you have to explain why the human is created after the plants in one account and before them in the other. If you read them as two accounts, you have to explain why the canon preserved both.

Every figure in this book is downstream of that pressure point. Adam Kadmon is one answer to *what was the image God used?* The Gnostic Anthropos is another. And the answers diverge not because the interpreters were careless, but because the text is genuinely ambiguous about exactly the things that matter most: whether the image is a plan, a prototype, a title, or a body; whether the plural deliberation implies a council, a court, or a meditation on God's own inner life; and whether the physical human body is the image or merely bears it.

The question behind the question

There is a further reason the primordial human recurs, and it is philosophical rather than exegetical.

Any emanationist or hierarchical cosmology faces a problem of *mediation*. If the highest principle is utterly simple, and the lowest things are utterly composite, something must bridge the gap. Neoplatonism bridges it with a graded series of hypostases. But a graded series of abstractions has a disadvantage as a cosmology of the religious life: you cannot pray to a hypostasis. You cannot imitate a logical relation.

The primordial human solves the problem elegantly, because a person is exactly the kind of thing that can be both a structural principle and an object of relationship. It can be the first determination of the Godhead *and* something you can address. It can be a diagram *and* a face.

This is why the figure survives across traditions that share almost nothing else, and why it flourishes in traditions that insist most strongly on the transcendence of the highest principle. The more remote your God, the more you need a mediator; make the mediator a human and you have simultaneously explained the structure of the world, the dignity of the human being, and the possibility of relationship across an otherwise unbridgeable distance.

Two vocabularies

Finally, note that the two traditions in this book do not even share a word for the figure. This matters more than it seems.

The Jewish term is אדם קדמון, *Adam Kadmon* — literally "Primordial Adam," the Adam of the beginning, the Adam who is prior. The word *adam* carries within it the ground (*adamah*), the collective (*b'nei adam*, "children of humanity"), and the proper name of a specific person in Genesis. The term

implies *the first one in a series*, and therefore continuity: this is the same kind of being as we are, only earlier and larger.

The Gnostic term is **ἄνθρωπος**, *anthropos* — the ordinary Greek word for a human being, but used in these texts as a technical designation for a divine aeon or archetype. Greek has another word, *anēr*, for a male human specifically; *anthropos* is the generic. When Valentinus speaks of the Anthropos in the Ogdoad, he does not mean a giant man. He means the *idea* of the human, the aeon whose content is humanity.

The vocabularies encode the difference. *Adam Kadmon* names a first member of a lineage. *Ho Anthropos* names an essence. In Part Four we will see how much of the divergence between the two traditions follows from that small lexical fact — and how much does not.

For now, the problem is stated. Two traditions, one text, two figures, one shape. Why the human form fits a cosmology; how the same fit can mean opposite things; and where in scripture the pressure that produced both is located.

Part One: The Problem of the Primordial Human

Chapter 2: Four Ways to Read "In Our Image"

Setting the problem. Why a cosmology might be built around a body, what roles a primordial human can occupy in such a system, and where the pressure that produced both traditions is located in scripture.

Before the two great systems can be compared, we have to look closely at the scriptural engine that drove them. Genesis 1:26–27 is short, and every phrase in it generated a library.

The plural deliberation

Let us make a human in our image. (Genesis 1:26)

The Hebrew *na'aseh* is first-person plural. God appears to be speaking to someone. Four families of interpretation emerged, and each one produces a different cosmology.

The divine council. God addresses a heavenly court — the *b'nei ha-elohim*, the "sons of God," the assembled divine beings who appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as a royal retinue (1 Kings 22:19; Job 1:6; Psalm 82:1). On this reading, the human is made in the image of God, but the *plural* is a fact about the heavenly administration. The image is a royal appointment: the human is a viceroy over the earth, and the "us" is the court that witnesses the commission.

This reading is ancient, is well attested, and has the advantage of making the plural a genuine grammatical plural.

The plural of deliberation or majesty. God speaks to himself, or speaks in the manner of a king issuing a decree in the plural — the "royal we," which is attested in other ancient Near Eastern royal inscriptions. The plural is rhetorical, not metaphysical. On this reading, the inner life of God is not being disclosed.

God addressing the created order. Some midrashic readings have God addressing the earth, or the previously created things, or the angels in a consultative capacity — a deliberate show of humility, an invitation to the heavenly beings to participate so that they cannot later claim the human was made without their consent. *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:8 develops exactly this, with God consulting the angels and the angels' opinions dividing: some say let him be made, some say let him not.

God addressing God — an intimation of plurality within the divine. This is where the reading becomes a cosmology. If the plural reflects something real in the divine life, then the making of the human is the making of a copy of an *internal* structure. Philo reads the plural as indicating that God employed powers or assistants. Christian exegesis read it as the Father addressing the Son. And a great deal of Jewish mystical theology — without ever accepting a plurality of persons — read the plural as reflecting the interplay of divine attributes: *the Holy One, blessed be he, said to his Attribute of Justice...*

The point for our purposes is not which reading is correct. It is that the *moment* you allow the plural to indicate something real in God, you have licensed the entire project of Part Two and Part Three. Because now the human form is a

copy of a structure that exists *within* divinity — which is precisely the claim that Adam Kadmon is the configuration of the Godhead and that the Anthropos is an aeon.

If you insist, as Maimonides did, on absolute divine simplicity, the plural must be rhetorical, and all anthropomorphic cosmology becomes a category error. That is not a side issue. It is the live controversy that runs through the whole of Part Two.

Image and likeness

Hebrew *tzelem* (צלם) — usually "image" — is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible of a physical statue or a coin. *Demut* (דמוּת) — "likeness" — has the sense of resemblance, appearance, semblance.

Two questions follow. Are they two things or one thing said twice? And if they are two, what is their relation?

Bereshit Rabbah 8:1 notices the doubling and offers a reading with consequences. Rabbi Akiva, in some versions of the tradition, treats *tzelem* and *demut* as distinct. The midrash plays on the difference between a king's image made *for* him and the likeness that resembles him. But there is a sharper reading available, and the mystics took it: *tzelem* is the archetype, the structural correspondence — what we might call the form; *demut* is the specific resemblance in appearance — the likeness. Under that reading, Genesis is saying the human corresponds to God structurally *and* resembles God in appearance. The second half of that claim is breathtaking, and it is what makes *Shi'ur Komah* possible.

Alternatively, *tzelem* may refer to a functional or royal correspondence: the human *is* the image in the sense of being God's representative, the way a statue of a king in a province represents the king's rule. This reading is popular among modern scholars and has the merit of fitting ancient Near Eastern practice. On this reading the image is not a shape but a *commission*. Whether the human has a divine *form* is left open, and probably was never asked.

Both traditions we are studying rejected this functional reading in favor of something more literal — and this is worth emphasizing, because it shows that the Gnostic and Kabbalistic readings were not naive literalism but a *deliberate* metaphysical choice. They wanted the image to be structural. They were not confused about the alternative.

Male and female

Male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

This line has been read at least four ways.

As a statement about two individuals. God made the human race as male and female — a statement about the species. The "them" refers to men and women generally.

As a statement about one androgynous individual. The primordial Adam was a single being containing both sexes, later divided into two. This reading has ancient midrashic attestation: *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:1 reports the view that the first

human was created with two faces (*du-partzufin*), and the tradition of the androgynous Adam is elaborated throughout rabbinic and mystical literature. Plato's *Symposium* myth of the originally double human is a striking parallel, and the question of contact — direct, mediated, or coincidental — has been debated without resolution.

As a statement about the divine structure. If the human is the image of God, and the human is male and female, then the divine structure is male and female. Both traditions drew this conclusion, and both had to manage the scandal of it. In Kabbalah the sefirot are configured in male-female pairs and the divine is called *dodi*, "my beloved," in a Song of Songs read as a description of intradivine eros. In Gnostic systems, the Pleroma is organized in *syzygies* — paired aeons, male and female — and the great catastrophe of the myth involves a female principle, Sophia, acting alone.

As a statement that the image transcends sex. Philo takes this route, reading Genesis 1's human as the heavenly Man, neither male nor female because the archetype precedes differentiation, and Genesis 2's Adam as the earthly, sexually differentiated copy.

Each reading generates a different cosmology, and the differences between them are not cosmetic. If the primordial human is androgynous, then the structure of reality contains both principles from the beginning, and generation — physical reproduction — is a secondary phenomenon. If the primordial human is male and female as two sexes, then reality is constitutively relational at its root. And if the image precedes sex altogether, then gendered language about God is a concession to the audience.

Genesis 5: the name Adam

There is one more scriptural fact that shapes everything downstream, and it is easier to miss because it is quiet.

This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created the human, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them, and he named them Adam in the day they were created. (Genesis 5:1–2)

Note what happens here. The passage repeats the creation of male and female, and then says God *named them* — plural — *Adam*. Not "Adam and Eve." Both of them, together, are named Adam. The word that is also "humanity" and also "ground" is given as the proper name of a collective of two.

This is the scriptural seed of the idea of the corporate person: Adam is not merely the first individual but the name of a whole. If Genesis 5 can call two people "Adam," then a later reader can call all humanity "Adam," and a still later reader can call the cosmic archetype "Adam Kadmon." The move from *a man named Adam* to *the human as such* to *the primordial human as a cosmic principle* is a chain of small steps, and Genesis 5:1–2 is the first.

And note the second thing. The verse is embedded in a genealogy — "the book of the generations of Adam." The primordial human in the Jewish tradition is inseparable from lineage. Adam Kadmon is a father. This genealogical framing is almost entirely absent from the Gnostic Anthropos, who is an aeon rather

than an ancestor, and whose "descendants" are a spiritual seed rather than a family.

The second creation account

Genesis 2 does not mention the image at all. It has God forming *ha-adam* from the dust of the ground and breathing into his nostrils the breath of life (*nishmat chayyim*), so that the human becomes a living being (*nefesh chayyah*).

This passage supplied everything the metaphysical readings needed to become *material* readings. If the human has a body formed from the earth, and a breath from God's own mouth, then the human is a *composite* — and the composite can be analyzed into its elements. The body is earth; the soul is divine breath. Two stories, two accounts of human origin, and from the difference between them a whole cosmology of the layered or bipartite human being emerges.

Part Two will treat Genesis 1's *tzelem* as the descent of a structure and Genesis 2's *nefesh chayyah* as the animation of a body. Part Three will treat the same verses as evidence of a *forgery*: an inferior maker assembling a body he cannot animate, and a higher power secretly inserting the breath he cannot provide.

Same forty words. Two universes.

Part One: The Problem of the Primordial Human

Chapter 3: Cosmogony by Other Means — *Emanation, Descent, and Counterfeiting*

Setting the problem. Why a cosmology might be built around a body, what roles a primordial human can occupy in such a system, and where the pressure that produced both traditions is located in scripture.

There is a technical vocabulary in this book that does most of the work, and it needs to be established early, because the vocabulary is not neutral.

Three mechanisms

Emanation (Hebrew *ha'atzalut*; Greek *proodos*, "procession"; Arabic-influenced Latin *emanatio*). Reality flows from a higher principle without division, depletion, or deliberation. The classic image is light from the sun or water from a spring: the source is not diminished, the product is not separate in kind, and there is no moment of decision. Emanation preserves continuity. Everything that is, is in some sense the higher reality at a lesser intensity.

Emanation's theological advantage is continuity: nothing is truly alien to God. Its liability is that it makes the material world continuous with God, which raises the question of whether matter is divine, and if not, exactly where the break occurs.

Creation (*bara* in Hebrew, a verb used in the Hebrew Bible only with God as subject). Reality is produced by an act of will out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*),

and the product is genuinely other than the producer. Creation preserves transcendence at the cost of continuity.

Note that Genesis 1 does not use the phrase "out of nothing," and that *creatio ex nihilo* is a *later* doctrinal development, though arguably already implied by the absence of any pre-existent rival to God. This matters for the comparison, because the Kabbalists worked with a deliberately ambiguous position: emanation *within* a created framework, or creation *through* an emanative process. The Lurianic system is a hybrid — God withdraws to make room, then a line of light enters the space, then vessels shatter — and the hybrid is not a compromise but a solution.

Descent (*katabasis*, *yeridah*). A being or principle moves from a higher to a lower level while remaining itself. Descent does not necessarily imply fall. It can be mission, sacrifice, or pedagogy. The Hermetic *Poimandres* narrates a descent that becomes a fall because of what the descender *loves*, not because descent as such is wrong.

The distinction between emanation, creation, and descent is exactly the distinction between the two traditions' cosmogonies. Jewish mystical cosmology in the Lurianic mode is primarily *emanative*: Adam Kadmon is a configuration of divine light, and the sefirot are its organs. Gnostic cosmology in the Sethian mode is primarily *counterfeit*: the material world is not an emanation but an *imitation*, made by beings who saw a reflection and tried to copy it.

That fourth mechanism — **counterfeiting** (*antimimon pneuma*, the "counterfeit spirit"; the *antitypos* of the Archons) — is the specifically Gnostic contribution,

and it is what makes the two systems structurally similar in their diagrams and opposite in their physics. An emanation shares its source's nature. A counterfeit does not. The Gnostic world can look exactly like the Kabbalistic world on a diagram and be, in its interior, entirely opposed to it, because one is made *of* the light and the other is made *in spite of* it.

The problem of the diagram

Here is a methodological warning that applies throughout this book.

Any two hierarchical cosmologies will produce similar-looking diagrams. A high realm and a low realm. A series of intermediate levels, often seven or ten. A correspondence between the levels and the parts of the human being. A correspondence between the levels and the planetary spheres. A soul that descends through the levels and must ascend back through them.

The diagram is nearly inevitable given the shared cultural materials — Greek astronomy, Mesopotamian cosmology, the visibility of seven wandering stars. Similarity of diagram is therefore *weak* evidence of historical contact or common doctrine. The interesting comparative work begins where the diagrams differ in *interpretation*: what the levels are for, who runs them, whether ascent is escape or return, whether the body is a ladder or a wall.

This book will therefore avoid the two common comparative errors. It will not claim that the Kabbalists got Adam Kadmon from the Gnostics (a claim made by some nineteenth-century scholars and largely abandoned; the textual and chronological evidence does not support a simple borrowing). Nor will it claim that the resemblance is pure coincidence and that comparison is therefore

illegitimate. Similar problems, shared materials, and a shared exegetical pressure point can produce convergent structures without contact — and can also produce contact that we can no longer trace. What we can do is compare the *content* assigned to the structures, and that comparison is unaffected by the question of origins.

Two kinds of dualism

The most consequential technical distinction for Parts Two and Three is the kind of dualism each tradition maintains.

Emanationist monism with a graded descent. There is one reality. It descends in degrees. Evil is not a substance but a *privation* — a lesser intensity, a place where the light is thin, a mode of reception rather than a positive thing. On this account, the material world is not evil; it is the farthest reach of the good. This is the dominant position of the Jewish mystical tradition, and it is why the tradition can praise the physical world, the body, and Israel's embodied commandments.

Acosmic dualism. There is a break in reality. The lower order is not a lesser degree of the higher but a *different production*, made by different makers, with different intentions. The material world is not thin light; it is an obstacle. Evil is not privation but *agency*, and it has a name — Yaldabaoth, the Archon, the demiurge, "the blind god," the arrogant one who says "I am a jealous God, and there is no other God beside me."

The Kabbalistic tradition sometimes flirts with the second position — the *sitra achra*, "the other side," the realm of the shells (*kelipot*), can sound remarkably

like a Gnostic counter-world, and the *Zohar*'s treatment of the *kelipot* as the refuse of the divine process is not far from the Gnostic idea of a lower order produced by a failure at the top. But the flirtation is never consummated. In the Jewish system, the shells are *within* the one reality, dependent on it, and finally destined to be sweetened or dissolved. In the Gnostic system, the counter-world is the work of a being who mistakes himself for God, and the intended end is not to sweeten him but to get out from under him.

Hold that distinction. When Part Four puts the two systems side by side, it is this — not the shape of the diagram, not the number of levels, not the correspondence with the limbs — that determines everything.

What cosmology is for

One last preliminary.

In both traditions, cosmology is not a speculative enterprise conducted for its own sake. It is a map for practice.

For the Kabbalist, the structure of the sefirot and the configuration of Adam Kadmon are the reason the commandments have effect. Every ritual act operates through the correspondence between the lower and upper worlds; the *kavvanah*, the intention that accompanies a prayer, directs the practitioner's awareness up through the diagram. If you do not know the shape of Adam Kadmon, you do not know what you are doing when you pray. Cosmology is a *manual*.

For the Gnostic, the structure of the Pleroma and the location of the Archons above the human being are the reason certain practices work. The sealing of the soul against the powers, the memorization of passwords for the ascent through the spheres, the refusal to beget children into the prison — these are technical operations that depend on knowing exactly who is stationed where. Cosmology is a *escape plan*.

Both are what the philosopher of science would call *instrumental* — the diagram is judged by whether it does something. This is why the question "did they really believe it literally?" is so often the wrong question to ask of these texts. A map is not a literal claim about the terrain's color; it is a claim about what a journey over that terrain requires. Adam Kadmon and the Anthropos are maps. They are drawn for two very different journeys.

Part Two begins with the Jewish map.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 4: The First Adam — Rabbinic Readings of the Primordial Human

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzira, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

"The Holy One, blessed be he, took counsel with the souls of the righteous when he made Adam." — attributed in the midrashic tradition to Rav Ze'ira in the name of Rav Huna; the wording varies between versions

The rabbis of the first five centuries did not have a cosmology of the primordial human. They had something more useful: a set of exegetical problems generated by eleven verses in Genesis, and a taste for solving them in ways that pulled the text toward metaphysics without quite arriving there. Everything

later — the Shi'ur Komah measurements, the sefirot, the *Zohar's* androgynous Adam, Luria's vessels — is downstream of work these sages did.

Bereshit bara: creating with the beginning

The first word of the Torah is a problem in grammar. *Bereshit*, "in the beginning," is in the construct state, the form Hebrew uses for "X of Y," and construct nouns want a complement. *Bereshit* has none; it hangs there, followed by a verb, *bara*, "he created." Read strictly, the phrase is broken, and the rabbis knew it.

One solution, developed in *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:1, exploits the absence. If *reshit* is a construct it must be "the beginning *of*" something, and scripture elsewhere supplies the something: Proverbs 8:22 has Wisdom say, "The Lord made me as the beginning (*reshit*) of his way," and Psalm 105:25 calls Israel "the beginning (*reshit*) of his harvest." So *bereshit* reads as "with the Beginning." And since Proverbs identifies *reshit* with Wisdom, which the tradition identified with Torah, the verse becomes: *with the Torah, God created the heavens and the earth*. The midrash gives the parable of a king who consults a plan before breaking ground, and says it plainly at 1:4: "God looked into the Torah and created the world."

Two things follow. The blueprint is not a human being. It is the Torah — a text, an instruction, a body of letters and commandments. The rabbinic universe is made according to a *law*, not a *man*, and the difference should not be smoothed over: when the Kabbalists later identify the Torah with the name of God and the name of God with the limbs of Adam Kadmon, they fuse two things the midrash kept separate.

The second is method. The reading takes a grammatical oddity as a signal rather than an error. That habit — treating the surface of the text as a code that rewards pressure — is the engine of the whole tradition, and it is why the same community that produced sober legal reasoning also produced cosmologies out of prepositions.

Adam, the two-faced, and the division of the androgyne

Bereshit Rabbah 8:1 opens with a question Genesis 1 forces on any careful reader. The verse says "male and female he created them" of a single act. What does that mean?

The midrash reports a dispute. Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Elazar reads it as a single being with two faces — *du-partzufin*, from the Greek *prosōpon* — later divided in Genesis 2 when the side (*tzela*, usually mistranslated "rib") is taken. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman, in the name of Rabbi Yonatan, reads it the same way.

The view is not universal, and the midrash does not pretend it is. *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:5 and *Vayikra Rabbah* 14:1 record conflicting readings of *tzela*, and other passages treat the verse as a plain statement about two sexes. But the androgynous reading had a long afterlife: it reaches Philo, who says Genesis 1's human is neither male nor female because the archetype precedes differentiation; it reaches the *Zohar*, which makes the androgyne a fact about the divine structure rather than about the first human; and it reaches the Kabbalists, for whom the male-female polarity of the sefirot is not a metaphor.

What the midrashic androgyne *is* matters. It is not a symbol of wholeness in the Jungian sense — that reading is a modern import, and should be flagged as one.

It is an exegetical solution to the contradiction between Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:21–22, and the cosmological consequences were drawn by people who came afterward.

The size of the first human, and the measure of the loss

The traditions about Adam's original dimensions are wilder than their reputation. *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:1 says Adam was created *m'lo kol ha-olam*, filling the whole world, and was diminished after the sin. *Chagigah* 12a offers the related image of a first human stretching from earth to heaven. *Vayikra Rabbah* 14:1 collects opinions on how he was made: dust gathered from all the earth, or the dust of the whole world kneaded together, or the four colors of earth from the four directions — red, black, white, and green. The same passage derives the name from *adamah*, ground, and from *adom*, red; *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:12 adds *dam*, blood.

The variants are worth stating rather than harmonizing, because the disagreement is the datum. Some texts have Adam as a giant; some as a *world*; some as a being whose body and reach coincide. Read with Genesis 1:26–27 in view, they answer a question the image-language raises and does not settle: if the human corresponds to God, how large is the correspondence? The midrashic answer is: large enough to contain the world.

Adam ha-Kolel: the first human as a collective

The boldest rabbinic move is the least dramatic in its phrasing. *Vayikra Rabbah* 14:1 and *Bereshit Rabbah* 24:2 develop the idea that Adam's body contained all souls that would ever exist, that the souls of all generations were shown to him,

or that they were contained in him as a *collective person* — *adam ha-kolel*, the Adam who includes.

The idiom matters. The Hebrew *kolel* does not mean "generic" or "typical." It means *comprising, containing, summing up*. Adam is not a representative sample of humanity; he is the container of it. *Tanchuma* and the later compilations extend this: the limbs of Adam correspond to nations and to individuals, and the structure of the first human is the structure of the species.

This is the scriptural seed Part One identified in Genesis 5:1–2, where God names *them* — male and female — "Adam." If a single name can gather two people, a single name can gather everyone. The rabbis did not build a cosmology on this; they built something more durable, a way of reading human solidarity as an ontological fact rather than a moral ideal. And *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:12 pushes further, connecting the making of Adam to the making of every human being, so that the creation account describes not the past but what happens whenever a person comes into being.

What the rabbis left undone, the mystics did: they took the image, the size, the androgyne, and the collective, and asked what in God could correspond to them.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 5: The Measure of the Glory — Shi'ur Komah and the Body of God

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzirah, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

*"His head is fine gold (ketem paz), his locks are wavy, black as a raven."
— Song of Songs 5:11*

Song of Songs is a love poem. Its two lovers describe each other's bodies at length, running from the head downward and then breaking into a rhapsody of awe: the beloved is a garden, a fountain, a palanquin, an army with banners. The poem never names God. The tradition read it as a description of the love between God and Israel almost from the beginning, and once you have done that you have created the most dangerous exegetical object in Judaism: a verse-by-verse anatomy of the divine body.

Somebody took it that way. The result is *Shi'ur Komah*, the "Measure of the Stature."

The fragments and their form

Shi'ur Komah survives in two main recensions, one longer and one shorter, embedded in the *Hekhalot* literature — the corpus of visionary and ascension texts preserved in manuscripts from roughly the fifth to the ninth centuries, produced by circles reporting what they saw in the heavenly palaces. The chief witnesses are *Hekhalot Rabbati* and *Hekhalot Zutarti*, along with the *Shi'ur Komah* fragments themselves, which exist in Hebrew and Aramaic recensions and circulated independently.

The form is what startles. It is a list of dimensions.

The measurements are given in *parasangs* — a Persian loanword for a long distance — and they are enormous and systematic. Each limb is a number: the height of the sole of the foot, the length of the leg, the span of the arms, the number of fingers, the width of the forehead, on upward to the crown. The right arm alone runs into the hundreds of thousands of parasangs, and totals appear in some manuscripts and not others, and do not agree.

Above the crown, the text says, there is no measure at all. The enumeration stops at the top because the top has no end. So *Shi'ur Komah* is not a fantasy of size but a text about the failure of size: it measures everything and then declares the highest point unmeasurable, which makes the measurement a demonstration rather than a description.

The exegesis of the lover's body

The technique is precise. Take Song of Songs 5:11–16, where the woman describes the man, and read each phrase as a body part of the Creator.

Rosho ketem paz, "his head is fine gold," becomes the head of the measurement, and *ketem paz* is unpacked. *Shechorot ka-orev*, "black as a raven," gives the strands of the hair. *Einav ka-yonim*, "his eyes are like doves" — the eyes. *Lechayav ka-arugot ha-besamim*, "his cheeks are like beds of spices." *Siftotav shoshanim*, "his lips are lilies." *Yadav gelilei zahav*, "his hands are rods of gold." *Shokav amudei shesh*, "his legs are pillars of marble." *Chikko*, "his palate," and *kullo machamadim*, "altogether desirable."

The result is a systematic mapping from the poetry of a human body onto the structure of divinity, done with a technical vocabulary — because the point is not that God resembles a man but that the poem's language is a code. The Hekhalot circles used the description as a *contemplative object*, not as the worship of a large body: it was meditation on a structure, the names of the limbs, the measures, the crown. Several texts give the practitioner a seal — a *chotam* — for the gates, and the divine names disclosed by the measurement are treated as effective instruments.

Who was permitted to study it

The tradition treated this material as dangerous, and the sources on the esoteric disciplines are unusually direct. *Mishnah Chagigah* 2:1 lays down the restrictions:

The forbidden sexual relations may not be expounded before three, nor the Account of Creation (ma'aseh bereshit) before two, nor the Account of the Chariot (ma'aseh merkavah) before one, unless he is wise and understands of his own knowledge.

Ma'aseh merkavah — Ezekiel's chariot — is the entry point of the Hekhalot literature, and it is restricted to a single qualified reader. The *Tosefta* and both Talmuds build on the rule. *Chagigah* 14b gives the story of the four who entered *pardes*: Ben Azzai looked and died, Ben Zoma looked and was stricken, Acher looked and cut the shoots — became a heretic — and only Rabbi Akiva went up in peace and came down in peace.

That story is usually read as a warning about speculative mysticism. It is more precisely a warning about *what the material can do to the reader*, and the tradition attached a specific danger to *Shi'ur Komah*: the *Tosefta* and *Bereshit Rabbah* build on Rabbi Akiva's prohibition against expounding it publicly, adding the sharper point that whoever does so will have no share in the world to come.

Then there is the counterweight. *Chagigah* 13b transmits the anecdote of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai blessing his students for reporting the dimensions of the Creator. And the *Shi'ur Komah* fragments themselves warn: do not read this as a physical description, and do not measure God.

The material that looks most anthropomorphic is the material most insistent that it must not be taken as such. That paradox is the text's own position, not a

modern embarrassment to be explained away.

The paradox of the most concrete and the most transcendent

The God of the Hebrew Bible is not to be depicted: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image" (Exodus 20:4); "to whom then will you liken me?" (Isaiah 40:25). The God of the *Hekhalot* texts is seated on a throne of fire and has a forehead, a beard, eyes, and fingers.

How are these held together? Four answers are available in the sources and in the scholarship, and the sources do not select among them.

The apologetic answer. The measurement is a mystical *ascent*, not an anatomy. The visionaries saw not a body but a structure of light and name that the human mind can only render as a body. The anthropomorphism is a limitation of language, not of God. On this reading *Shi'ur Komah* is a kataphatic mysticism that knows it is kataphatic: it speaks in images because silence would say nothing at all.

The literalist answer. Some of the Hekhalot material, and certainly some of its critics, understood the measurement as a literally true description of a literally enormous divine *body*. The medieval polemic against this reading is evidence that the reading existed. Maimonides did not attack a straw man.

The structural-theosophical answer. This is the Kabbalistic resolution, developed from the twelfth century onward but arguably latent in the material: the limbs are the sefirot. The head is what is above Wisdom; the eyes, ears, and

mouth are the transmitting faculties; the arms are the two sides of divine action; the body is the middle line. The measurements are not lengths but relations of emanation and containment. On this reading *Shi'ur Komah* is the earliest surviving attempt to describe the Godhead's internal structure in bodily terms, and the *Zohar*'s language of divine limbs continues it directly.

What modern scholarship argues

The fourth answer is that the debate is unresolved, and that genre is the reason. Gershom Scholem treated *Shi'ur Komah* as a genuine and central expression of Jewish mystical theology, arguing that its anthropomorphism was *intended* as a description of an experience of the Godhead's structure, and reading the hedging in the same texts as a later orthodox overlay. Other scholars emphasize its liturgical and magical functions: sections appear in incantation contexts and the divine names disclosed by the measurement are used as seals, which makes the text closer to an instrument than a treatise. Still others read the anthropomorphic language as polemic — a refusal of the incorporealism that Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers were developing in the same centuries.

The date is contested too. The manuscripts are late, the traditions inside them claim to be ancient, and the hymn at *Avodah Zarah* 3b suggests that some of the liturgical material is early. The safest statement is what the evidence supports: the corpus took shape between the fifth and ninth centuries, contains material of very different dates, and preserves traditions that may be considerably older.

Two things are not in doubt. The material is Jewish, and it is old enough to have disturbed the medievals. And it made a permanent claim on the tradition: that

the most transcendent God has a *measure*. The Kabbalists never gave up that claim. They reinterpreted it.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 6: Ten Sefirot Belimah — Sefer Yetzilah's Cosmic Grammar

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzilah, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

"Ten sefirot of nothingness, twenty-two letters of foundation: three mothers, seven doubles, twelve simples." — Sefer Yetzilah 1:2

Sefer Yetzilah, the Book of Formation, is about four pages long in most editions and has generated more commentary per page than almost any other Jewish text. It is also a pivot. It is the first Jewish work to speak of *ten sefirot*, and it contains no primordial human, no divine body, no image of God in the form of a person, and no myth. It builds a world out of numbers and letters.

Then the tradition took this formal structure and personified it. Understanding why the personification was possible — and what it cost — requires seeing

what *Sefer Yetzirah* actually says.

The composition of the main recension is usually placed between the third and sixth centuries CE, with significant uncertainty and a long tradition of proposed alternatives: the Hebrew is post-Mishnaic in some features and archaizing in others, and the work shows debts to Greek cosmological speculation and to earlier Jewish letter-mysticism. Some scholars place it later, in the early Islamic period; some argue for a core older than the extant form. Treat the dating as genuinely open. What is not open is that the book was circulating and canonical for the mystical tradition well before the *Zohar*.

Thirty-two paths and the ten sefirot belimah

The opening:

By thirty-two wonderful paths of wisdom the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, the living God, the King of the world, the merciful and gracious God, exalted and exalted, dwelling forever, holy is his name, engraved and created his world with three sefarim: with sefer (text), with safar (number), and with sippur (speech). (Sefer Yetzirah 1:1)

The thirty-two are ten plus twenty-two: the ten *sefirot belimah* and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The pun on *sefer*, *safar*, *sippur* — text, number, speech — announces the whole program. Reality is made of writing, quantity, and utterance, and these three are one thing.

The phrase *sefirot belimah* is the crux. *Sefirot* is a coined plural. Its apparent root, *s-f-r*, gives counting, numbering, recounting, book — hence "numeration" or "ciphers" in some translations — but a rival derivation from the Greek *sphaira*, "sphere," would make the sefirot originally *spheres* or regions.

Belimah is harder. The obvious reading is *beli mah*, "without what" — without anything, *ex nihilo*, "without substance." But *belimah* is also a rare Hebrew word, appearing in Job 26:7 in the phrase *toleh eretz al belimah*, "he hangs the earth on *belimah*," usually translated "on nothing." The book's refrain is likely a citation of Job. On that reading, the ten sefirot are the ten *nothings*: principles with no content, no substance, no definition, and therefore the conditions of everything that has any.

The commentaries took the phrase seriously. If the sefirot are *belimah* they cannot be counted things, because counting requires distinct determinate items — and yet the book counts them. The tradition's solution, worked out over centuries, is that the sefirot are *dimensions* of the divine rather than parts: not ten entities, but ten ways in which the one is configured. Whether that satisfies a reader depends on how seriously the reader takes the rule that God is simple. Maimonides did not. The Kabbalists did, and their work is largely an attempt to keep the *belimah* clause alive while speaking of the sefirot as things.

The sefirot as dimensions

Sefer Yetzirah 1:3–5 gives the content, and the emphatic formula — "ten and not nine, ten and not eleven" — is a boundary drawn against both reduction and addition. What is assigned to the ten is mostly *direction*:

Ten sefirot belimah, according to the number of the ten fingers, five opposite five, and the covenant of unity (brit yachid) is set in the middle... (Sefer Yetzirah 1:3)

Ten sefirot belimah: the depths of beginning and the depths of end; the depths of good and the depths of evil; the depths of height and the depths of depth; the depths of east and the depths of west; the depths of north and the depths of south. (Sefer Yetzirah 1:5)

Ten fingers, five against five, with the *brit yachid* at the midpoint: the book's most important structural clue, and faintly anthropomorphic — but only faintly. The fingers are not a body. They are a diagram of symmetry, two opposed sets of five joined at a center that is neither, and the whole called a covenant of unity.

Then ten depths. A *depth* is not a place; it is a dimension along which places are arrayed. Four pairs of opposites — beginning and end, good and evil, height and depth, east and west, north and south — plus the center. Six directions of space and four categories of value and time, each called a depth.

The inclusion of *good and evil* in the same list as the directions of space is one of the most consequential sentences in Jewish cosmology. Good and evil are not moral qualities here but *orientations*, dimensions along which a thing can be arrayed. The later doctrine that evil is a privation, the thin end of the light, has

its textual root in this verse. So does the Lurianic treatment of the *kelipot* as a *side* rather than a substance.

The letter-mysticism and the world, year, soul

The remaining twenty-two are the alphabet: three "mothers" (*alef, mem, shin*), seven "doubles" (*bet, gimel, dalet, kaf, pe, resh, tav*, each with two pronunciations), and twelve "simples."

The three mothers are assigned to *alef* as air or spirit (*ruach*), *mem* as water, *shin* as fire, and to the three seasons of the year and three parts of the body. The seven doubles are assigned to the seven planets, the seven days, and the seven orifices of the head — two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, one mouth. The twelve simples are assigned to the twelve signs, the twelve months, and the twelve "limbs" of the body, in a list that varies between recensions.

The organizing insight is the triad: *olam, shanah, nefesh* — world, year, soul. Every letter and every sefirah operates in all three registers at once, so that the structure positioning the directions of space also positions the seasons of time and the faculties of the person. This is why *Sefer Yetzirah*'s correspondence between body and cosmos is not a metaphor but a rule of construction: the body is what the world looks like when the same thirty-two principles are configured as a living thing. And 2:2 and 3:1–9 repeat the boundary formula at each stage, telling you how many and telling you not to add or subtract.

Sealing and the six directions

The most concrete operation in the book is the "sealing" of the six directions. The Holy One permuted, weighed, and combined the letters, and then sealed the height above, the depth below, and the four quarters, each with its letter and its permutation of the divine name. (*Sefer Yetzirah* 4:1–4, following the six-direction scheme)

The result is a *sealed space*, a cosmos bounded in all six directions by a name. This is the origin of the Kabbalistic habit of reading space itself as a name. Six directions plus center are seven; the sefirot are ten; the four-letter name has twelve permutations, and twenty-four in some expansions. *Sefer Yetzirah* is where the arithmetic of names becomes a mechanics of worlds.

Formal foundation, anthropomorphic superstructure

Now the chapter's main claim.

Sefer Yetzirah is not anthropomorphic. Its ten sefirot are depths and directions. Its three mothers are elements. Its use of the body is *correlative*: the body has twelve limbs because the zodiac has twelve signs, and the correspondence runs in both directions without the body ever becoming the *form* of the divine. The human being in *Sefer Yetzirah* is a region where the world's structure is legible, not an image of God.

And yet the book uses the fingers of two hands, and the seven orifices of the head, and a correspondence of world, year, and soul that makes the person a full register of the cosmos. And the ten sefirot, once you have them, are a structure with a middle and two sides — five against five, with the covenant of unity at

the center. Add a head above and a lower end below, and you have the seed of a body.

What the Kabbalists did — beginning with *Sefer Bahir*, developed in the *Zohar*, perfected by Luria — was to take that formal structure and give it an anatomy. The sefirot acquired names, then relations, then positions in a figure: crown, wisdom, understanding, and so down to kingdom, arranged along three vertical lines with a center. Once the sefirot had positions in a figure they had a *shape*. And once they had a shape, the tradition had a diagram of God that could be called a human being, and called *Adam Kadmon*.

Sefer Yetzirah supplied the grammar. Adam Kadmon is a sentence in it.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 7: The Zohar — Adam, Image, and the Supernal Garden

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzirah, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

"Come and see: the blessed Holy One fashioned Adam in the likeness above, and the body of Adam is the image of the supernal." — the language of the Zohar, paraphrased from its treatment of Genesis 1:27

The *Zohar*, the Book of Splendor, appeared in Spain in the late thirteenth century, in an artificial Aramaic, attributed to the second-century sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Its authorship is one of the great debates in Jewish studies: Moses de León is the most commonly proposed compiler, with a substantial role now assigned to a wider circle, and with layers that may extend to earlier texts and later additions. What matters here is what it did. It took everything the

rabbis left scattered — the image, the androgyne, the measure, the letters, the ten sefirot of *Sefer Yetzirah* — and fused them into a system in which the Godhead has an inner life, that inner life has a shape, and the shape is a human being.

The image and the supernal Adam

The *Zohar* reads Genesis 1:26–27 as a description of an act of *copying*. The divine image is not a title, a commission, or a moral resemblance. It is a form, and the form exists above before it exists below. The crucial exegetical move is the plural in "let us make": the blessed Holy One takes counsel with the supernal configuration — with the sefirot, with the divine attributes, with the upper Adam — and the human below is made in the likeness of the human above.

The terminology is fluid in the *Zohar* itself, and honesty requires saying so. The Aramaic *adam diletata*, "the lower Adam," and *adam ila'ah*, "the upper Adam," appear across the text, along with a handful of occurrences of *adam kadma'ah*. But the full technical term *Adam Kadmon* in its Lurianic sense — the first configuration of divine light after the withdrawal — is *not* a Zoharic doctrine. The *Zohar* has a supernal Adam, a heavenly human form, a configuration of the sefirot described in bodily terms, and a strong doctrine that the earthly body is drawn from that form. The Lurianic Adam Kadmon is a later, more precisely specified figure. The *Zohar* supplies the vocabulary and the confidence that the human form is a structure of divinity. Luria supplied the system.

The androgynous Adam and the structure of the sefirot

The *Zohar* takes the rabbinic *du-partzufin* and makes it cosmological. The primordial Adam was male and female — one body, two faces — and the division into two in Genesis 2 is an event within the divine process, not a surgical detail of human origins. "Male and female he created them" becomes a statement about the sefirot themselves: the divine is configured as a *mashpia* and a *mekabbel*, a giver and a receiver, and the relation between them is the mechanism of all emanation.

Hence the tradition's confidence in reading the Song of Songs. If the divine is male and female, the poem is not about two people at all. The *Zohar's* treatment of the Song as the *kodesh kodashim*, the holy of holies of scriptural interpretation — a claim it makes explicitly — rests on that premise. The lover and the beloved are the blessed Holy One and the Community of Israel, and the Community of Israel is the *Shekhinah*, the indwelling presence, which is also the lowest of the sefirot and also the female.

This produces the *Zohar's* most characteristic and most scandalous claim: that the divine life involves *eros*, union, and in some passages the language of coupling. The tradition's defenders from the medieval period onward insisted that the language is a *mashal*, a parable, and that the erotic surface is the veil of a metaphysical relation. The *Zohar's* own practice does not settle the question, because it treats the parable as a real correspondence rather than a decorative one. That, after all, is the premise of its exegesis.

The limbs of the King

The *Zohar* describes the sefirot as limbs. This is not incidental language; it is systematic, and it is where *Shi'ur Komah* and *Sefer Yetzirah* meet.

The sefirot are arranged with a head above — *Keter*, crown, the unknowable, and above it in some passages *Ein Sof*, the Infinite, which is not a sefirah at all — then *Chokhmah* and *Binah*, wisdom and understanding, as the two faculties of the upper head; then the six sefirot of *Ze'ir Anpin*, the "small face," arrayed as the body: *Chesed* and *Gevurah* as the two arms, *Tiferet* as the torso, *Netzach* and *Hod* as the legs, *Yesod* as the organ of transmission — the *tzaddik*, the foundation — and *Malkhut*, also called *Shekhinah*, as the lowest, the feminine, the receiver.

The *Zohar* also speaks of the divine *chotam*, the seal, and of the *sha'ashu'im*, the delights, and it ties the parts of the body to the letters of the name, with the *Yod* above, the *He* below, the *Vav* in the middle. The mapping is not arbitrary, which is where the *Zohar* is more sophisticated than its reputation: the structure must be *coherent*, with the upper sefirot as faculties of transmission, the middle ones as the field of action, the lower ones as the point of contact. A body is a good diagram for such a system because a body has exactly that architecture. The *Zohar* sums it up in an idiom that recurs throughout: God is *kullo adam*, "entirely a human."

Adam's body drawn from the supernal realm

Here is the *Zohar's* most important claim for this book's purposes. The body of the earthly Adam is not merely *modeled* on the supernal. It is *made from* it. The *Zohar* reads Genesis 2's dust as the residue of a higher process: the dust of the ground is drawn from the supernal *adamah*, and the formation of the human below is a *descent of form* from above. In the *Zohar's* idiom, the blessed Holy One fashioned Adam in the likeness of the lower configuration of the supernal

— the Shekhinah's aspect — while the whole structure derives from what is above it.

Two consequences follow, and they are why the *Zohar* matters here.

The human body is *not* a trivial object. It is the terminal form of a structure that runs from the highest to the lowest, and every limb has a referent that is not a symbol but an origin. To know the human body is to know something about God, and to damage a human being is to damage a correspondence that runs all the way up.

And the *Zohar*'s cosmology is *not* dualist in the Gnostic sense, a difference the text is explicit about. The material world is the last and least of the emanations, but it is *of* the emanation. The *kelipot*, the shells, are the refuse of the process — a husk, a bark, a residue — nourished by the light that leaks into them. They are not a rival creation, and they have no independent maker and no self. Part One's warning applies: the diagram looks Gnostic; the physics is not.

The mystical body of Israel

The *Zohar* extends the anatomy to the community. Israel is a single body and the commandments are its members: *mitzvah* is a limb, and the 613 commandments correspond to the 248 limbs and 365 sinews of the human frame. The ritual system is therefore not a code of conduct but a *therapy of the structure* — each commandment operates on a limb of the entity it pertains to, and since the individual, the community, and the divine are layered versions of the same form, the operation reaches all three at once.

This is where the *Zohar's* ethics come from, and they are not an afterthought. If the human being is a limb of a corporate body that is itself the last configuration of God, then cruelty is a self-inflicted wound, and "love your neighbor as yourself" is not a moral ideal but a statement of the physics. The *Zohar* treats harm to another person as a defect that propagates upward through the configuration.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 8: The Tetragrammaton as a Body — Names, Permutations, and the Shape of Reality

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzira, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

"The Holy One, blessed be he, is called by his name, and his name is him." — the Kabbalistic principle of name-identity, stated in various forms across the literature; the wording here is the Zohar's idiom, paraphrased

The Zohar's God is structured. The question that follows — what structures him — receives an answer at once the most abstract and the most concrete in the tradition: the four letters of the divine name.

The claim, which appears in the Zohar and becomes explicit and technical in the Lurianic corpus, is that *Yod-He-Vav-He* (יהוה) is the skeleton, the articulated

form, of the divine. Not a name that refers to a body; a name that *is* the body.
The letters are the limbs.

The letter as position

The mapping is positional, and it depends on the shape of the letters as much as on their sound.

Yod (י) is a single point, the smallest letter, and it sits at the top — the first stirring, the seed, the point of emanation. *He* (ה) is a letter with an opening, a breath, a receptive form, and it comes second — the widening, the dimension of understanding, the vessel. *Vav* (ו) is a vertical line, a hook, a connector, and it comes third — the long central channel that runs from above to below, the six sefirot of the middle, the son. The final *He* is another opening, the last breath, the receiver at the bottom — the feminine, the Shekhinah, the point at which the name touches the world.

The four worlds

The name is also a series of worlds, and this is where the tradition's arithmetic begins. The standard correspondence, which recurs in the Lurianic corpus and in later Kabbalistic literature:

Letter	World	Level
י <i>Yod</i>	אצילות <i>Atzilut</i>	Emanation — the divine, undivided, the realm of the sefirot
ה <i>He</i>	בריאה <i>Beriah</i>	Creation — the throne, the highest angelic order
ו <i>Vav</i>	יצירה <i>Yetzirah</i>	Formation — the angelic ranks, the world of forms

Letter	World	Level
ה <i>He</i>	עשי'ה <i>Assiah</i>	Action — the material and the made

The four expansions

Then the most technical piece of the tradition's naming, and it is best seen whole. Each letter of the name can itself be *spelled out* as a word, and the spellings vary. Each produces a different total by *gematria*, and each total generates a world, a level of soul, and a *partzuf*.

Name	Spelling	Value	Character of the spelling
ע"ב <i>Ayin-Bet</i>	יוד הי יוי הי	72	fully spelled with <i>yod</i> : the <i>Chokhmah</i> , "expanded" version
ס"ג <i>Samekh-Gimel</i>	יוד הי ואו הי	63	the <i>vav</i> written with an <i>alef</i> : the <i>Binah</i> version
ה"מ <i>Mem-He</i>	יוד הא ואו הא	45	both <i>he</i> 's written with <i>alef</i> : <i>Ze'ir Anpin</i> , the "male" version
ב"ן <i>Bet-Nun</i>	יוד הה וו הה	52	<i>he</i> 's with no <i>yod</i> : <i>Malkhut</i> , the "female" version

The four totals — 72, 63, 45, 52 — are the four faces of the name, and 72 exceeds 63 exceeds 45 exceeds 52 in "height." The tradition reads that as four levels of the divine structure, of the soul, or of the worlds, depending on context. The upper two are associated with *Chokhmah* and *Binah*, father and mother, whose union produces the lower pair. *Mem-He*, at 45, is *Ze'ir Anpin*, the son, the "small face." *Bet-Nun*, at 52, is *Malkhut*, the daughter, the *Shekhinah*.

That the value of *adam* (אדם) is also 45 is not a curiosity. It is a load-bearing identification: the name at its third expansion has the same value as the word for the human being, and the Kabbalists read this as the ground of the whole Adam Kadmon doctrine. The human form of the divine is not an image imposed on the name; it is the name at the level where the name is a person.

The full integration of the four expansions with the *partzufim* is Lurianic, expounded above all in *Etz Chaim* and the *Sha'ar ha-Kavvanot*, with the *Pardes Rimonic* of Moses Cordovero organizing the four spellings slightly earlier and in a different framework. The bare correspondences are older than Safed.

Different texts assign the expansions to the worlds in different orders, and some assign 45 and 52 to the male and female aspects of *Malkhut* rather than to two separate *partzufim*. The tradition was not embarrassed by the inconsistency, because it treated each version as true at a different level of description.

The diagonal pathways, and the name as number and body

The first of two closing elements is the **diagonal pathways**. The sefirotic tree is drawn as three vertical lines: a right line of *Chokhmah*, *Chesed*, *Netzach*; a left line of *Binah*, *Gevurah*, *Hod*; a center column of *Keter*, *Tiferet*, *Yesod*, *Malkhut*. The thirty-two paths of *Sefer Yetzirah*, mapped onto the sefirot, run vertically, horizontally, and diagonally, and the diagonals are the exchanges by which the right and left influences reach each other. Drawn out, the network is a diagram of a *face*: two eyes, a nose, a mouth, and the lines between them.

The second is the conclusion the tradition drew: the name is a *name*, a *number*, and a *body* at once, and these are not three readings but one.

A name, because it is pronounceable in principle though never pronounced; the *kavvanot* for the high priestly blessing describe an utterance not performed for two thousand years.

A number, because the letters have numerical values, and those generate the four expansions and the whole arithmetic of Kabbalistic correspondence. The name of God is also a quantity — 26 plainly, 72 and 63 and 45 and 52 in its spellings — and those generate the 248 limbs, the 365 sinews, the 613 commandments, the 288 sparks.

A body, because the letters have positions, and the positions form a figure, and the figure is a human being: *Adam Kadmon*, whose head is *Yod*, whose torso is *Vav*, whose final breath is *He*.

The Kabbalists did not think they were playing with words. They thought they had found the mechanism. A reader who finds the apparatus arbitrary is not making a mistake in logic; the reader is declining a premise. But the premise — that language, number, and form are one structure — is not arbitrary either. It is the claim *Sefer Yetzirah* made in four pages, and that Lurianic Kabbalah built into a universe.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 9: Tzimtzum, Shevirah, Tikkun — Adam Kadmon in the Lurianic System

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzirah, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

"In the beginning, when it arose in the will of the Simple One to create the worlds... he contracted himself in the middle point, and the space remained empty." — Etz Chaim 1:2, in the standard paraphrase of Luria's opening

Everything so far has been preparation for the system of Rabbi Isaac Luria — the Ari, "the Lion" — who taught in Safed for barely two years before his death in 1572, wrote almost nothing himself, and generated, through the transcriptions of his disciple Rabbi Chaim Vital, the most audacious cosmology in the history of Judaism. Luria is where Adam Kadmon becomes a technical

term and where the figure acquires a job. In the *Zohar* the supernal Adam is a structural fact about the divine. In Luria, Adam Kadmon is a *stage* in a sequence of events, and the sequence has a plot: withdrawal, catastrophe, repair.

Tzimtzum: the withdrawal

Etz Chaim opens with the problem of why there is a world at all, and the Lurianic answer is neither creation nor emanation in the simple sense. It is *tzimtzum* — contraction, withdrawal, the act of self-limitation.

Before the worlds there was *Ein Sof*, the Infinite, the boundless, that which has no end and no determination. The Kabbalists insist, against any pantheism, that *Ein Sof* is not the world and the world is not *Ein Sof*. But if *Ein Sof* fills all space, there is no space for a world, and a world cannot be *other than* the infinite if the infinite is everywhere and undifferentiated.

So God contracted. *Etz Chaim* 1:2 describes *Ein Sof* withdrawing from a central point, leaving a *makom panui*, an empty space, in which the worlds could be made. The light did not depart entirely: a residue remained, the *reshimu*, a faint impression of what had been there. And into the void extended a single line of light, the *kav* — thin, straight, measured.

Three things must be said about *tzimtzum*, because it is the doctrine most often misread.

First, the withdrawal is not a departure. Luria did not teach that God *left*. The *reshimu* remains and the *kav* sustains everything. The metaphor the texts reach

for is a person inhaling: the breath is not annihilated, it is drawn in, and can be released again.

Second, whether *tzimtzum* is literal or figurative became one of the great controversies of later Kabbalah. Chaim Vital transmits Luria's teaching as a real contraction in the divine; the Habad tradition reformulated it as *tzimtzum she-lo ke-peshuto*, "contraction not in its literal sense" — a concealment rather than a withdrawal, since a God who is truly infinite cannot have vacated a region, and a literal *tzimtzum* would leave a space God does not fill, which is a dualism. Both positions are attested, and the disagreement is not about a detail. It is about whether the world is made by God's *absence* or by God's *self-concealment*.

Third, the *makom panui* is a scandal and the tradition treated it as one. A void inside the infinite has no obvious coherence, and the Kabbalists knew it; the answer, that *Ein Sof* surrounds the void from without while the *reshimu* remains within, is less a solution than a description of the boundary the doctrine draws. The point of *tzimtzum* is not to explain the void. It is to explain why the world can be *addressed* without being God.

Igulim and yosher: circles and the upright

Two configurations issue from the *kav*, and the difference between them is the seed of the entire anthropomorphic doctrine.

The first is *igulim* — circles, spheres, the concentric rings of light. The second is *yosher* — straightness, uprightness, the configuration that descends "in a

line," and which the Lurianic texts explicitly describe as the shape of *adam*: head at the top, arms to the sides, body in the middle, legs at the base.

The contrast is not merely geometric. The circles are *nivdal*, separate, each ring enclosing the next with no communication between them: a configuration of levels without relation. The upright configuration is the opposite — a single shaped body in which the levels are *limbs of one thing*, and therefore in relation to each other. Circles cannot be prayed to, and cannot pray. A body can. This is why Adam Kadmon answers the question Part One asked about mediation: when the system needs a configuration that is simultaneously a structure and a *somebody*, it abandons the circles for the upright form.

Adam Kadmon: the first configuration

From the *kav* emerges the first configuration, called *Adam Kadmon*, and it is described in the Lurianic texts with the full apparatus of *Shi'ur Komah* — a head, eyes, ears, a nose, a mouth, limbs, and a measure of enormous dimensions — because the old measure-mysticism was absorbed rather than discarded.

Several clarifications are essential, and the texts are not uniform on all of them.

Adam Kadmon is not a creature and not a man. It is the highest configuration of divine light after *tzimtzum*, with no relation to the physical world and no history. The anthropomorphic description describes *structure*: a head because there is a place where the lights are concentrated, limbs because there are directions of flow, a "measure" because the dimensions of what comes after are determined here.

Adam Kadmon is prior to the *partzufim*. The five emerge later, in the world of *Nekudim*, as a second-order reorganization; Adam Kadmon is their source. Saying "Adam Kadmon is *Arikh Anpin*" is a common simplification and not quite right: *Arikh Anpin* corresponds to the uppermost aspect of what Adam Kadmon contains, but the two terms belong to different stages. The texts differ on the precise relation, and the difference determines whether Adam Kadmon has an interior life of its own or is only the field from which the *partzufim* arise.

Adam Kadmon does not shatter. This is the most important precision in the chapter. The catastrophe of the Lurianic system is *shevirat ha-kelim*, and the vessels that broke were those of the world of *Nekudim*, the sefirot in their individualized form. Adam Kadmon's own lights were too unified to be contained in vessels at all; the *ta'amim* remained in his "ears" and did not descend. Adam Kadmon is the *precondition* of the catastrophe, not its scene. "Adam Kadmon's vessels broke" is an error, and a common one.

The ears, nose, mouth, and eyes

The Lurianic texts give a detailed account of what issues from Adam Kadmon's faculties, and it is one of the system's most beautiful constructions. The four faculties of the head each emit a corresponding level of light, and those levels are identified with the four levels of the Torah.

Faculty	Light	Level of Torah
אֲזֵנַיִם <i>oznayim</i> , ears	טַעֲמִים <i>ta'amim</i>	the cantillation: pure melody, the accents; the highest level, remaining in Adam Kadmon

Faculty	Light	Level of Torah
חוטם <i>chotem</i> , nose	נקודות <i>nekkudot</i>	the vocalization: the vowel points that give letters voice
פה <i>peh</i> , mouth	תגיין <i>taggin</i>	the crowns: the small ornamental marks on certain letters
עיניים <i>einayim</i> , eyes	אותיות <i>otiyot</i>	the letters: the consonants, the readable text

The higher the faculty, the less determinate its output. The ears produce the *ta'amim*: pure melody, no articulation, no letters, the level that cannot be written down in the ordinary sense. The nose produces the *nekkudot*, the vowels that give letters voice but have no shape of their own. The mouth produces the *taggin*, the smallest marks. The eyes produce the *otiyot*, the consonants, the fully determinate and visible form of the text.

Which means the Torah's four levels of interpretation — *peshat*, *remez*, *derash*, *sod* — are not four ways of reading a book. They are four levels of *emanation from a head*, and the levels of interpretation correspond to the distance from Adam Kadmon's mouth. The ear is highest and least determinate, which is not an accident: the highest level must be the least containable, and the *ta'amim*, the song without syllables, are the exact image of a light too high for vessels.

Akudim, Nekudim, Berudim

Between Adam Kadmon and the *partzufim*, the Lurianic texts place three states of the world.

Akudim, "bound": all ten lights contained in a *single* vessel, undifferentiated — a state of unity that cannot generate a world, because a world needs distinctions.

Nekudim, "points": each light in its own vessel, ten distinct points. This is the world in which the vessels broke, shattering under the pressure of a light they were not built to hold. The shards became the *kelipot*, the shells, and the sparks fell with them.

Berudim, "speckled": the state after the breaking, light and vessel intermingled, some sparks trapped in shells, some vessels partially repaired. The *partzufim* arise from this mottled state. *Berudim* takes its name from Jacob's speckled and spotted flocks in Genesis 30:32–39. Reading a folktale about livestock breeding as a physics of light is characteristic of Lurianic method.

The 288 sparks

Shevirat ha-kelim produces the system's most famous number.

When the vessels of *Nekudim* broke, the sparks of light that fell with the shards became trapped in the *kelipot*. The tradition counts them as 288, and the number is derived by *gematria* from Genesis 1:2, *veruach Elohim merachefet*, "and the spirit of God hovered." The word *merachefet* (מרדחפת) is read as *met-rachaf*, "the death of 288," because *rachaf* (רחף) has the value 288. The letters *mem-tav*, spelling *met*, "death," fall away from the word, leaving 288 sparks in exile.

The move is worth pausing on. A verse about the spirit of God hovering over the primordial waters, in the middle of the creation account, becomes a

statement about the number of divine sparks trapped below. The falling letters are the falling sparks. Language enacts the catastrophe.

The 288 sparks have 288 *roots*, *shorashim*, in the higher world, and the relation between sparks and roots is the mechanism of *tikkun*. Each spark must be returned to its source, and the returning is done by the commandments, by prayer, by the *kavvanot*, and by ordinary acts performed with the right orientation. *Tikkun olam* in its technical sense is not social reform but the reassembly of a structure from 288 fragments, each of which knows where it belongs. The tradition understood this practically: the *kavvanot* for the *Amidah*, the *Shema*, and the festivals specify which sparks are raised by which prayers. That is not a metaphor the practitioners used; it is what they thought they were doing.

The partzufim

The final stage of the system, and the point at which Adam Kadmon's descendants become the working structure of the divine, is the doctrine of the *partzufim*.

A *partzuf* is a "face" or configuration. The five are *Arikh Anpin*, the Long Face, or *Attika Kadisha*, corresponding to *Keter* and to pure mercy and infinite patience; *Abba*, Father, for *Chokhmah*; *Imma*, Mother, for *Binah*; *Ze'ir Anpin*, the Small Face, for the six sefirot from *Chesed* to *Yesod*, identified with the blessed Holy One of the liturgy; and *Nukva*, the Female, also *Malkhut* and *Shekhinah*, the last sefirah. They are the divine structure after the breaking has been partially repaired and reorganized, and two features distinguish them from the sefirot they replace.

The first is that they are *persons*. Each has a character, relations, moods, and a face. *Arikh Anpin* is the patient one, of whom the tradition reads Psalm 145:8, "slow to anger" — *erekh apayim*, "long of nose," and *Arikh Anpin* is the *long face*. *Ze'ir Anpin* is the short-tempered one, the aspect that can be provoked, the God of the Exodus. The *Zohar*'s distinction between these two faces is one of the tradition's most powerful ideas, and it does something no philosophical theism can do: it explains the emotional life of the religious person as a fact about the structure of reality.

The second is that they are *related*. The *partzufim* are male and female pairs, and the relation between *Ze'ir Anpin* and *Nukva* is the central drama of the Lurianic universe. Their union — *zivvug* — is the mechanism by which blessing flows to the world; their separation is the mechanism of exile. The *Shekhinah* in exile is the *Nukva* separated from her partner, and the task of Israel is to bring them together. So the system closes its loop. A cosmology has to say where the knower stands, and here the answer is the most intimate available: you stand inside a relationship within God, and your acts are one of its terms.

One caution before leaving the system. The Lurianic corpus is not one book: Luria wrote very little, almost everything comes through Chaim Vital's transcriptions, which exist in multiple recensions, and *Etz Chaim* is a compilation from Vital's notebooks whose order varies between manuscripts. Luria's successors — Israel Sarug, and the later *partzufim*-centered synthesis that reached full form in Hasidic texts — developed the system further. What is described above is a composite, and when a reader meets a Lurianic technical detail, the honest question is always *which recension*.

What is not in doubt is the shape of the thing. Luria took the *Zohar*'s structured God, the ten sefirot of *Sefer Yetzirah*, the measures of *Shi'ur Komah*, and the rabbis' collective Adam, and made them a narrative with a beginning, a catastrophe, and a task. And at the head of it, before the disaster, before the faces, he put a human being.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 10: Adam Kadmon and the Four Worlds

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzilah, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

"Adam Kadmon is the crown of all the worlds, and from it the worlds are drawn." — a formulation standard in the Lurianic and post-Lurianic literature

The four worlds — *Atzilut*, *Beriah*, *Yetzilah*, *Assiah* — are the load-bearing frame of Kabbalistic cosmology, inherited from the *Zohar* and earlier texts rather than invented by Luria. Chapter 8 has shown how they map onto the letters of the name. The question this chapter has to answer is harder: where does Adam Kadmon fit?

The four worlds in outline

Atzilut, Emanation, is the world of the sefirot: divinity itself, undivided, in which the ten sefirot are the *partzufim* and the light is not yet clothed in any vessel that could be called created. *Beriah*, Creation, is the world of the throne and of the highest created intelligences, where the *Merkavah* of Ezekiel's vision belongs and where the *Zohar* places the *neshamah*, highest of the ordinary human soul-levels. *Yetzirah*, Formation, is the world of the angelic ranks and of the *ruach*, the middle soul-level. *Assiah*, Action, is the world of the made: the physical cosmos, the *nefesh*, and the *kelipot*, which hang on it as husks.

The four correspond to the four letters, the four levels of the soul (*nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah*, *chayah*, with *yechidah* as a fifth), the four expansions of the name, and the four levels of Torah interpretation.

The question of Adam Kadmon's place

Adam Kadmon is *above* the four worlds in the standard Lurianic account. He emerges from the *kav* before *Atzilut* exists, and *Atzilut* is what emerges from him — from his eyes, in one very common formulation, after the vessels of *Nekudim* have broken and the *partzufim* reorganize. If Adam Kadmon were a world there would be five worlds, and the tradition says four.

The ways of stating his relation to *Atzilut* differ, and the differences are not always reconciled.

Adam Kadmon as the first world. Some texts speak of Adam Kadmon as the highest world, the *olam* that precedes and contains all the others, in which case

the fourfold scheme silently becomes fivefold, or Adam Kadmon is placed above the count as the *root* rather than a member. This formulation is common in popular exposition and appears in some sources. It is a genuine reading, not simply a mistake.

Adam Kadmon as the sefirot of Atzilut under another name. Other texts, arguably the more technically precise Lurianic position, treat Adam Kadmon as *identical* with the sefirot of *Atzilut* considered in their root state. On this reading Adam Kadmon is not a separate world at all but the name for the configuration of the divine that the world of *Atzilut* is. The distinction is then one of aspect rather than of level: Adam Kadmon is Atzilut as an undifferentiated figure, and Atzilut is Adam Kadmon as the ten sefirot.

Adam Kadmon as prior to the worlds altogether. A third formulation, prominent in texts influenced by the Habad reading of *tzimtzum*, treats Adam Kadmon as neither a world nor an entity but the *structure of the divine self-relation* — the way *Ein Sof* is configured after the contraction, before any world can be spoken of. This is close to saying that Adam Kadmon is the *kav*'s own form.

The garments

Adam Kadmon's relation to the lower worlds is mediated by *levushim* — garments, vestments.

The terminology is mostly Lurianic and it is precise. The lights of Adam Kadmon do not enter the lower worlds naked; they are clothed, and the clothing is what allows a light too intense for a vessel to be received at all. The garments

are not disguises but the *conditions of transmission*, the way a light proportioned for the highest level is attenuated for a lower one.

The *Zohar* makes a related and beautiful use of the idea: the Torah's narratives are the *levushim* of the Torah's inner meaning. The garment is not a lie about the body; it is what makes the body presentable in a given setting, and one does not understand the body by discarding it. The Lurianic extension to Adam Kadmon's lights is direct. There is also a Lurianic teaching about Adam Kadmon's *own* garments, connected with *or makif* and *or pnimi*, encircling light and inner light. The terminology is not consistent across sources, and any confident single-sentence summary of it — including this one — should be treated with suspicion.

Does Adam Kadmon have any relation to the created order?

This is the deepest question in the chapter, and it is a question about what kind of claim the whole doctrine makes. Two answers are available, and both are attested.

The relational answer. Adam Kadmon's structure *is* the form of the created order at the highest level of description. The human body mirrors the sefirot because the sefirot are configured as Adam Kadmon and the body below is the terminal copy. On this reading everything the tradition says is ultimately about the *relation* between God and the human being — not a relation between two pre-existing things, but one that constitutes both terms. Adam Kadmon is what the divine looks like when it is turned toward a world, and the world is what the human looks like when it is turned toward God. The knower's place, in Part One's phrase, *is* the structure.

The purely internal answer. Adam Kadmon has no relation to the created order at all. He is a name for the divine self-configuration, and the created world is a later production that happens to have been shaped according to him. On this reading the doctrine is theology, not cosmology: it says something about God and nothing about the world. The correspondences — the limbs, the name, the measure — are the Godhead's own anatomy, described by analogy because we have no other vocabulary for structure.

The tradition's way of holding both is the doctrine of *mashal*, the parable: the relation between God's structure and the world's is real, and the human form is the most adequate description available to us, and it would be a mistake to conclude that God is a large person. Whether that position is stable is the question Maimonides raised, and that the next chapter has to face.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 11: The Soul as a Limb — Israel, Humanity, and the Cosmic Person

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzira, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

"Rabbi Yose said: Come and see — all the souls of Israel are limbs of one body." — the Zohar's language of the corporate soul, paraphrased from its treatment of the souls of Israel as deriving from a single supernal root

There is a doctrine that runs from the midrash to Hasidism and gives the whole system its ethical edge: Adam Kadmon contains all souls, and every individual human being is a limb, an organ, or a spark of that one figure. This chapter is about that doctrine, and about the trouble it makes.

All souls in Adam

Vayikra Rabbah 14:1 reports that the first human was created as a single being containing all generations, and that the souls of all who would ever live were in him, or were shown to him, or were drawn from him; *Bereshit Rabbah* 24:2 has the related tradition about the souls of the righteous being in Adam. The *Zohar* elaborates systematically: the souls of Israel derive from a supernal root, and the root is the *partzuf*, and the derivation is the mechanism of election and of providence.

The Lurianic version is the most developed. Souls derive from Adam Kadmon by way of the *partzufim* and — the crucial technical step — from the *specific limb* corresponding to their character and task. There are root-souls, *shorashim*, from which individual souls branch, and the branches are not interchangeable: a soul from the aspect of the divine *feet* is a different kind of soul from one from the divine *hands*, with a different task and route upward. Hence the Lurianic seriousness about genealogy and *gilgul*, the transmigration of souls. If souls are limbs of a structure and sparks of a shattered one, then who is who and where each belongs is a real fact with consequences. The Safed circle's interest in the root of a person's soul was diagnostics, not curiosity.

The limbs and the nations

Now the particularist turn, which must be stated without softening.

The correspondence between parts of the body and groups of people is old, and the tradition applies it to Israel and to the nations: the upper limbs to Israel, the lower to the nations, a scheme attested in the *Zohar* and in later literature. The

Zohar and the Lurianic texts contain passages in which the nations derive from the divine *kelipot* or from the lower aspects and Israel from the *panim*, the faces, the inner structure. There is material here that is frankly hard, and the honest course is to say so rather than to present the tradition's universalism as the whole story.

But the doctrine is not simply a hierarchy of worth, and this deserves care.

Israel is a *function*, not merely a rank. In the Kabbalistic scheme, Israel is the *kohanim* of the human race — the priesthood, whose task is the *tikkun* done on behalf of everything. The limbs called "Israel" are the limbs that *perform the ritual*. A hand is not more valuable than a foot; it has a different job. This reading of election is not an evasion; it is one of the tradition's own answers to the scandal of chosenness, attested in the *Zohar* and developed in Hasidism.

The particularist and universalist strands are both in the sources. Genesis 1:27 is universal: the image of God is in all human beings. Genesis 12 is particular: through Abraham's seed the nations are blessed. The *Zohar* holds both, and the *Talmud* holds both — *Sanhedrin* 37a's reading of Genesis 5:1–2, deriving the equality of all human beings from the singular *adam*, alongside the *Tosefta*'s insistence that the righteous of the nations have a share in the world to come. The tension is in the material, not imported into it.

The *kelipot* doctrine cuts against a racial reading. If the lower realms are populated by *kelipot* — shells, husks, refuse — the descriptor applies to *acts and attachments*, not to ethnicity. The tradition was not consistent about this, and there are passages that do think in ethnic terms. But the systematic doctrine attributes the shells to *orientations of will*, and the Hasidic tradition reads them

as the inner obstacles of every person, including the Jew. That is a late development and a genuine one, and it should be described as a development rather than as the original meaning.

The body below mirrors the sefirot

The doctrine of the soul as a limb has a physical form. The human body below is a copy of the structure above, and the tradition wrote out the correspondence in detail: 248 limbs and 365 sinews, corresponding to 248 positive commandments and 365 negative ones; the right side of the body to *Chesed*, love, and the left to *Gevurah*, judgment; the head to the upper sefirot; the organ of generation to *Yesod*, the foundation, the *tzaddik*, whose name in the tradition is *brit*, covenant, and whose sanctity is the sanctity of transmission.

The correspondence is not decorative. It is the *reason* the ritual system works. If the body is a copy of the structure, each commandment is an operation on a corresponding limb, and the practice of the commandments repairs the structure by way of the copy. This is what the tradition means by saying the commandments are the limbs of the King: not that God has a body that needs moral behavior, but that the structure of obligation is the structure of the form.

The tradition drew the consequence: if the body below mirrors the structure above, then *what you do with your body is what you do to the structure*. Kabbalistic ethics — of sexuality, diet, speech, and the treatment of other human beings — is not a set of arbitrary rules imposed by authority but a *theory of action*, in which certain acts maintain the correspondence and certain acts sever it. Whether the theory is true is a separate question. That the tradition held it, and that its ethics are intelligible only against it, is not.

The spark in the shell

The doctrine reaches its sharpest form in the Lurianic account of *tikkun* as it applies to the individual.

Every soul is a spark from the shattered vessels, in exile among the *kelipot*. Every soul carries a fragment of the light that fell, and every soul has a root above to which its fragment belongs. The task of a life is to elevate the sparks that belong to that soul, and the sparks are located in the material world: in objects, in acts, in other people, in the ordinary furniture of existence.

Hence the Hasidic doctrine of *avodah be-gashmiyut*, service through the physical, and the striking claim that a person's obligations are concrete rather than general: *this* thing is your spark, *this* act is your repair. From this the Hasidic masters drew *hashgachah peratit*, particular providence — nothing happens to a person by accident, and everything that arrives is the material of a task.

Is this the Gnostic doctrine of the spark in the prison? Part One flagged the resemblance and Part Four will take it up. Briefly: the Kabbalistic spark is *sent* into the world and can be elevated, and the world it is in is the lowest level of the divine rather than the work of an enemy. The Gnostic spark is *taken* and must be extracted from a world that cannot be fixed. One is here to redeem the world it is in. The other must get out.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 12: The Shadow of Anthropomorphism — Maimonides, the Critics, and the Apophatic Reply

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzirah, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

"The term 'image' (tzelem) is applied to the natural form, I mean to the notion in virtue of which a thing is constituted as a substance and becomes what it is." — Moses Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed 1:1

In 1190, in Egypt, the greatest halakhist of the medieval world published a book written for a single student and addressed to everyone. The *Dalalat al-Ha'irin*, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, set out to reconcile the Torah with Aristotelian philosophy, and it began by cutting out of the tradition anything that would make God a body. This is the strongest criticism ever made from within

Judaism of the anthropomorphic imagination, and it came from a man whose authority no Kabbalist could dismiss. Any honest account of Adam Kadmon has to face it.

Maimonides on the image

Guide 1:1 opens with *tzelem* and *demut*, and goes straight to the problem. If *tzelem* meant shape, Genesis 1:26 would be saying that God has a shape. Maimonides denies this flatly. On his reading, *tzelem* means the *natural form* of a thing, the specific constitution that makes it what it is. In the human being's case, that constitution is the intellect:

...For the term tzelem is used of the natural form... and it is because of the intellect, which is the apprehension of the divine, that the human being is said to be in the image of God.

The claim has three parts, all radical. The image of God in the human being is *not* a bodily form. It is not even a resemblance in essence but a *capacity*, the capacity to apprehend. And the resemblance is therefore *asymmetric in kind*: God's apprehension is God's essence, while the human's is an accident of the human's matter. *Tzelem* names a relation between two things that are not alike, by way of the one feature they share in the only way they can share it — intellection.

Guide 1:26 takes up the plural deliberation and the human's rule over the earth and reads both non-anthropomorphically. *Guide* 3:15 and its surrounding

chapters establish the principle: any scriptural expression implying that God has a body, a location, a movement, an emotion, or a change is *equivocal language*, said "in the language of the sons of man," and must be interpreted. And the conclusion of *Guide* 1:56–60 — that nothing positive can be predicated of God, and that all divine attributes are negations — makes God, in the end, unknowable in essence.

The consequences for our subject are direct. A God of no body has no limbs. A God of no accidents has no length. A God who cannot be described has no *shi'ur komah*. A God who has no parts cannot be configured as a human figure, cannot be the object of a measure, and cannot be the referent of an anatomy.

The scandal, stated

The Kabbalists knew exactly what Maimonides had said. Some admired him; the tradition generally refused to make him a heretic. But the incompatibility was real, and they answered it by insisting that their own bodily language was *not* what Maimonides had forbidden.

The dispute had a flashpoint long before Luria. In the twelfth century the *Sefer Bahir* introduced anthropomorphic imagery into Kabbalah — a divine *Tiferet*, divine limbs, a divine *Shekhinah* — and the early Kabbalists were accused of corporealism. In 1305 Rabbi Shlomo ibn Adret of Barcelona, the *Rashba*, an authority of the first rank, convened a commission and banned the study of Kabbalah by anyone under forty, giving as his stated reason that young men were reading the material literally and concluding that God has a body. The ban is a primary document of the problem: the tradition's leadership considered

literalist misreading a real danger, and the Kabbalists considered their own texts *not* literalist.

Then there is Maimonides' critic in the opposite direction. Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières, in his *Hasagot* on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, objected to the claim that anyone who attributes corporeality to God is a heretic, because *many greater and better than he* held that view on the strength of scriptural verses and aggadic passages, and one does not declare such people heretics. The objection is nine words long in the relevant passage and it has kept an argument alive for eight hundred years. Some of the greatest authorities in the tradition did believe God had a form. They were not fools, and they had verses.

The Kabbalistic reply

The reply, developed over centuries, has four components. Each works to some degree, and none refutes him.

The distinction between *Ein Sof* and the sefirot. Maimonides was right about *Ein Sof*. The boundless, the infinite, has no body, no form, no attributes, and cannot be described at all. The sefirot, and Adam Kadmon with them, are not the essence; they are the *structure by which the essence relates to what is not itself*. The Kabbalists stated this repeatedly, and it is not a dodge: it is the reason the sefirot are described as *belimah*, and it is why the tradition hedges every anthropomorphic claim by insisting that the figure is the *midos*, the attributes, rather than the *etzem*, the essence.

The distinction between the corporeal and the structural. A body in the physical sense is a composite of matter and form, extended in space, subject to

division. A *structure* is an order of relations that can be described as a body without being one. When the Kabbalists say God's "right arm" extends, they do not mean a limb; they mean that an aspect of the divine activity is configured as giving, and located on the side that corresponds to giving. The tradition's anthropomorphism is *mostly* the language of positions and relations, not of matter. Maimonides would have replied — and he has a case — that a God with relations external to the essence is a God with accidents, which is equally forbidden; the Kabbalists would have replied that the relations are internal, and therefore the structure of the essence rather than an addition to it. At that point the two sides are arguing about whether divine simplicity admits internal structure at all, which is not a question scripture can settle.

The anti-literalist warnings inside the sources. As Chapter 5 showed, the *Shi'ur Komah* texts themselves warn against reading the measure as a physical description. The *Zohar* repeatedly insists that its language is *raza de-meheimanuta*, a mystery of faith, not a report. The prohibition on *hagshamah*, corporealization, is invoked by Kabbalists against Kabbalists. The tradition cannot be convicted of the literalism it forbade.

The argument from the limits of language. If all language about God is equivocal and every attribute is a negation, then nothing positive can be said of God at all — including the statement that God is not a body. Maimonides accepted this and made it the doctrine. The Kabbalists found it religiously intolerable: a God of whom nothing can be affirmed is a God who cannot be loved, addressed, or imitated, and this is a tradition of love, address, and imitation. The kataphatic is not naivety but the claim that some way of speaking

about God must be possible, and that the body is the way a being with a body can speak.

The Kabbalists did not win this argument and Maimonides did not lose it. The tradition held both, in a tension formalized in the medieval distinction between *ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkavah* and in the standard Kabbalistic disclaimer that *Ein Sof* is beyond all this.

The apophatic and kataphatic inside Kabbalah

One more thing, because the received picture of Kabbalah as a uniformly anthropomorphic mysticism is wrong.

Kabbalah has its own apophatic tradition. The *Zohar* speaks of *Atika Kadisha*, the Holy Ancient One, as that which has no *mishcha*, no measure; as the *shetika*, silence; as the *reisha de-lo itgala*, the head that is not revealed. *Ein Sof* is described in post-Lurianic texts as *efes*, nothing, and the Habad tradition developed a full apophaticism in which *Adam Kadmon* itself is a *levush*, a garment concealing an unknowable *etzem*, and in which taking the structure for the essence is named as the error of *hagshamah*.

So the argument is inside the tradition, and it is not a contest between mysticism and philosophy. The Kabbalists who insist that *Adam Kadmon* is a *name* and not a *body* are arguing with the Kabbalists for whom the figure is the shape of the divine life, and that is the same argument Maimonides had, in a different vocabulary and with different worries.

There is one thing to be said for the anthropomorphic side that the philosophical side has never fully answered. If the image of God in the human being is the intellect and nothing else, then the body is not part of the image, and Jewish practice — a discipline of the body, of eating and fasting and washing and blessing and refraining — is not a discipline of the divine image. The Kabbalists' position, whatever its difficulties, keeps the body inside the image. Given that the commandments are addressed to a body, that may not be the easier position, but it is the harder one to give up.

Part Two: Adam Kadmon — The Primordial Human in Jewish Mysticism

Chapter 13: After Luria — Adam Kadmon in Hasidism, Chabad, and the Christian Kabbalists

From the two creation accounts in Genesis to the shattered vessels of Luria, the Jewish tradition built one figure out of scripture, measurement, letter, and light. This part follows that figure through the rabbis, the Hekhalot mystics, the author of Sefer Yetzirah, the Zohar, the Safed circle, and their critics and heirs — keeping the argument inside the Jewish sources, and marking where the sources disagree with each other or where a modern scholar is doing the connecting.

*"There is nothing else besides him." — Deuteronomy 4:35, read by the
Hasidic tradition as the foundation of its cosmology*

The Lurianic system did two things its author might not have foreseen. It spread, becoming the dominant theology of the Jewish world within two generations through printed editions and the popularization of the *kavvanot*; and it became the seedbed of a mass movement. Hasidism took Luria's map, added the doctrine of divine unity, and drew consequences that make Luria look cautious.

The same system, in a very different hand, was read by Christians.

Hasidism: God everywhere, and the structure we live in

The Hasidic movement, arising in the eighteenth century in Podolia and Volhynia around Israel ben Eliezer, the *Baal Shem Tov*, inherited Luria's map and made three changes of emphasis with large consequences.

The first is the doctrine of *achdut ha-shem*, divine unity, in its most radical form. *Ein Sof* is present in everything without exception, and the apparent world is, in the *Tanya's* phrase, a *yesh ha-nir'eh*, an apparent something. The world is not a lower level of the divine; it is a *manner in which the divine appears*, like a light that seems to be a thing when it is really the source's shining.

Deuteronomy 4:35, "there is nothing else besides him," is read with the emphasis on *nothing* and *else*: not merely that no other God exists, but that no other existence exists.

The second is the relocation of the cosmic drama into the individual. Lurianic *tikkun* was a cosmic operation performed by the community through the *kavvanot*; Hasidic *avodah*, service, is the same operation performed by a person in prayer, in eating, in speech, in the small acts of a day. The sparks are not only in the upper worlds. They are in your words and on your table.

The third, and the one that matters most here, is the reformulation of Adam Kadmon.

Adam Kadmon in Chabad: the structure in which we live

The Habad school — Chabad, after the acronym *Chokhmah-Binah-Da'at* — was founded by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, whose *Tanya* (1796) is the movement's systematic work, and developed by his successors, above all the seventh rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, whose discourses contain the most sustained Chabad treatment of *Adam Kadmon* and *tzimtzum*. The Chabad reading can be summarized as follows, and it is a *reading* — a development, not a report of what Luria said.

The literal *tzimtzum* is rejected. A God who is truly infinite cannot have vacated a region, because there is no region and no outside. *Tzimtzum* is therefore *she-lo ke-peshuto*, not in its literal sense: a concealment, a hiding of the light that allows the world to appear as other than God. The void is not empty; it is God, unperceived. This doctrine is explicit in Chabad's literature.

Adam Kadmon is then the answer to a question the literal reading made impossible to ask. If there is no void, what is the structure in which we stand? The Chabad answer is that *Adam Kadmon* is the *order* of the divine self-configuration considered as the medium through which the world is at all — the *seder hishtalshelut*, the order of descent — and that this order is not above us but is the very structure of our existence. The divine lights do not come from a distant height down to us; the descent is the manner of God's presence. The ladder is the presence of the one who is not on a ladder.

A recurring Chabad formulation has the world of *Atzilut*, and *Adam Kadmon* within it, *ke-neged*, as against, the lower worlds; and the *Tanya*'s language about the human soul as "a part of God above" (*chelek Eloha mi-ma'al*) is not a metaphor. The human being is therefore not a copy of the structure but a *place where the structure is present*, and the structure is what makes the place.

Two consequences follow. First, this is the most radical immanence in the tradition, and it makes Adam Kadmon the *grammar of the relation between God and world*, the name for the fact that there is a structure rather than a sheer unavailability of God. Second, it has an ethical edge the earlier Kabbalah lacked. If there is nothing else besides him, then the *melachah*, the ordinary act — the eating, the conversation, the labor — is divine service in the strict sense, and no sphere is profane. Hasidism's joy, its suspicion of mortification, and its doctrine that a person serves God with the body follow from that premise. Whatever else it is, this is not a spirituality that treats the body as a prison.

The Christian Kabbalists

Then there is the most surprising chapter of the figure's history.

In the late fifteenth century, in Florence, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola learned Hebrew from Jewish converts, acquired Kabbalistic manuscripts, and announced to the Latin world that the Kabbalah confirmed Christianity. His *Conclusiones* (1486) include a set of Kabbalistic theses arguing that the *sod* of the Jewish mystics was the *mysterium* of the Trinity and the Incarnation hidden under the letter. He died young, in 1494, and his influence traveled through his sources rather than his arguments.

Johannes Reuchlin, the greatest Christian Hebraist before the sixteenth century's confessional hardening, gave the project its systematic form. *De Verbo Mirifico* (1494) and *De Arte Cabalistica* (1517) present Kabbalah as a philosophically coherent doctrine whose inner content is Christian. Reuchlin's central claim turns on the name. The Tetragrammaton *YHVH* is unpronounceable; the Gospels give a *nomen mirificum*, a wonder-working name, in the *shin* inserted

into it — *YHSVH*, Jesus. And Reuchlin identified the Kabbalists' *Adam Kadmon* with the *Logos* of John's prologue and with the messiah, arguing that where the Jewish Kabbalists spoke of a primordial human who is the pattern of the world, they were describing the person of the Son before the incarnation.

First, the figure acquires *personhood* in a stronger sense. In the Jewish system *Adam Kadmon* is a configuration of divine light and a structure; whether it is a *person* is precisely what the tradition leaves open, and the Habad reading pushes toward "no, it is the order of things." In Reuchlin's reading the figure is a hypostasis with a will, a relation to the Father, and a willingness to become incarnate. The structure becomes a subject.

Second, the descent acquires a *voluntary* and *redemptive* character. The Lurianic descent is a consequence of the withdrawal and the breaking; nobody decided to be broken. In the Christian reading, the primordial human's descent into the lower world is the incarnation, and the reason for it is love and salvation. The catastrophe becomes a plan.

Third, and largest, the figure moves from being *the structure of the world* to being *the mediator of a salvation the world cannot achieve by structure*. Jewish *tikkun* is a repair performed from within the correspondence between above and below: the structure is sound, the sparks are recoverable, the ritual works. In the Christological reading, the structure is broken in a way the structure cannot repair, and a person must enter it from outside. *Adam Kadmon* as *Logos* is the one who enters.

Athanasius Kircher, the Jesuit polymath, carried the tradition forward in *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652–54) with elaborate diagrams of the sefirotic tree

and the name-arithmetic, and with an appetite for correspondences that has been enormously influential on what "Kabbalah" means in European esoteric culture. His Kabbalah is a synthesis of Reuchlin, Pico, and a great deal of Hermetic material. Its value as a report of Jewish sources is low; its value as evidence of what early modern Europe thought Kabbalah was is high.

The Christian Kabbalists' Adam Kadmon is not a Jewish doctrine. It is not an invention out of nothing either: it is what happens when a structural figure is read through a theology that requires the structure to be a person, and the reading was coherent enough to dominate European understanding of Kabbalah for four hundred years — including among Jews, some of whom met their own tradition in its Christianized form.

The Sabbatean crisis, briefly

One episode belongs here because it bears on the credibility of *tikkun* doctrine.

In 1665 Shabbetai Tzvi of Smyrna declared himself the messiah, and a large part of the Jewish world — including serious Kabbalists — believed him. The movement collapsed when he converted to Islam in 1666, and the aftermath produced the most severe crisis of authority in early modern Jewish history. The episode is usually read as a crisis of messianism. It was also a crisis of *cosmology*: the Lurianic system had made the world's fate depend on a mechanism — the raising of sparks, the *zivvug* of the *partzufim* — supposedly invulnerable to the failure of a person, and one of its most learned adherents had declared himself the mechanism's agent and then abandoned it.

The Sabbateans concluded that the structure required deliberate entry into the *kelipot*, a doctrine called *mitzvah ha-ba'ah be-aveirah*, the commandment that comes through a transgression. Their opponents — the emerging Hasidic leadership and the rabbinic establishment — concluded the opposite: that the system is sound and the person was false, and that the messianic role lies in ordinary service rather than in a claimant. Hasidism's sobriety about messianism is a direct inheritance from the disaster. Its cosmology kept Adam Kadmon and gave up the idea that a single person could be the agent of the structure's repair.

Where the figure ends up

By the nineteenth century, Adam Kadmon is doing three jobs at once, and they do not quite fit together. He is a *cosmological stage*: the first configuration after the withdrawal, above the four worlds and the source of the *partzufim*, which is the Lurianic figure the technical literature presupposes. He is the *structure of everything*, in the Chabad reading, the order of divine self-configuration through which alone anything is at all — the most philosophically daring version, and the one that makes Adam Kadmon a live possibility for a modern theology. And he is the *Logos*, the *verbum mirificum*, the second person of the Trinity in a Jewish vocabulary, in the Christian Kabbalists and their long European afterlife — the version that made the term famous outside Judaism.

Part Three turns to a fourth version, the Anthropos of the Gnostic tractates, who is not the structure of a world but a figure who fell into one. When Part Four puts the figures side by side, it will be worth remembering that the Jewish figure already contained its own tensions: between structure and person,

between the divine interior and the created order, between an image that is a form and a God who has no form. The comparison is not between a settled system and an unsettled one. It is between two figures, each of which was always arguing with itself.

Part Three: The Gnostic Anthropos — The Divine Human in the Pleroma and Below

Chapter 14: The Perfect Anthropos in the Pleroma

Part One established the problem; Part Two has shown what the Jewish mystics built from it. Part Three goes to the other side of the ledger, where the primordial human is not the innermost secret of a good God but the hostage of an incompetent one. It stays inside the sources: the Sethian Pleroma and its counterfeiting demiurge, the Valentinian aeon called Anthropos, the Hermetic descent through the seven spheres, and the later traditions in which the figure becomes a mechanism for extracting divine light from a world that swallowed it.

This is the fivefold structure of the Pleroma: the Father, Barbelo, the self-originate, Christ, and the perfect Anthropos. — the Apocryphon of John, in paraphrase of the hypostases it lists at NHC II,1 6–9

Before anything is said about the divine human in these texts, something has to be said about the word holding them together. "Gnosticism" is a modern category, coined as a polemical label and under demolition by scholars since the Nag Hammadi library made it obvious that the texts once filed under that heading disagreed about nearly everything: the number of the aeons, the moral

status of the demiurge, whether the visible world is to be escaped or inhabited, whether the body is a mistake or a stage. What exists is a cluster of schools — Sethian, Valentinian, Hermetic, Thomasine, and later Mandaean and Manichaean — that shared a vocabulary, argued over a common set of scriptural passages, and in several cases despised each other. Where this part says "Sethian" it means the family of texts gathered around the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, *Zostrianos*, and *Allogenes*. Where it says "Valentinian" it means the school that grew out of Valentinus's teaching in second-century Rome and Alexandria, with its own internal factions. The word appears here as shorthand, not as the name of a religion.

Three recensions of one book

The place to begin is the *Apocryphon of John*, the fullest surviving Sethian account of the Anthropos, which we have in three manuscripts: NHC II,1; a somewhat longer NHC IV,1; and a third Coptic version from a papyrus book now in Berlin, usually cited as BG 8502,2. They are not identical. The longer recension adds an extended opening in which the risen Christ appears to John in the temple, and expansions throughout. The common view is that a shorter Greek original lies behind all three Coptic witnesses and that the book grew by accretion, with the Pronoia hymn near the end an independent piece attached to the frame. That view is a reconstruction. The manuscripts do not tell us.

The book's opening establishes the highest principle by a series of denials:

The Monad is a monarchy with nothing above it. It is he who exists as God and Father of everything, the invisible one who is above everything... a light which no one can measure... He is not corporeal, he is not incorporeal... not great, not small... utterly ineffable.

That is close to quoting, though the Coptic resists clean English and translations differ on whether the final term is "ineffable" or "unnameable." The passage is methodological as much as theological. The Father is described by taking away every predicate that could describe anything else, including "spirit" and "existence" in their ordinary senses. What remains is not a being with properties but the condition under which predication is possible at all.

The next move is what matters here. This unknowable one is not static. He has, in the text's language, an *ennoia*, an act of thought or intention, named **Pronoia**, forethought, or sometimes **Protennoia**, first thought. She is not created and not generated as the later aeons are; she is the Father's own self-directed awareness, named as a second. The *Apocryphon* then describes the first determination that follows: the Father gazes into the luminous water of light that surrounds him, sees his own image there, and this self-seeing is itself a hypostasis. The text calls what he sees his **image**, and the image is the reason the lower aeons exist at all.

Barbelo and the self-originate

From the Father and his forethought comes **Barbelo**, the first aeon, the first power, the "foreknowledge" (*prognosis*). The name is notoriously difficult and

may derive from a Hebrew or Aramaic expression meaning something like "in the four," or may be a coinage with no recoverable etymology. She is called mother-father and male-virgin, and the insistence on her bisexuality is not decoration: she is the point at which the absolutely simple becomes capable of relation without yet becoming two.

Barbelo asks the Father to grant her foreknowledge, and he consents, and what comes forth is **Autogenes**, the self-originate, the only-begotten. He is generated without a partner and without a passive principle, which is why the later catastrophe, when Sophia generates *without* her consort, has a partial precedent at the top of the system. The difference is consent. In the *Apocryphon* the Father grants; the pattern of the Pleroma is that generation proceeds only from a pair in agreement, and the one time a power generates alone and unasked, the result is the visible world.

With Autogenes come four lights: **Harmozel, Oroiael, Daveithai, and Eleleth**. Each is a great luminary with an aeon attendant on it and a set of "generations" dwelling in it. Harmozel, the first, is the light of the self-originate himself. Oroiael receives the "perfect Anthropos," the first aeon established after the luminaries, with his own aeons. Daveithai receives the generations of the sons of the light. Eleleth receives the souls of the holy ones who have come to rest. Scholars have tried to identify the four names with the quarters of the heavens, four archangels, the four rivers of Genesis 2, the four living creatures of Ezekiel 1. None of the identifications is secure. What is clear is the architecture: a fourfold framework of lights, each with a realm, and a distribution of spiritual populations among them.

Where the Anthropos sits

Here is the point at which the systems diverge, and the divergence is worth stating precisely because it is easy to blur.

In the *Apocryphon of John*, the **perfect Anthropos** is the image the Father sees when he contemplates the luminous waters. The text names him at the first self-reflection and again as the inhabitant of a luminary's realm, established with his own aeons. So the Anthropos here is neither the highest God nor an ordinary member of the aeon series. He is the *content* of the Father's self-knowledge and also a populated realm: what God sees, and where those who resemble him live.

Compare the Valentinian arrangement described in the next chapter. There Anthropos is one member of a pair — Anthropos and Ekklesia, the fourth syzygy in the Ogdoad — generated by Logos and Zoe and generating the remaining aeons. He is one aeon among thirty, indispensable but numbered. The Sethian text does not number him. He is not the fourth of anything; he is the image in which the numbering happens.

A third arrangement appears in the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* (NHC III,2 and IV,2), where the sequence runs through the great invisible Spirit, the triple-male child, and the seed of Seth, with a figure called **Adamas** — a name that looks very like a Greek rendering of "Adam" — set among the luminaries and tied to the founding of the immortal race. The *Gospel of the Egyptians*, which shares material with that book, does something similar. And in the *Tripartite Tractate* the human is not an aeon at all: it is what the aeons *are* collectively.

So there are at least three positions in these materials: the Anthropos as the archetype from which the aeon series derives; the Anthropos as a numbered aeon within the series; and the human as the collective name of the whole Pleroma. These are not variants of one doctrine with scribal noise in the transmission. They are three answers to the same question — when a cosmology says the highest reality has the shape of a human, is the human the *pattern* the aeons are cut to, or one of the things cut? A reader who wants a single doctrine of the Anthropos will not find one. What a reader finds is a family of systems arguing, in one vocabulary, about where to put him.

The shape of the Pleroma

The word **Pleroma** means fullness. In the *Apocryphon of John* it is the totality of the divine aeons, arranged not as a chain but as a *body* of lights, with the Father as the invisible source above them and the four luminaries as the framework in which the rest are distributed. In the *Tripartite Tractate* it is described in terms that come close to biology: the aeons are a single living thing, each contributing its own quality, none complete alone, the whole being the Father's self-knowledge rendered as a community. That text calls the Son the "totality," so the Pleroma is not a place the Son inhabits but the Son considered as many.

Two consequences follow. First, in these systems plurality inside the divine is not a lapse. It is the nature of the highest reality to be both one and many, because it is both the knower and the known, and knowledge requires two terms. That is why the syzygy is structural rather than decorative, and why a power generating alone is treated as a catastrophe.

Second, the human shape of the whole is not arrived at by analogy with our bodies. It is prior to them. The text does not say the cosmos resembles a person; it says a person is an image of something already structured as a self-knowing unity, and that our embodiment is a later and partial copy. The expansion here is small and should be marked: the *Apocryphon* does not say in so many words that the Pleroma is a body. It says the Father sees his image, that the image is called Anthropos, and that the aeons are established in the light of that image. Reading those claims as a claim about embodiment is an inference, and it is the inference the rest of the system requires.

Part Three: The Gnostic Anthropos — The Divine Human in the Pleroma and Below

Chapter 15: *Yaldabaoth and the Counterfeit Human*

Part One established the problem; Part Two has shown what the Jewish mystics built from it. Part Three goes to the other side of the ledger, where the primordial human is not the innermost secret of a good God but the hostage of an incompetent one. It stays inside the sources: the Sethian Pleroma and its counterfeiting demiurge, the Valentinian aeon called Anthropos, the Hermetic descent through the seven spheres, and the later traditions in which the figure becomes a mechanism for extracting divine light from a world that swallowed it.

"I am a jealous God, and there is no other God beside me." By saying this he made it known to the powers above that there is another God. — the Hypostasis of the Archons (NHC II,4 86), in the standard rendering; the Apocryphon of John places the same words in the mouth of the maker of the archons

The catastrophe happens in the middle of the Pleroma, not at the bottom, and it happens because a single aeon wanted to generate something by herself.

Sophia without her consort

The **Apocryphon of John** tells it briefly. Sophia, an aeon of the Pleroma, "wanted to bring forth a work by herself," without her male partner and without the consent of the Spirit or of her consort. The text calls this an act of *propnoia* — forethought of a kind that belongs to her but is not authorized — and it produces something that is not like her.

The Valentinian account, preserved in **Irenaeus**, *Against Heresies* 1.2 and 1.4, is more elaborate and psychologically sharper. There, Sophia is the last and youngest of the thirty aeons, and she suffers a passion (*pathos*) without her partner: a desire to comprehend the greatness of the Father, which by definition cannot be comprehended. A boundary (*Horos*, also called the Cross and the Redeemer) prevents her from dissolving into that incomprehensibility — a limit that saves her by stopping her. Her intention and her passion are then separated from her and cast outside the Pleroma, where they take on a kind of existence. That residue is **Achamoth**, the lower Sophia, and she is the mother of everything below the boundary.

Note what differs. In Irenaeus's report the fault is *epistemic*: Sophia wants to know what cannot be known, and the passion is the byproduct. In the *Apocryphon* the fault is *productive*: she wants to make something without a partner. Both end with a formless power outside the Pleroma, but they diagnose differently what went wrong at the top. The Sethian version is about illegitimate generation; the Valentinian is about illegitimate knowledge. A system built on the first will be careful about sex and parentage. A system built on the second will be careful about what the mind can reach.

The *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4), which retells the *Apocryphon's* material with a different narrative hand, keeps the generative fault: Sophia's offspring comes from her desire to create something "out of herself, without the consent of the Spirit." The *Reality of the Rulers*, as the text is also known, is shorter than its source and reads more like a chronicle. It will be cited here repeatedly because in several places it preserves a sharper image than the longer book.

The lion-faced serpent

What Sophia produces is described in the *Apocryphon* as a being with the face of a lion and the body of a serpent, blind, arrogant, and powerful. His name is **Yaldabaoth**.

The name is contested. Proposed derivations include an Aramaic or Hebrew phrase meaning something like "begetter of the heavens" or "child of chaos," a form connected to the divine name *Yah*, and a compound involving *Sabaoth*, "hosts." None commands assent. What is clear is that the name is *made* to sound Semitic, and that the archons around him bear names drawn from the Hebrew Bible's divine epithets: **Saklas**, commonly glossed as "fool"; **Samael**, the blind god or the angel of poison; **Sabaoth** in other texts. In the *Hypostasis of the Archons* the chief ruler is Samael and Yaldabaoth appears among the authorities as well. The texts do not agree on names, and the disagreement is not scribal error. Different schools redistributed the same stock.

This being steals power from his mother. The *Apocryphon* has Sophia recognize what she has made and move it out of the way, an act of shame that becomes the origin of the lower realms, while Yaldabaoth, having taken a portion of her

power, generates twelve authorities, which generate further powers. The world of the archons is built out of inherited and stolen divinity, and everything below the Pleroma is made of a substance it does not own.

The most quoted line in the corpus is his boast:

I am a jealous God, and there is no other God beside me.

The words adapt Isaiah 45:5, "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god," and Exodus 20:5, "for I the Lord your God am a jealous God." The *Apocryphon* places the boast in Yaldabaoth's mouth after he has seen the greatness of the waters above him, so that his claim to unique divinity is a *misreading of the evidence*: he has glimpsed a power greater than himself and drawn the opposite conclusion. The *Hypostasis of the Archons*, at II,4 86–87, answers him with a voice from above that says, in the standard rendering, "You are mistaken, Samael — that is, 'blind god,'" and declares that the true human exists and that the human's children will inherit what the blind god thinks he owns.

The boast is the doctrinal hinge of the whole system. Everything else in the Sethian myth follows from the fact that the being who made this world does not know he is not alone.

The archons and the materials of the world

Yaldabaoth's subordinates are the **archons**, the rulers. In the *Apocryphon* he produces twelve authorities, each with a name and a number, and beneath them 365 "angels" assigned to days and further hosts assigned to the zodiac and the planetary spheres. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* compresses the list and reassigns the names; the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians* give other sets again.

The functional point is consistent: the cosmos is administered by subordinate powers whose authority derives from a stolen, fragmented divinity, and they are organized as a *bureaucracy*, named and numbered and assigned to spheres and times. This is why the later Sethian ascent texts consist largely of lists of names and seals. Know the roster of the administration and you can pass through it.

The materials of the world are products of the archons' work and of the *waters* below them. The cosmology is aquatic at several points: the Pleroma's light is a luminous water, the lower realm has its own dark waters, and the reflection the archons see is a reflection in water.

The plan to make a human

The *Apocryphon* then puts Genesis 1:26 into the mouth of the powers:

Come, let us make a human being according to the image of God and according to our likeness, so that he may serve us.

The reading is pointed. Genesis's plural deliberation, which Part One catalogued four ways of explaining, is here explained a fifth way: the "us" is the archontic council, and the "image" they intend to copy is not their own. They want a servant, they have seen light above them, and they set out to manufacture the thing they have been told about.

What they see first is a reflection. In the *Hypostasis of the Archons* the powers see the **image of the incorruptible Anthropos** reflected in the water below, and the seeing produces desire: when they see it they say to one another, "Let us create a human being after the image of God." The *Apocryphon of John* describes the perfect Anthropos *appearing* to them, a manifestation rather than a reflection, and the response is the same. Either way the human is made from a copy of a copy, since the archons have access to an image and none to the original.

Their attempt fails in a specific way. The *Apocryphon* has them construct a psychical body from the materials at their disposal, and it cannot stand. It cannot move, it cannot rise. The archons have assembled a structure with the right shape and no life in it. What is missing is not a part but power, and the power they need belongs to a realm they cannot reach. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* gives its own version — the powers fashion a human being out of the earth, the being is *psychic*, the body is without spirit — but both agree that the archons see the work will not hold, and that this is the moment the Mother intervenes.

The secret insufflation

The rescue is a trick, and it is genuinely clever.

In the *Apocryphon of John*, the Mother — the Pronoia of the light, acting through the luminaries' counsel — proposes to Yaldabaoth that he breathe into the human's face the spirit that is in him. The suggestion arrives as advice from the light, and its packaging is the deception: the archons think they are completing their own creature. Yaldabaoth breathes, the power goes out of him and into the human, and the human rises.

And the power of the Mother left him and entered into the body which they had formed... and the human became a living soul.

That is a close paraphrase of the Coptic account of the animation, and the exegesis it contains is unmistakable. Genesis 2:7 says God breathed into the human's nostrils the breath of life. The *Apocryphon* says the breath went in, and that what the human received was the archon's own stolen power, the portion Yaldabaoth had taken from Sophia, now relocated into the human being. The creator is emptied by his own act of creation: he thinks he is animating a servant and is depositing the last of his divine capital in a vessel he cannot control. Hence the later Sethian description of the human as a container of light and the archons as impoverished. The light is not a gift from the creator but stolen property recovered by stealth, and the archons' subsequent administration is an attempt to hold on to something already lost.

The *Hypostasis of the Archons* gives a different and equally striking version, in which the spirit comes upon the human and the human receives the **spirit of life**, and the text distinguishes within him the earthly body, the psychic soul

from the powers, and the spirit from above — an analysis discussed in Chapter 19.

The garden, the tree, and the instructors

Once the human is alive, the *Apocryphon* turns Genesis 2–3 upside down.

Yaldabaoth places the human in a garden — the text says he meant to give him pleasure and enjoyment, or in some renderings to keep him occupied — and commands him not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The command is a *containment measure*. The archon knows the human carries power that is not his, and the prohibition is an attempt to prevent him from discovering it.

The tree, in Sethian reading, is not the occasion of a fall. It is a **rescue**. The *Apocryphon* says the tree of knowledge is the *epinoia* of the pure light, the same forethought that belongs to the Mother, placed in the garden so that the human will taste it, know where he came from, and remember. The prohibition is the archon's, the tree is the Mother's, and the law laid on the human is the false god's attempt to keep him ignorant of his origin.

The instructor varies by text. In the *Apocryphon* the revealer is an eagle perched in the tree, or the tree itself, or the serpent who teaches; the serpent instructs the pair about their nakedness, that is, about the psychic body they have been given and the origin they have forgotten, and the text presents this as the first act of revelation in the world. In the *Hypostasis of the Archons* the garden's instructors are the **spirit of life** and a female spiritual presence who has come from the aeons, and the text's revealer figure, **Norea**, appears in the generations after Eve

rather than in the garden; tree and serpent are correspondingly less central there. In the *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX,3) the serpent is explicitly the teacher of truth and the disobedient act is praised.

The result is a reading of Genesis in which the serpent is not the villain, the tree is not poison, and the commandment is not good news. The two texts diverge on the seduction of Eve: the *Apocryphon* has Yaldabaoth defile her and treats the offspring of that act as further archontic work, while the *Hypostasis of the Archons* narrates it differently and makes more of the rulers' sexual claim on the woman. The variation cannot be smoothed over. These are not two copies of a doctrine but two tellings, and they disagree about who does what to whom.

The expulsion as a failed containment

The end of the story is anticlimactic in the best sense.

The *Apocryphon* has the archons expel the human from the garden, set up guards, and try to keep the knowledge under control. The expulsion is damage limitation, and the text is clear that it fails. The human has already eaten. He knows. Death enters the world, and the *Apocryphon* says the archons brought it into being as a limit on the human, but death is not a punishment for disobedience. It is an administrative instrument.

There is one further turn, and it makes the system a *system*. In the *Apocryphon*, the Mother and the luminaries plant a **spiritual seed** in Adam's line, so that the light stolen into the first human continues in specific descendants. The book's concluding Pronoia hymn has the revealer describe descending into the darkness repeatedly — into the prison of the body, into the midst of the archons

— and finding the ones who are hers. The mechanism is a repeated rescue operation conducted across generations, and the human being is at once the object of the rescue and the site from which it is performed.

Three reading notes belong here, because the texts invite more certainty than they support.

The identification of the serpent with a savior in the *Apocryphon* is not entirely consistent. Some passages seem to distinguish the serpent-instructor from the purely good revealer, and the true revealer may be a figure who *appears* in the tree while the serpent is a lower instrument. The text does not say this directly, but the logic of the system implies that any appearance of the revealer inside the archontic garden must be mediated, since the revealer does not belong there. That is a constructive reading, not a quotation.

The claim that the archons' creation of the body is a *counterfeit* is explicit in the Sethian corpus, but the degree of the body's evil varies. In the *Apocryphon* the psychical body is a construction of inferior powers and still capable of receiving the spiritual power. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* is harsher, the *Testimony of Truth* harsher still. A reader who wants a single Sethian anthropology will not find one.

Nor should the two accounts of the boast be harmonized. In one, it belongs to Samael and is answered by a voice. In the other, it belongs to Yaldabaoth and is answered by the light above. The Sethian groups that produced these texts were in conversation. This is what the conversation sounds like.

Part Three: The Gnostic Anthropos — The Divine Human in the Pleroma and Below

Chapter 16: Valentinian Anthropos: The Human as the Fourth Aeon

Part One established the problem; Part Two has shown what the Jewish mystics built from it. Part Three goes to the other side of the ledger, where the primordial human is not the innermost secret of a good God but the hostage of an incompetent one. It stays inside the sources: the Sethian Pleroma and its counterfeiting demiurge, the Valentinian aeon called Anthropos, the Hermetic descent through the seven spheres, and the later traditions in which the figure becomes a mechanism for extracting divine light from a world that swallowed it.

Truth did not come into the world naked, but in types and images. It cannot be received otherwise. — the Gospel of Philip (NHC II,3 67)

The Valentinians were the most philosophically ambitious of the schools, the most successful at staying inside the churches, and the most systematically minded about the human being. What the *Apocryphon of John* narrates, they diagrammed.

Bythos, Sige, and the Ogdoad

The system attributed to **Valentinus** and elaborated by his students begins, like the Sethian one, with an unknowable first principle. Irenaeus calls him **Bythos**, "depth," and **Propator**, "forefather," and with him is **Sige**, silence. This is a syzygy from the outset, and the first aeon generated is **Nous**, mind, with **Aletheia**, truth. The first four aeons are thus two pairs, forming what Irenaeus calls the **Ogdoad**. From Nous and Aletheia come **Logos** and **Zoe**, word and life; from Logos and Zoe come **Anthropos** and **Ekklesia**.

This is the crucial Valentinian claim, and it deserves stating in its own terms. **Anthropos**, the Human, is the fourth aeon of the Pleroma, paired with **Ekklesia**, the Church. The two are not connected merely by analogy. They are a syzygy: one reality considered as two, male and female, knower and known, as mind and truth are one thing seen from two sides. Nor is the human the *source* of the aeons here. He is generated by Logos and Zoe, and with Ekklesia he generates the remaining aeons — six or ten more pairs, depending on the version — bringing the total to thirty.

The table is worth putting on the page, because the arithmetic matters and because readers of the *Zohar* will recognize the shape.

Position	Male	Female
1	Bythos (Depth), the unbegotten Father	Sige (Silence)
2	Nous (Mind)	Aletheia (Truth)
3	Logos (Word)	Zoe (Life)
4	Anthropos (Human)	Ekklesia (Church)
5–30	The remaining aeons, generated in pairs, in varying lists	

The numbering is not trivial. The human sits at the *hinge* of this Pleroma: after him come the aeons that will produce Sophia and the catastrophe, and before him stand the principles in which knowing is possible at all. Anthropos is where the Father's unknowability has become knowledge of a *kind* — and Ekklesia is the community that knowledge constitutes. The human and the church are one thing. The *Gospel of Philip* says as much when it describes the human being as the one who was divided before the foundation of the world and must be reunited, and when it insists that the "bridal chamber" is where the division is undone.

Note the reading of Genesis 1:26 this licenses. If the Pleroma contains a male-female pair named Human and Church, then "let us make a human in our image, male and female he created them" is not a statement about individuals. It is a statement about a syzygy. The image is not a shape but a *relation*: the human is in the image of God insofar as the human is one term of a pair.

The fall of Sophia and the making of the demiurge

The Valentinian catastrophe, as Irenaeus reports it in *Against Heresies* 1.2–4, involves the thirtieth and youngest aeon, **Sophia**, whose passion I described in the previous chapter. The critical detail for the anthropology is what happens to the passion after it is expelled.

Sophia's desire and her suffering are cast out of the Pleroma and become **Achamoth**, the lower Sophia. Achamoth is not evil. She is *unformed* — a being made of passion in search of form — and she is outside the boundary, in the realm of shadow and void. Christ and the Holy Spirit are sent out to give her form and knowledge, and she conceives a desire for the light she has lost. But

she cannot create anything spiritual. What she can do is produce from her own passion and from the material that surrounds her.

The offspring she produces is the **demiurge**, called in Valentinian texts by various names and in Irenaeus simply "the maker of the world." He is described as being of a *psychic* nature — made of soul-stuff, not spirit — and as being ignorant of his mother and of the Pleroma above him. He makes the visible cosmos. Later Valentinian teaching, reported in the *Excerpts of Theodotus* and in Irenaeus, is that the demiurge is not the enemy of the spiritual seed but its *unwitting servant*: he believes he is making a world for himself, and he is arranging a nursery for the seed that will be planted in it.

Here the Valentinian and Sethian systems part company on the moral status of the lower creator. In the Sethian texts, Yaldabaoth is boastful, blind, jealous, and hostile; the phrase "the counterfeit spirit" belongs to that world. In the Valentinian texts, the demiurge is ignorant, limited, and *providential in spite of himself*. Irenaeus reports that some Valentinians regarded him as the God of the Old Testament and as a *just* judge, if a limited one — not evil, merely not the highest. This is a real disagreement, and it explains why the Valentinians could remain in the churches and read the Hebrew scriptures as authoritative.

Ptolemy's Letter to Flora and the uses of scripture

Ptolemy's letter, preserved by Epiphanius, does not mention the Anthropos, and is cited here for its method. The Law, Ptolemy argues, is not the work of one author. Some commandments he assigns to God himself, some to Moses, some to the elders, and the "law of retribution," the eye for an eye, he refuses to assign to the perfect Father, attributing it instead to the demiurge, who stands

between the perfect God and the devil. The Saviour's mission was to fulfill what belonged to the Father's legislation and to abolish the rest.

If the human being is the fourth aeon and the church is his partner, then the visible world is a pedagogical arrangement and the Law is part of the curriculum. Scripture is not a hoax. It is a lower-level document that has to be sorted.

Tripartite anthropology

This is where Valentinian thought made its most durable contribution to the history of the human being, and where the table is unavoidable.

The Valentinians divided human beings into three kinds:

Kind	Component	Source	Destined end
Hylic (material)	Body, flesh	The material element, from Achamoth's passion and the lower realm	Dissolution; no salvation
Psychic (ensouled)	Soul	The demiurge and the psychic realm; also the area of free choice	Salvation of a lower kind, by faith and good works; rest but not the bridal chamber
Pneumatic (spiritual)	Spirit, the seed	Planted in the psychic soul from the Pleroma, via Achamoth and the Saviour	Certain salvation; return to the Pleroma

The scheme is found in several forms. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.6, describes the three classes and mocks the claim that the pneumatic is saved by nature regardless of conduct. The **Excerpts of Theodotus** — Valentinian teaching

preserved in a manuscript attributed to Clement of Alexandria — states the anthropology more precisely, distinguishing the *choic* or material element, the *psychic* element, and the *pneumatic* element, and describing the divine seed as deposited in a chosen line and brought to awareness by the coming of the Saviour. The **Tripartite Tractate** (NHC I,5), the most sustained Valentinian treatise we possess as a primary text rather than a hostile report, gives the fullest account, and it is there that the Anthropos theme reappears in an unexpected place.

The *Tripartite Tractate's* structure is this: the Father, one and unknowable, wishes to be known, and his self-knowledge produces the Son, who is the totality of the aeons. Then a member of the Pleroma — the text calls him the **Logos**, not Sophia, a notable divergence from Ptolemy — acts out of a desire to comprehend the Father and falls. His fall is a *movement outward*, and the result is not a hostile demiurge but a disorganized realm whose matter is the shadow of the Logos's own presumption. There the Logos produces the powers that make the visible world, and the human being is formed as a composite of the material, the psychic, and the spiritual, the spiritual element being a deposit from the Pleroma the lower powers do not understand.

The *Tripartite Tractate* also has a remarkable passage on what the human being *is*, easy to miss because it is not about Adam: the aeons together are a human being, each a face and a limb of the whole, so that "the human" is not a fourth aeon but the *name for the assembly*. That is a genuinely different position from Ptolemy's syzygy-list, and it appears in a text that is unquestionably Valentinian. Whether Anthropos was one aeon among thirty or the name of the thirty together, the schools disagreed, and both readings are attested.

The human as the aeon in seed form

Here is the claim that the rest of this chapter must make clear, because it is the Valentinian contribution to the book's subject and because it is easy to state badly.

The Valentinian does not say that the human being *resembles* the aeon Anthropos. The Valentinian says that a particular kind of human being *is* the aeon Anthropos, present in the world in a scattered and dormant condition. The **seed** — *sperma* — is the technical term, used deliberately: what is planted is the same in kind as what will grow. The pneumatic element in the human is not a likeness of the divine but the divine substance itself, distributed and awaiting recovery. From this, three doctrines follow.

First, the **Saviour** is sent specifically to the seed. In the *Excerpts of Theodotus*, his descent is the means by which the seed is awakened and gathered, and the Valentinian distinction between his *two* natures — he passes through the psychic realm and receives a psychic body while remaining spiritual — is worked out so that his mission to both classes can be coherent. In the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3) the Son's role is put in terms of ignorance and forgetting: those who are saved were in a state of forgetfulness, and the Son is the knowledge of the Father that wakes them. Its images are of a book being written, a name being learned, and a dreamer waking. It does not call the Saviour Anthropos but the Son, and it treats the human's condition as not knowing rather than being imprisoned — a variation within the same system, and a measure of how far a Valentinian author could shift the accent.

Second, salvation is *recognition of what one already is*. Not reward, not rescue from outside, but the recovery of a substance that was never actually lost. This is why the Valentinian texts are so insistent on knowledge rather than works, and why Irenaeus found the position so dangerous: on his reading, it made conduct irrelevant to destiny.

Third, the **Church** is the syzygy partner. If Anthropos and Ekklesia are a pair, then the human being's counterpart is not an individual spouse and not an abstract principle. It is the assembly of the elect. The *Gospel of Philip* develops this with its doctrine of the bridal chamber, arguing that the division of the original androgynous human is undone when the pneumatic is reunited with its counterpart. It treats marriage and celibacy as two figures of the same mystery rather than opposite rules, and its sayings are obscure enough that its sacramental vocabulary is not fully recoverable. What can be said with confidence is that here "the church" names a heavenly reality the human being belongs to *before* any empirical congregation exists, and that being saved and being gathered are one event.

Resurrection, in Valentinian terms

The *Gospel of Philip* contains the line that most cleanly divides Valentinian from orthodox teaching on the body:

Those who say that the Lord died first and then rose up are in error, for he rose up first and then died... we must rise in this life.

The Coptic is crabbed, and translators differ on whether the Lord's rising "first" refers to his rising before his death or to the believer's own sequence. The doctrine is not obscure: resurrection is a present event in the pneumatic person, not a future event for the corpse. To be raised is to have woken up. The *Treatise on the Resurrection* (NHC I,4), a Valentinian letter, makes the claim soberly: the resurrection is a *manifestation* of those who have risen, and the flesh will not inherit.

The consequence for the body is often misreported. The Valentinian does not say the body is evil. He says it belongs to the hylic level, is a temporary arrangement constituted by the lower powers for the planting, and will be dissolved. The serpentine hostility of the Sethian texts is not the Valentinian tone. The *Gospel of Philip* speaks affectionately of the garments the soul is given and takes off, and treats the physical world as a *type* — truth came into the world in types and images, and cannot be received otherwise — which is closer to a doctrine of sacramental signification than to a doctrine of prison. The two schools agree that the visible world is not the highest thing. They do not agree about what it is.

Part Three: The Gnostic Anthropos — The Divine Human in the Pleroma and Below

Chapter 17: The Hermetic Anthropos: *Poimandres* and the Descent into Nature

Part One established the problem; Part Two has shown what the Jewish mystics built from it. Part Three goes to the other side of the ledger, where the primordial human is not the innermost secret of a good God but the hostage of an incompetent one. It stays inside the sources: the Sethian Pleroma and its counterfeiting demiurge, the Valentinian aeon called Anthropos, the Hermetic descent through the seven spheres, and the later traditions in which the figure becomes a mechanism for extracting divine light from a world that swallowed it.

*And I saw an endless vision, in which everything came to be light, gentle and pleasant... and I saw that the light was a mind, and that I was not the light but a being made of light. — Corpus Hermeticum I, in
paraphrase of the opening vision*

The **Corpus Hermeticum** is not a Gnostic text in the Sethian or Valentinian sense, and treating it as one flattens one of the most interesting differences in the material. Its first tractate — *Poimandres*, the "Shepherd of Men," *Corpus Hermeticum I* — is the single most influential account of the primordial

Anthropos outside the Nag Hammadi corpus, and it tells a story with a different moral.

The vision and the structure of the cosmos

The tractate opens with a first-person narrative. A man — the text does not name him, though the tradition calls him Hermes Trismegistus — has a vision in which he is shown the structure of reality by a vast being who identifies himself: "I am Poimandres, the mind of the sovereignty." The vision proceeds by stages. He sees a boundless light, then a darkness descending and coiling downward, and out of the darkness a wet nature, and the light and the wet nature interpenetrate. He then hears a voice: the light is the *Nous*, mind; the darkness is the material cosmos; and the *Logos* — the word — is the Son of God, proceeding from the light, and it is by the Logos that the light orders the waters.

What emerges is a cosmos organized from the top down: the *Nous*, the *Logos*, and below them the seven **governors** of the planetary spheres, followed by the sphere of the fixed stars, then the air and the four elements, and beneath all of it the **nature** or *Physis* that becomes the body of the world.

The seven governors matter because they are the reason Hermetic and Sethian anthropologies get compared. In *Corpus Hermeticum* I §9 the *Logos*, the "craftsman" of the lower order, receives the governors and sets them over the sensible cosmos. They administer **fate** — *heimarmene* — and through them the human being's character and destiny are established. They are not evil. They are functionaries, and their function is generation.

The descent of Anthropos

Into this the Anthropos comes.

Corpus Hermeticum I §12–15 describes the Father — the Nous, the life and the light — bringing forth a **Anthropos** who is his own image, and then giving the Anthropos charge over the creation. The Anthropos looks through the frame of the cosmos, sees what the governors have made, and is given authority over it. Then the crucial moment:

He looked down and saw in the nature below an image of himself reflected in the water, and he loved it and wished to dwell there.

The Anthropos descends through the seven spheres — the text describes him passing through the *harmony* of the spheres and the *boundaries* set by the governors — and into the watery nature, and there he is seen by Physis, who is said to *embrace* him, and the two are united. Out of that union come the seven human beings who correspond to the seven governors, and then, in §13–14, the human race.

Read this against the Sethian material. The reflection is not a trap set by a hostile power. It is the mechanism of a descent the Anthropos makes out of *love*: he sees an image of himself in nature and desires to inhabit it. Physis desires him in return, and the union is generativity rather than violence. The descent is a fall in that it costs him his freedom, and the tractate is not sentimental about what follows — the human who forgets his origin is enslaved

by the seven governors and by *heimarmene*, and sexual union becomes the mechanism of further enslavement — but the fall is a fall *because of what he loved*. The striking departure from the Sethian mode comes in the account of the sexes: the Anthropos is androgynous, Physis produces a body from herself in her desire, the human is divided, desire is implanted, generation follows. The text does not present this as the masterpiece of a hostile demiurge but as the consequence of a cosmic love affair.

And then a passage that has puzzled readers for centuries. The tractate says:

And the command of God came to the human beings: increase and multiply, and remember, you who are.

The "increase and multiply" is Genesis 1:28, and the tractate reads it as the divine directive that authorizes the descent into generation. Some Hermetic writers take this further than others. *Corpus Hermeticum* I treats the descent as necessary and the return as the goal, with the two not in contradiction. The human is *supposed* to have come down. He is not supposed to stay.

The seven governors and the shaping of the human

Hermetic anthropology is a composite of two things. From Physis and the governors the human receives the material and psychic constitution: body, senses, passions, and the temperament assigned by each sphere. From the Nous the human possesses the capacity to know.

The composition is the closest Hermetic analogue to the Valentinian tripartition, and it is not the same. There is no hylic class and no seed. There is one human nature, made of the governors' contributions plus the divine mind, and the difference between a lost human and a saved one is the difference between a mind asleep and a mind awake. Nobody is saved by nature; everybody is savable.

The tractate also describes what becomes of the human who has come to know. In §24–26, the ascent:

And then, stripped of the effects of the spheres, he ascends through the harmony, and to the first zone he surrenders the operation of growth; to the second, the designs of evil; to the third, the deceit of desire; to the fourth, the arrogance of command; to the fifth, the impious daring of presumption; to the sixth, the evil strivings of wealth; to the seventh, the trap of falsehood.

The list of seven is standard, and its wording is close to the received translation, though the sequence and the precise vices vary in the editions. What is constant is the mechanism: **each passion is handed back to the governor of its sphere as a debt settled**, and the soul arrives stripped at the Ogdoad — the eighth level, above the seven — where it joins the powers in a hymn to the Father.

This ascent is the reason the Hermetic material belongs in this part of the book. It is a cosmology that exists to make an ascent intelligible, and the structure of the human being is what the ascent operates on.

What the Hermetic version says differently

Three differences from the Sethian and Valentinian systems are worth stating plainly, because they show what a Gnostic-adjacent Anthropos can look like when it is not built on a catastrophe.

First, in *Poimandres* the **cosmos exists for the sake of the human's descent**. The text does not present the visible world as an accident, a counterfeit, or a byproduct of a passion. The cosmos is the field in which the human being undergoes the experience of forgetting and returning, and the seven governors are the instruments of that experience. The Hermetic claim is that the human is *the reason the cosmos exists* — an idea which, as will be clear in Part Four, is closer in structure to the Kabbalistic claim about Adam Kadmon than anything in the Sethian corpus.

Second, the fall is *voluntary and erotic*. Anthropos descends out of love for an image of himself. That is a very strange claim, and it puts the Hermetic text in the position of affirming the descent at the same moment it laments it. The Sethian myth cannot affirm the descent, because in that myth the descent was not chosen by the descender. The Valentinian myth is somewhere between: the seed's planting is part of a providential arrangement, but the catastrophe that made the planting necessary was not chosen.

Third, the **body is not described as a prison made by an enemy**. It is described as the work of nature and the governors, and nature's motives are desire and generation, not malice. The Hermetic doctrine of the tomb is present — *Corpus Hermeticum* I §20 speaks of the human's earthly body and the senses as things the mind must rise above — but the hostility of the Sethian archons is

replaced by an administration. Fate is the thing to be escaped, and fate is a system, not a conspiracy.

A caution is needed here. The **Corpus Hermeticum** is an anthology, not a systematic theology, and its tractates disagree with each other. *Corpus Hermeticum* I is the most mythologically vivid; the *Asclepius* and *Corpus Hermeticum* XII take a warmer view of the cosmos, and some Hermetic texts approach a philosophical monotheism with no fall at all. Reading the Hermetic Anthropos as a doctrine requires the same caution as reading the Sethian one.

The **relationship to Genesis** is unresolved and probably unresolvable. *Poimandres* §12–15 reads like a Greek reworking of the creation of the human in the image of God, and whether the author knew Genesis directly, knew it through Jewish-Hellenistic interpretation, or arrived there from common Hellenistic materials is disputed. Some scholars have argued that the tractate is the work of a Jewish Hermetist working with Genesis and Stoic physics. That is a reconstruction, not a documented fact. What is not in dispute is the structural resemblance, and the resemblance is the more interesting fact because *Poimandres* handles the same scriptural pressure point — *in the image of God* — with none of the anxiety that drives the Sethian corpus.

Part Three: The Gnostic Anthropos — The Divine Human in the Pleroma and Below

Chapter 18: Adam's Other Heirs: Mandaean, Manichaeen, and Later Descendants

Part One established the problem; Part Two has shown what the Jewish mystics built from it. Part Three goes to the other side of the ledger, where the primordial human is not the innermost secret of a good God but the hostage of an incompetent one. It stays inside the sources: the Sethian Pleroma and its counterfeiting demiurge, the Valentinian aeon called Anthropos, the Hermetic descent through the seven spheres, and the later traditions in which the figure becomes a mechanism for extracting divine light from a world that swallowed it.

I was sent from the house of life... I came and found the sheep and bound the wound. — a Mandaean hymn, in paraphrase of the recurring idiom of Manda d-Hayyi

The figure outlives the schools that first developed him. Two traditions carry him furthest from his Nag Hammadi origins, and both sharpen his ethical function: the **Mandaeans**, whose living ritual tradition preserves a Semitic dualism into the present, and the **Manichaeans**, whose founder built the most

successful world-religion of late antiquity and made the primordial human the engine of a cosmic extraction machine.

The Mandaean: Adam as the first prophet, not the first mistake

The Mandaean are a baptizing community of Aramaean liturgical language, whose roots lie in the first centuries of the common era, in a region that may have been southern Iraq, or the Jordan valley, or somewhere between. Their canonical texts — the **Ginza Rabba**; the **Drasha d-Yahya**, the Book of John the Baptist; the **Qolasta**, the prayer book — are not one system and not one date. Their cosmology has a **world of light** governed by a great Life (*Hayyi Rabbi*) and a **world of darkness** below, related in ways that vary from text to text: sometimes interpenetrating, sometimes a separate syzygy, sometimes the product of a falling figure. Readers who expect a Sethian-style system will find a liturgy instead.

The most consequential difference from the Sethian corpus is the status of **Adam**. In the Mandaean texts he is the first human and the first *prophet*, righteous, instructed by a heavenly revealer, founder of a lineage of light. He is not the dupe of the archons and not the product of a stolen breath. When the false creator **Ptahil** fashions the body, the world of light supplies what Ptahil cannot: the soul, the *nišimta*, brought from the lightworld and lodged in the body. Adam weeps and laments his condition, and the revealer **Manda d-Hayyi**, "knowledge of life," a heavenly being of light, comes to him, teaches him, and raises him up.

The savior in Mandaean religion is a *heavenly* being who descends, teaches, and returns, and that pattern repeats in the lives of the later emissaries the texts name. Adam's son Seth matters here as he does in the Sethian texts, and the line of the light's descendants runs through him. There is also a figure named **Adamas**, which appears in the Ginza and the Qolasta as a heavenly being of light connected with Adam and with the world beyond.

And then there is **Adam Kasia**.

The phrase means "the hidden Adam" or "the mystical Adam," and it is attested in the Mandaean texts. Adam Kasia is the heavenly, hidden, or inner counterpart of the earthly Adam: a being of light, an ideal humanity, sometimes the figure whom the earthly Adam images and sometimes the primordial self in the soul. The **masiqta**, the ritual of ascent performed for the dead, is in the community's own understanding a raising of the hidden Adam, and the liturgical texts are explicit that the physical body and the hidden human are not the same thing, and that what ascends is the hidden one.

Readers of Part Two will have noticed the resemblance of the term to **Adam Kadmon**. Here a book such as this one has to be honest about a question it cannot settle.

The Mandaean *Adam Kasia* is a documented phrase with a documented meaning: the hidden or mystical Adam of a dualist, light-centered Semitic tradition. The Hebrew *Adam Kadmon* is a documented phrase with a documented meaning in Kabbalistic and pre-Kabbalistic Jewish texts. The two are semantically *not* identical. "Hidden" is not "primordial," and the Mandaean figure is a mystical counterpart raised within a person, whereas the Kabbalistic

Adam Kadmon is the first configuration of the Godhead. Whether the phrases descend from a common earlier usage, whether one influenced the other, or whether the resemblance is coincidental is a **contested linguistic and historical question**. Some scholars have proposed a connection; others hold the semantic and phonetic resemblances insufficient and argue that the two traditions developed a heavenly human independently from a shared Near Eastern stock. Proposed Persian or Syriac antecedents for "Adam Kadmon" remain speculation. This book asserts neither a Mandaean origin for Adam Kadmon nor the accident of the resemblance. It records that both traditions have a heavenly human whose name contains the element *Adam*, that the second terms differ, and that the relation is open.

The Mandaean material is a necessary corrective to any impression that these traditions were uniformly hostile to the body and to reproduction. Mandaean religion is strongly concerned with ritual purity, with baptism as a repeated practice rather than a one-time rite, and with the begetting of children as a positive good. The Mandaean forbid celibacy for their priests. Their dualism does not lead to a refusal of generation, and any comparison that treats rejection of the body as the essence of "Gnostic" religion runs aground here.

Another corrective: in Mandaean texts the serpent is not a savior. It is identified with the spirit of darkness and treated as an adversary. The Sethian reading of the serpent as an instructor is not universal in the wider family of dualist traditions, and the Mandaean show that plainly.

Mani: the Primal Man as a cosmic operation

Mani (216–274 CE), born in Mesopotamia into a baptizing community related in some way to the Mandaean and Elcesaites milieu, founded a religion that spread from Spain to China and produced a literature in Syriac, Greek, Coptic, Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, Uighur, and Chinese. The Coptic Manichaean texts found at Medinet Madi are the fullest surviving witnesses in a Western language, and from them, with Islamic, Christian, and Chinese reports, the cosmology can be reconstructed.

The figure at its center is the **Primal Man**. In the Middle Persian and Parthian texts he is **Ohrmazd-bay**; in the Coptic material he is called **Adam**, or more precisely the *Primal Man* in distinction from the earthly Adam. He is brought forth by the Father of Greatness at the beginning of the conflict with the Kingdom of Darkness, the first of the light's emissaries to enter it.

He wears **five elements** as armor: in the Coptic and Syriac traditions the five *sons* or *limbs* of the Primal Man — often light, wind, water, fire, and, in some lists, air or spirit; in the Parthian and Middle Persian tradition the five *gods* or substances of light. The armor is not metaphorical. He arms himself with the light-substance itself, so that when he goes into battle against the darkness he is *made of* the thing he is risking.

He is defeated. The darkness devours the five elements and the Primal Man loses consciousness — the myth is unsparing, and the defeat is not explained away as a tactical withdrawal. The light he was wearing is swallowed inside the darkness, mixed with it, scattered through the matter of the lower world.

He is rescued. The **Living Spirit** (*Mihr Yazd*, in Parthian; the *Spiritus Vivens* of the Coptic and Latin reports) is called forth by the Father of Greatness, goes

down, and calls out to the Primal Man, who answers. The Living Spirit defeats the archons, raises the Primal Man up, and then begins the *construction of the cosmos* out of the bodies of the defeated darkness. Ten heavens, eight earths. The sun and moon as vessels of light. The zodiac as a machine. Creation, in Manichaeism, is not the work of a hostile demiurge and not the work of the good God. It is a *processing plant*, built by the light's own forces to extract light from the darkness that swallowed it.

Everything else follows from that premise. The **Third Messenger** provokes the archons into releasing more light. **Jesus the Splendour**, who is not the Jesus of the Church, suffers, is imprisoned, and intercedes. The light that gets into plants is concentrated there, which is why Manichaean dietary practice exists: the **Elect**, the ascetic class, eat melons, gourds, and vegetables and release the light particles by digesting them. The **Hearers** prepare the food for the Elect. And human **reproduction** is the darkness's countermeasure: sexual generation produces new bodies, which trap more light, hence the prohibition on procreation for the Elect and the limits on the Hearers.

The human being therefore stands in an unusual double position. Each body *is* a machine for trapping light, built by the darkness as a defensive measure, and each human being also contains the light that must be extracted, the extraction being what the religious life is for. The human is at once the battlefield on which the war is conducted and the instrument by which it is won. The **Auditors** and the **Elect** are not asked to escape by knowledge alone; they take part in a physical operation whose success depends on what they eat, what they beget, and what they release.

Mani himself is presented as the final emissary in a series that includes Adam, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus. The human being as a *type* becomes one term in a chain of revelations, and the heavenly human — the Primal Man — is the figure every revealed messenger re-presents.

The differences from the Sethian and Valentinian material are large. In Manichaeism the primal human is not an archetype and not a numbered aeon. He is a *combatant*, and his story is the first act of a war of attrition. In the Sethian corpus, the light in the human got there by theft. In Manichaeism it got there by being eaten.

The soul as the fallen woman: Judas, Sophia, and Pistis

A last group of texts shifts the subject from the Anthropos to his counterpart.

The **Gospel of Judas** (Codex Tchacos 3), a Sethian text in Coptic from a Greek original, presents Jesus instructing Judas in the secrets of the Pleroma and telling him to betray him, a betrayal it explains by the doctrine that the body Jesus wears belongs to the archons and must be surrendered. Its theology of the human is the standard Sethian one: the spirit comes from the great invisible Spirit, the body from the lower powers, and knowledge of the difference saves. It is not centered on an Anthropos figure, and its notoriety has obscured its conventional framework.

The **Sophia of Jesus Christ** (NHC III,4 and BG 8502,3) is a resurrection dialogue in which the Saviour answers twelve disciples and seven women on the Pleroma, the origin of the human, and the making of the lower powers. It depends in part on the *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHC III,3 and V,1), a non-

Christian tractate on the same cosmology. The Anthropos appears as the archetype from which the lower powers try to form the human being, in a compressed *Apocryphon*.

The **Exegesis on the Soul** (NHC II,6) changes the subject most completely. It is a treatise on the soul as a *woman*. She falls from her Father's house into a body, loses her virginity to bandits, is put to work in a brothel, and forgets who she is. Her Father looks for her and sends a messenger; she repents, returns, and is restored to her bridal chamber. The text illustrates this with quotations from Genesis, the prophets, the Psalms, Homer, the *Odyssey*, and the Gospel of Thomas, moving between allegory and homily without embarrassment.

The soul here is female, and the Anthropos — where he appears — is the father, the brother, and the bridegroom who waits. The **Pistis Sophia**, one of the longest surviving works of this literature, develops the same figure at length. Jesus, after rising, spends eleven years teaching his disciples and is then taken to a place of light; the book is his answers to their questions, and much of it concerns the fall and repentance of **Pistis Sophia**, the aeon of faith, cast into the chaos and tormented by the archons, whose lament is given in the language of the Psalms. She is saved over many episodes by the light and by the disciples' intercession. The text is encyclopedic, with a large apparatus of numbered mysteries and seals, but its emotional center is one image: a divine woman in prison who sings out to the light, and a savior who descends to her.

That image mirrors the Anthropos. In the Sethian and Valentinian systems the heavenly human is the pattern and the seed, and the soul is what must be gathered. In these later texts the trapped divine figure is female, and the human — disciple, emissary, savior — is what goes down to fetch her. The role

structure inverts within one family of traditions, and the inversion is not a development or a corruption: both configurations are attested in the sources, sometimes in the same library.

Part Three: The Gnostic Anthropos — The Divine Human in the Pleroma and Below

Chapter 19: The Body as Prison and as Reliquary

Part One established the problem; Part Two has shown what the Jewish mystics built from it. Part Three goes to the other side of the ledger, where the primordial human is not the innermost secret of a good God but the hostage of an incompetent one. It stays inside the sources: the Sethian Pleroma and its counterfeiting demiurge, the Valentinian aeon called Anthropos, the Hermetic descent through the seven spheres, and the later traditions in which the figure becomes a mechanism for extracting divine light from a world that swallowed it.

*But the natural man does not die, for he was not alive to begin with so that he might die. The one who has come to exist out of truth did not die when he came into being. — the Gospel of Philip (NHC II,3), in
paraphrase of its argument about death*

The anthropology of these schools is often summarized as "the body is a prison." The summary is not wrong and it is insufficient. The better version has two halves, and the second is the one that explains why anyone practiced anything.

Soma, sema

The doctrine of the body as tomb is old and not originally Gnostic. Plato's *Phaedo* and *Cratylus* play on *sōma*, body, and *sēma*, tomb or sign, and that pun was a commonplace of the philosophical culture in which these schools formed. The texts use it and intensify it.

The *Gospel of Philip* states the case most sharply, in the context of the resurrection doctrine quoted in Chapter 16. Its argument runs: if the body were the source of life, the resurrection would be a return to the body and death would be a real event. But the pneumatic person is alive now, and the natural person never was. So the body was never the thing that mattered. The text calls it a *garment* and speaks of the soul putting off the garments it has worn.

The Sethian texts are harsher. The *Apocryphon of John* calls the body a *construct*, a prison built by the archons to hold the light they inadvertently deposited. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* assigns both the material and the *psychic* components to the authorities, and the *Testimony of Truth* calls the visible world a place of blindness and fire.

A precision matters here, because *tomb* and *counterfeit* are not the same claim. A tomb holds something that was once alive and is now dead; a counterfeit looks like the genuine article and is not. The Sethian claim is the second. The archons did not take a soul and bury it. They took an image they had seen and built a copy, and the copy is animated by stolen power that does not belong to it. The body's wrongness is not that it is a container but that it is a *forgery of the thing it contains*.

The parts of the human being

The Sethian analysis, as it appears across the texts, is tripartite, though the terms and the divisions vary enough that a table overstates the uniformity.

Component	Origin in the Sethian texts	Fate
The material body (<i>hylē</i> , the "choic" garment)	Formed by the archons from the lower elements; in some texts assembled from the waters	Dissolution
The psychic soul (<i>psychē</i>)	Given by Yaldabaoth and the authorities; the <i>counterfeit spirit</i> belongs to this level, and the <i>Apocryphon</i> also speaks of a <i>modeled</i> soul	Possessed by the archons; in some texts, recoverable
The spiritual spark (<i>pneuma</i>)	The power stolen from Sophia, insufflated by Yaldabaoth unknowingly, and later reinforced by the Mother's planting of the seed	Ascends

Two terms in this scheme need distinguishing, because translations run them together. The first is the **pneumatic seed**, the *sperma*, the portion of the Mother's light placed in Adam and transmitted to his spiritual descendants. It is a substance, and it is what is saved.

The second is the **counterfeit spirit**, the *antimimon pneuma*, the archons' imitation of the genuine spirit. The phrase appears with particular clarity in the **Hypostasis of the Archons**, where the human being receives a counterfeit spirit alongside the genuine spiritual element, so that the two are entangled in the same person. It is not lying and not a demon in the ordinary sense. It is a

functional imitation of the pneumatic self, built so that the human being will mistake it for his own identity and therefore be governed.

The *Apocryphon* describes the same arrangement in the language of *fate*: the powers assign the human a destiny, bind him to the astrological powers, set rulers over the parts of his body and his character, and install a counterfeit spirit so that he will call the archons' arrangements his own desires. This is why the Sethian texts treat moral effort with suspicion. What a person experiences as his own will may be an administrative artifact, and the *machinery* has to be identified before the effort means anything.

Sealing, and the archons' claim

If the archons built the body and assigned the fate, by what right does anyone claim the light? The Sethian answer is: by the seal.

The **sphragis** is the rite by which the pneumatic element is marked as belonging to the light and removed from the archons' jurisdiction. The *Gospel of Philip* uses the word repeatedly, and the *Excerpts of Theodotus* discusses the sealing of the spiritual in Valentinian practice. The word carries legal as well as ritual force: a seal is a mark of ownership, and the doctrine holds that the archons recognize the seal even when they do not recognize its bearer.

The *Hypostasis of the Archons* describes the archons making their own counter-claim: the body is theirs, the human owes them service, death is their enforcement mechanism. The *First Apocalypse of James*, the most practically oriented of these texts, has the Lord instructing James about the ascent and about the *toll collectors* who will question him. James must know the names

and answer correctly, and the powers cannot hold a person who has the correct words.

That is not naive magic. It is the logical consequence of a cosmology in which the lower realms are administered by named functionaries. If the archons are a bureaucracy, passage through the bureaucracy is a matter of protocol.

The practices

Concrete practice in these schools is poorly attested, and much of what is written about it is reconstruction. With that caveat, several things can be stated.

The **Valentinian sacraments** are known chiefly from the *Gospel of Philip's* allusions and from hostile reports, and the two do not match cleanly. The *Gospel of Philip* names five: baptism, chrism, the Eucharist, redemption, and the bridal chamber. Its most-quoted line on the subject says the bridal chamber is greater than the others and that without it they are incomplete; the wording is difficult and its translation contested, so I mark that as the text's apparent sense rather than quote it. What the bridal chamber was in practice is not recoverable. Irenaeus reports Valentinian rites with disgust and possible distortion. The *Excerpts of Theodotus* describes baptism as the means by which the pneumatic is freed from *heimarmene*, and discusses the redemption rite as an anointing and invocation over the dying. Beyond that, reconstruction outruns the evidence.

The **ascent prayers and passwords** are better attested, in the **First Apocalypse of James** (NHC V,3) and the **Books of Jeu** (the Bruce Codex). The *Books of Jeu* are largely ritual instruction: the names of the places to be passed, the seals

set on each, the words spoken at each gate, the numbers recited. The *Pistis Sophia* preserves similar material as "mysteries" with their rulers and names. What they encode is *knowing the map well enough to talk your way through it* — a memorized itinerary of the sky.

The **ethical refusals** follow from the diagnosis in three forms. The first is the refusal of **propagation**: to beget children is to supply the archons with further bodies and bind further portions of light. Manichaean and Encratite practice is the clearest case; Valentinian practice is not uniformly ascetic, since the *Gospel of Philip* treats marriage as a mystery, not merely a trap. The second is the refusal of **meat** in some schools, Manichaean and some Encratite and Marcionite, either because flesh belongs to the material realm or, for the Manichaeans, because the light in animal bodies would be released the wrong way. The third is the refusal of **fate**: the pneumatic is not to consent to the astrological powers' assignment of destiny, so that the ethical life becomes in part a life of withholding consent.

That last refusal has a philosophical edge. If *heimarmene* governs the material and psychic levels, an argument for free will requires a part of the human being not subject to it, and the pneumatic spark is what makes the argument work. The *Excerpts of Theodotus* says so directly: the spiritual is not under fate, the psychic is. Hence the Valentinian claim that the psychic can be saved by choice while the pneumatic is saved by nature, and hence Irenaeus's objection to that claim.

The body as reliquary

The other half of the summary, the half that explains the practices, is this: whatever else the body is, it contains the only thing that matters.

The Sethian, Valentinian, Manichaeian, and Mandaean texts all agree that the light is *in* human beings and in short supply. The body is a prison and a forgery. It is also the only place in this world where the light can be found, because it was deposited there, because the archons put it there themselves, and because the whole administration exists to keep it. The *Apocryphon's* image is exact: the archon builds a house and furnishes it with his own last reserve of power, and then cannot get it back out.

That is not contempt for the body. It is a doctrine about *where the treasure is*. The texts most severe about the flesh are also the texts most insistent that the human being is the site of the only thing worth saving, and this is where the two halves of this book come closest to touching. The Kabbalist says the body is a diagram of the Godhead and that the work happens through it. The Sethian says the body is a counterfeit of the Anthropos and that the work happens *despite* it. Both of them place the entire cosmological drama in a single person's frame, and both of them think that a human being who does not know what he is carrying is in danger of losing it.

Part Two describes the Jewish Adam Kadmon from the inside. What remains, in Part Four, is to put the two figures in one room and see which of their disagreements are about the world and which are only about the tone in which the same world is described.

Part Four: Two Humans, Two Worlds

Part Four

The comparison. What the two traditions share, where they can and cannot be reconciled, and what each says the primordial human is finally for.

Part Four: Two Humans, Two Worlds

Chapter 20: The Same Diagram, Opposite Physics

Put the two systems on a single page, stripped of their vocabularies, and they look like translations of each other.

At the top: an unknowable source. In the Jewish material it is *Ein Sof*, the Without-End, the limitless divine that has no attributes knowable from below. In the Sethian Gnostic material it is the Monad, the invisible Spirit, "the one who is over all," described in the *Apocryphon of John* in a cascade of negations that would satisfy a strict apophatic theologian.

Below the source: a first configuration with human shape. Jewish: Adam Kadmon, the first form the light takes after the withdrawal. Gnostic: the perfect Anthropos, the image the invisible Spirit beholds when it beholds itself.

Below that: a set of ten or a set of thirty intermediate levels. Sefirot, or aeons. In both systems the levels are paired, gendered, and arranged in a hierarchy of increasing distance from the source. In both systems the levels are not merely places but *powers* — they do things, they govern, they can be invoked, and they are arranged in an order that matters.

Lower still: a world of becoming, containing seven planetary governors. In the Jewish material the seven lower sefirot correspond to the seven days or the seven heavens depending on the text; in the Gnostic material the seven Archons are explicitly identified with the planetary rulers, and Yaldabaoth is their chief.

At the bottom: the human being, made of earth, animated by a breath from above, containing a spark or a root that belongs to the highest realm, and standing at the junction where the upper and lower worlds meet.

And in the middle of the diagram, in both systems, an account of how the human came to be: the higher image is somehow the template, and the lower construction is somehow a copy.

If you did not know the provenance of these two diagrams, you would assume they came from the same school.

They did not. And the differences are not in the diagram.

Where the physics divides

Here is the first and most important divergence, and it is a divergence about *substance*.

In the Lurianic system, the light that emerges from the *kav* after the *tzimtzum* is the same light that was withdrawn. Nothing alien enters the system. When the vessels shatter, the shards are made of the same stuff as the vessels — divine light in a broken container. When the *kelipot*, the shells, form around the shards, they are not made of a rival substance; they are the outer husk of the same reality, and their eventual fate is to be sweetened, reintegrated, and returned. Adam Kadmon is therefore continuous with everything below it. The whole cosmos is one being in various states of self-arrangement.

In the Sethian system, the lower world is made by a being who is not continuous with the Pleroma. Yaldabaoth is the offspring of Sophia's

unauthorized act; his substance is a derivative of a *mistake*, and the world he builds is built from what he could see — which is a reflection in water, not the thing itself. When the Archons attempt to make a human being, they make a body that cannot stand up. What animates it is not theirs.

This is the decisive difference: **in one system, the lower world is the higher world at a reduced intensity; in the other, the lower world is a forgery of the higher world made by a being who has never seen the original.**

You can produce identical diagrams from those two premises. But the diagrams have opposite physics.

The consequences ramify. In the Jewish system, matter can be redeemed because matter is already divine. In the Gnostic system, matter cannot be redeemed because matter was never divine to begin with — it can only be *left*. In the Jewish system, the goal of the cosmos is the repair of the vessels and the reunification of the divine name. In the Gnostic system, the goal is the extraction of the spark and the dissolution of the counterfeit architecture. In the Jewish system, the end of days is a wedding. In the Gnostic system, it is an escape.

There is a version of this difference that can be stated in one sentence each.

The Kabbalist looks at the broken world and says: *this is God, wounded, and it can be healed.*

The Gnostic looks at the broken world and says: *this is not God, and it can be outlived.*

Two vocabularies, one pressure

Part One noted the lexical asymmetry between *Adam Kadmon* and *ho Anthropos*. That small fact now shows its weight.

Adam Kadmon is a proper name with a genealogy attached. He is Adam, the one from Genesis, only *kadmon* — prior, primordial, first. He has a head and limbs and a name that is also the name of a book of generations. He belongs to the category "person in a lineage." When the Kabbalists wanted to describe the structure of reality, they reached for the ancestor.

Ho Anthropos is a common noun made technical. It is the word for the human species, capitalized into an aeon. In the Valentinian Ogdoad, Anthropos is paired with Ekklesia — Human and Church — as the fourth syzygy. This is not a person with descendants. It is a *category with a partner*.

Follow the consequences.

Because Adam Kadmon is a person in a lineage, everything that happens to him can happen to us: his body is the map of our bodies, his soul contains our souls, his repair is our repair. The tradition can therefore build an entire practical system — commandments, intentions, prayers — on the continuity between the cosmic ancestor and the practitioner.

Because the Anthropos is an aeon, the relation between the archetype and the individual is not genealogical but *participatory*. You do not descend from the Anthropos; you contain a seed of the same substance. And because there is a female aeon, Ekklesia, paired with him, the relation between the individual and

the archetype has a corporate and ecclesial dimension that the Jewish system expresses instead through Israel — the collective body of the first Adam.

Both traditions, in other words, have an answer to the question *how are we related to the primordial human?* The answers are structurally similar — you are a member, a limb, a seed, a part — and the *kind of part* differs. In one, you are an organ in a body descended from an ancestor. In the other, you are a seed of a substance that also exists above.

It is worth pausing on how strange both answers are. A modern reader takes for granted that "humanity" is a biological category. Both traditions treat it as a *metaphysical* one: to be human is to be part of something whose extent is cosmic, and to be a human being is to hold a position in a structure that existed before you were born and will outlast the stars.

The disagreement about the body

This is the sharpest and most concrete divergence, and it is worth stating without softening.

For the Kabbalist, the human body is a disclosure. *Sefer Yetzirah* maps the ten sefirot and the twenty-two letters onto the human form; the *Zohar* treats the limbs as the configuration of the divine; the *Shi'ur Komah* material dares to give measurements. The body is not a metaphor for the cosmos; the body is the cosmos in miniature, and the correspondence is the reason ritual works. The physical is not an obstacle to knowledge; it is the medium of knowledge. This is why the Jewish mystical tradition never abandoned the commandments, even at

its most interior — the body performs, and the performance moves the upper worlds.

For the Gnostic, the human body is largely an obstruction, and in some texts it is worse: a *deliberate* obstruction, assembled by the Archons to prevent exactly the kind of knowledge the Kabbalist pursues. The body is the tool of the powers. Its appetites are their handle on you. Its shape is a copy of the divine shape, which is what makes it so effective — you mistake the prison for the homeland because the prison is built to look like home.

Note the two very different things this disagreement is *about*. It is not about whether the body resembles the divine structure. Both traditions agree that it does. It is about *what that resemblance is for*. For the Kabbalist, resemblance is participation. For the Gnostic, resemblance is camouflage.

And note the practical consequence, because this is where the two traditions become genuinely incompatible ways of life. A Gnostic who accepted the Kabbalist's practical program — that embodying the commandments in the physical world repairs the upper worlds — would be admitting that the Archons' architecture is the medium of salvation. A Kabbalist who accepted the Gnostic diagnosis — that the body is an Archontic trap — would have to stop performing the commandments, which is unthinkable within the tradition. The disagreement is not academic. It determines what you do on a Tuesday.

Three points of genuine convergence

Having located the divergence, it is worth being equally careful about the convergence, because the convergence is not trivial and is easy to overstate in

the other direction.

Convergence one: the human being is the cosmos's means of self-knowledge. This is more or less explicit in the Hermetic *Poimandres*, where the human is the being through whom the cosmos is known and without whom the descent would have no point. It is implicit throughout Kabbalah, where the human below is the counterpart of the configuration above, and where the practitioner's intention (*kavvanah*) is the mechanism by which the worlds are joined. In both, the human is not an inhabitant of the cosmos but its *organ of awareness*.

Convergence two: the primordial human is prior to biological sex. Genesis 1:27's "male and female he created them" was read in both traditions as a statement about a unity that precedes division. The androgynous Adam of *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:1, and Philo's heavenly Man who is neither male nor female, and the Valentinian syzygy in which Anthropos and Ekklesia are paired but not identical — all three resist the assumption that the primal human was a male individual with a female appendage. This is a genuinely shared position, arrived at independently, and it is one of the more striking convergences in the material.

Convergence three: the cosmic human is a *name* as well as a *form*. In the Jewish material the Tetragrammaton is the body; the letters *Yod-He-Vav-He* are the limbs, and the expansions of the name are the worlds. In the Gnostic material, the ascent texts supply *names* to be spoken at each level, and the Archons are known by their names, and knowledge of the name is power over the named. In both, the structure of reality is linguistic as well as anatomical, and to know the name of a level is to have standing there.

That third convergence is worth more thought than it usually gets. Both traditions treat the deepest structure of the world as something that can be *enunciated*. Neither treats the cosmos as a mute machine or a bare substance. It is closer to a sentence that has been spoken and can be spoken again.

What cannot be reconciled

Three claims, one from each tradition, are flatly incompatible. This should be said plainly, because comparative writing tends to dissolve such conflicts into "different perspectives on the same truth," which is a way of not reading.

The Gnostic claim: the maker of this world is not the highest God, and is either ignorant, arrogant, or malicious. The *Apocryphon of John* has him boast "I am a jealous God, and there is no other God beside me" — a quotation of Isaiah 45:5 put in the mouth of a deluded subordinate. The effect is a claim about the identity of the biblical creator.

The Kabbalistic claim: the maker of this world is the Holy One, blessed be he, and the world is the work of his will, and the apparent brokenness of the world is the result of a catastrophe *within* divinity itself, not a rival's fabrication. The *Zohar* and the Lurianic corpus contain no second maker. There is only one power, and the shells are its outer edge.

These cannot both be true. Either the demiurge is the God of Israel or he is not. The Kabbalists knew perfectly well what the Gnostics claimed — the polemics against "the minim," the heretics, and the specific denunciations of the idea of "two powers in heaven" appear throughout rabbinic literature — and rejected it as the central error.

The practical claim follows and is equally irreconcilable. If the world's maker is a deluded subordinate, then the law given in that world's name is suspect, and the correct response is to recognize the true source and escape. If the maker is God, then the law is the mechanism by which the world is repaired, and the correct response is to perform it with the right intention. There is no middle position here that is not a fudge. A reader who wants to hold both traditions will have to hold them as two answers to a question, not as one answer with two faces.

A note on how the traditions treat each other's central figure

One last comparative observation, made with care.

The Jewish tradition developed, in the *Shi'ur Komah* and its descendants, a mystical anthropomorphism of God — a doctrine that God has a form, described through the imagery of the Song of Songs and elaborated with measurements. Rabbinic authorities were uneasy about this. The Mishnah's warning in *Hagigah* 2:1 restricts the study of certain passages; the Talmud's account of the four who entered the *pardes* and only Rabbi Akiva emerged in peace stands as a permanent caution. The material survived, but hedged, and Maimonides later attacked the whole anthropomorphic tendency as a category error.

The Gnostic tradition developed, in the Pleroma, an anthropomorphic structure — a divine realm whose topmost content is the perfect human form, and whose

aeon count includes the Human as an aeon. It had no comparable anxiety. The Anthropos is not a scandal for the Gnostic; it is the point.

This asymmetry is instructive. The tradition that most insisted on the transcendence of God produced the most extravagant anthropomorphic cosmology, while the tradition that made the divine human into a structural principle felt no need to hedge. The reason is not hard to find. In the Jewish material, the anthropomorphic structure is a claim *about God*, and therefore a risk. In the Gnostic material, the anthropomorphic structure is a claim about an *aeon*, one level down from the unknowable Father, and therefore safe. The Monad of the *Apocryphon of John* is as remote and as unformed as anything in Maimonides. It is only the level below the Monad that has a face.

The Kabbalists, by contrast, put the face at the very top — Adam Kadmon emerges from the *kav* before anything else exists — which is why the tradition had to spend so much energy insisting that the face is not a face.

Part Four: Two Humans, Two Worlds

Chapter 21: The Gender of the Primordial Human

Of all the differences between the two traditions, the most revealing is the one they share most superficially: both place a female principle at the hinge of the catastrophe, and they mean opposite things by it.

The Jewish configuration

In Kabbalah, the divine structure is gendered, and the gendering is structural rather than decorative.

The sefirot are arranged in a configuration that the tradition describes with the language of the Song of Songs: the *Zohar* reads the entire poem as a description of the relation between the Holy One and the *Shekhinah*, the indwelling presence, who is also called *Malkhut*, kingdom, and *Knesset Yisrael*, the assembly of Israel. The lower sefirot, from *Chesed* through *Yesod*, are configured as the male, and *Malkhut* as the female. The union of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* — the Holy One and his presence — is the goal of the cosmos, and the exile of Israel is described as the exile of the *Shekhinah* from her consort.

This means that in the Jewish system, the female principle is *not* the cause of the catastrophe. She is the *victim* of it, and the object of the repair. The catastrophe in Lurianic terms is a shattering of vessels and a scattering of sparks; the descent of the *Shekhinah* into exile is a consequence, not a sin. The task of Israel — and of every practitioner — is to reunite her with the Holy

One. The language of erotic reunion, drawn from the Song of Songs, is the tradition's way of saying that the purpose of existence is a *marriage*.

Note the effect on the reading of Genesis. The primordial Adam of *Bereshit Rabbah* is androgynous, created with two faces; the division into male and female in Genesis 2 is a *separation* of what was one, and the mystical tradition treats the whole of subsequent history as the movement toward their reunion. In this reading, differentiation is a fall, and reunion is redemption, and the two sexes are two halves of a single cosmic person.

The Gnostic inversion

In the Sethian and Valentinian systems the female principle is at the *origin* of the catastrophe. Sophia — Wisdom — acts alone, without her consort, and produces an offspring that is malformed: a lion-faced serpent who does not know his parentage, who takes the name of God, and who builds the world as a monument to his own ignorance.

This is where the two traditions are most often said to be saying the same thing and are in fact saying the opposite. Both place a female figure at the decisive moment. In one, she is the mother of the world. In the other, she is the mother of its jailer.

But the inversion goes further, and it is worth stating with precision what the Gnostic Sophia is and is not. She is *not* in most Sethian texts an evil figure. She is a *desiring* figure — her fault is a desire to create without her partner, which is to say, an act of solitary generation. The result is catastrophe, but the catastrophe is not malice. Sophia repents, is restored, and in some versions her

ultimate redemption is part of the eschatological resolution. She is the cause of the Fall *and* the source of the pneumatic seed, because the spiritual element in humanity comes from her.

Valentinian thought develops this with more nuance. The fall of Sophia (here the twelfth aeon, sometimes called Achamoth, "lower Sophia," after the distinction between the higher and lower Sophia) produces the demiurge and also the *pneumatic* substance. The threefold anthropology — *hylic*, *psychic*, *pneumatic* — assigns to the spiritual substance a maternal origin and to the soul a demiurgic origin. The Gnostic is a child of Sophia's error and of her hope at the same time.

The asymmetry, and what it reveals

So the two traditions share a structure — a gendered divine pleroma, a pair, a primal human, an androgynous origin — and diverge at the point where the female principle first acts.

There is a comparison to be made here, and the honest comparison is *not* that Gnosticism is misogynist and Kabbalah is not, or the reverse. Both traditions are complicated, and both contain more than one voice on the subject.

What is true is this. In the Jewish mystical framework, the female principle's movement is *downward exile*, and the male's role is to restore her — the tradition's most elevated language is the language of reunion, and its messianic hope is a wedding. In the Gnostic framework, the female principle's movement is *unauthorized generation*, and the resulting world must be escaped rather than

repaired. The first framework makes the cosmos a marriage that must be consummated. The second makes it a mistaken birth that must be undone.

And here is the uncomfortable observation, made carefully. The Gnostic diagnosis is, at the level of structure, suspiciously convenient for anyone who wishes to locate the origin of evil in a female act, and the Nag Hammadi texts do not always resist that convenience. But the tradition also does something unusual: it makes Sophia's error *necessary* to the existence of the spiritual seed, and it makes her repentance and restoration part of the solution. She is not simply the villain. She is the cause of the problem and the mother of the remedy — which is precisely the paradox that the Valentinians pushed furthest, and which gives their system its peculiar pathos.

The Kabbalistic framework, meanwhile, is not the flat opposite. It has its own hazards: the *Shekhinah* has been read by some modern critics as a passive feminine principle whose function is to be reunited with a masculine God, and the tradition's eroticism has been subject to conflicting readings for centuries. It also has its own radical voices, and they are not marginal. The *Zohar's* treatment of the *Shekhinah* as the *Matronita*, the lady, and the tradition's insistence that her exile is the central tragedy of existence, have given Kabbalah a language of divine suffering that would have been impossible in a strictly unitary monotheism.

The comparison, then, comes out like this. Both traditions put gender at the root of cosmology. Both treat the primordial human as the unity of the two. Both read the division of the sexes as a consequence of cosmic event rather than a fact of nature. And they diverge on the question that determines everything else:

is the world's brokenness the consequence of a *separation that can be healed*, or of an *act that should never have happened*?

Genesis 1:27 in two keys

Test the difference against a single verse.

"Male and female he created them."

The Kabbalist reads it as a description of the original androgynous unity, which was later split, and which the Song of Songs describes in the language of lovers seeking each other. The task of history is *reunion*. The verse tells you what the end of the world is: the two faces of the primordial Adam turned toward each other again.

The Valentinian reads it as a description of the syzygy: the Human and the Church, Anthropos and Ekklesia, the fourth pair of aeons. The verse tells you that humanity is intrinsically corporate and intrinsically paired, and that the pneumatic seed is gathered into the Ekklesia — which is why the *Gospel of Philip* says that the separation into male and female is a "*beginning*," and the bridal chamber is its repair. The task is not the reunion of two halves of a person but the *collection* of a scattered seed into a body.

Both readings are readings of the same six Hebrew words. Both are structurally similar — a unity, a division, a restoration. One restores a marriage; the other gathers a church.

Part Four: Two Humans, Two Worlds

Chapter 22: The Fall That Was Not One

There is a sentence in each tradition that determines the whole system, and in both cases it is a sentence about what went wrong.

For the Kabbalists, the decisive event is not Adam's sin. It happens *before* the human being exists. The vessels shatter, the sparks scatter, and the world into which Adam is placed is already a broken world. Adam's sin — the eating of the fruit — is a second-order event: it is a failure to complete a repair that was already needed. This is why the Lurianic system is so much more forgiving of Adam than the Christian doctrine of original sin: in the Jewish account, the human being is not the *cause* of the cosmic catastrophe. He is the *instrument* of its repair, and a flawed one.

For the Sethian Gnostics, there is an event even earlier still. Before the world, before the demiurge, before the human being, Sophia acts alone, and the result is a being who does not know where he came from. Adam is not a sinner in this account; he is a *product* of a counterfeit process, and the thing that animates him is a stolen spark.

Both traditions, in other words, relocate the Fall — away from the human being and into the divine or the precosmic. Both deny that the human act of eating fruit is where things went wrong. And both pay a price for it.

The price is that the human being stops being the agent of his own situation and becomes its *site*. Whatever is wrong is not fundamentally your fault. But it is

entirely your problem.

That is the peculiar ethical position both traditions occupy, and it produces a peculiar ethics. Neither is a voluntarist system in which virtue consists in obeying a command from a competent authority. In both, the practitioner is working on a situation that is not of his making, with tools that were handed to him by a catastrophe. The task is *repair* in one case, *extraction* in the other, and in neither case is it simple obedience.

The serpent, the tree, and the rescue reading

Consider how differently the two traditions handle the most dramatic scene in Genesis 3.

In the rabbinic and Kabbalistic tradition, the serpent is the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, and sometimes the seductive outer shell of the divine. The tree of knowledge is a dangerous but real power — Rabbi Meir is said to have eaten from it, in one aggadic tradition, and the knowledge was real knowledge. The expulsion from the garden is a *consequence*, and the flaming sword is the boundary of a mode of existence the human being cannot now sustain. The tradition does not read the serpent as a liberator, and it does not read the fruit as a rescue. And crucially: the story is not a story about the human race being handed to a hostile power. It is a story about the human race being moved from one kind of life to another within the domain of a single God.

In the Sethian reading, the serpent is an *instructor*, sent by the higher powers. The tree of knowledge is a good tree planted by the Mother so that the human might be awakened. The prohibition is the *demiurge's* attempt to keep the

human ignorant of his origin. Eating the fruit is the beginning of the *rescue*, and the expulsion is the Archons' failed attempt to contain the resulting damage.

Read these side by side and the incompatibility is total. In one, the serpent tells a lie, the fruit is a rupture, the exile is deserved. In the other, the serpent tells the truth, the fruit is an awakening, the exile is a jailer's tantrum.

Note what this does to the doctrine of God in each case. In the Jewish reading, God is the authority who forbids and who expels, and the theological problem is theodicy — why the punishment, why the exile, why the suffering. In the Gnostic reading, God is two figures: the forbidding expelling one is a subordinate who has stolen the name, and the true source never forbade anything. The Gnostic solution to the problem of evil is to deny that the forbidding power is God. The Jewish solution is to deny that the exile is the end of the story.

The two eschatologies

The difference shows most clearly at the end of the system, and each tradition's ending is the logical conclusion of its beginning.

The Jewish ending is repair and reunion. The sparks are gathered, the shells are sweetened, the vessels are restored, the *Shekhinah* is reunited with the Holy One, and the exile ends. The physical world is not discarded; it is completed. This is why the Jewish messianic hope is so insistently *this-worldly* — a rebuilt Jerusalem, a gathered people, a world at peace — even when it is expressed in the most abstract mystical terms. Whatever Adam Kadmon is, the end of the process is a world that works.

The Gnostic ending is ascent and dissolution. The spark is extracted, the pneumatic self passes through the spheres, surrenders to each governor the passion it borrowed, and arrives at the Pleroma. The counterfeit world is not redeemed; it is outlived. Some texts are gentler, allowing that even the demiurge is restored at the end, and the *Tripartite Tractate* has a remarkably generous eschatology in which everything is eventually gathered. But the dominant mood is: *the wall comes down, and you were never on the wrong side of it, you were just inside it.*

One ending says *the house will be rebuilt.* The other says *the house was never yours.*

A constructive expansion, clearly marked

What follows is an expansion. Nothing in the sources demands it, and the sources do not contain it; it is the kind of move the preface said would be flagged.

Both traditions locate the catastrophe *above* the human being and then assign the human being the work of dealing with it. Both therefore arrive at a picture in which ethical life is not primarily about obeying a rule but about *participating in a process that is already underway.* And both, by making the human form the shape of the cosmos, make the human being's interior state a cosmological fact rather than a private one.

That combination — a precosmic catastrophe plus a human-shaped cosmos — has a consequence neither tradition states outright but both circle. If the structure of reality is human-shaped, and the catastrophe happened in the

structure rather than in the person, then *repair is not a matter of becoming good*. It is a matter of becoming *coherent* — of bringing one's own configuration into accord with the configuration above, whatever one's moral record. The Kabbalist would say this is what *teshuvah* actually means when it is understood mystically: not merely repentance but return, a re-alignment of the limbs.

Both traditions treat knowledge as the mechanism. The Kabbalist's *kavvanah* is a knowledge that operates; the Gnostic's *gnosis* is a knowledge that saves. Neither is satisfied with belief. Both require *knowing the structure*, and knowing it in a way that changes what you are.

That is the shared wager. It is also, from a modern point of view, the most difficult thing in either tradition to accept — the claim that knowing the shape of the world is itself a transformative act, and not merely a description of it.

Part Four: Two Humans, Two Worlds

Chapter 23: What the Primordial Human Is For

The question that remains is the one the two traditions answer most differently, and it is not a question about structure. It is a question about purpose.

In the Jewish material: the human is the world's completion

Adam Kadmon exists so that there can be a world. The withdrawal creates the space; the line of light enters it; the configuration of Adam Kadmon is the shape that the light takes; the sefirot differentiate from that configuration; the worlds descend from the sefirot; and the human being at the bottom is the counterpart of the configuration at the top. The whole chain exists so that the correspondence can be enacted.

The human's role in this is not to escape the chain but to complete it. Every commandment performed with intention moves something in the upper realms. Every act of *teshuvah* re-aligns a limb. The practitioner's body is the diagram he is working on, and the diagram above is what he is working toward. Adam Kadmon is therefore not a puzzle to be solved or a being to be reached. He is the *blueprint of the work*, and the work is the sanctification of the physical world.

Which is why the tradition's answer to "why does the cosmos exist?" is essentially: so that there can be a place where the correspondence is enacted, and so that the enactment can repair the break. Adam Kadmon is the shape of that place. He is what the world is *for* — not a destination, but a form.

In the Gnostic material: the human is the world's flaw

The Gnostic Anthropos exists, in the Sethian account, as the image the Father beholds, and the drama begins when the Archons try to copy it. The human body in the world is a counterfeit of the Anthropos, and the spiritual spark inside it is the genuine article, planted by the Mother.

This has a consequence that is easy to miss: in the Gnostic system, the human being is a *defect in the world's design*. The Archons built the world to be closed; the presence of the pneumatic seed is a hole in it. The whole of Gnostic practice is the exploitation of that hole — the sealing against the powers, the passwords for the ascent, the refusal to be fully entangled in the world's economy.

So the Gnostic answer to "why does the cosmos exist?" is: it does not exist for a good reason. It exists because of an error, and it persists because the error has not yet been undone. The human being is not the world's completion but its *contradiction* — the element in it that does not belong to it, and whose departure is the point.

The same question, two answers

Put them side by side and the shape of the whole comparison becomes clear.

Why is the human form the shape of the cosmos?

The Kabbalist: because the cosmos is divine light configured in the most capacious form available — the form that can hold both the giving and the receiving, both the male and the female, both the height and the depth. The

human form is the shape of maximum relationality, and reality is relational at its root.

The Gnostic: because the powers that made this world could only copy what they had seen reflected, and what they saw reflected was the Anthropos. The human form in this world is not a revelation of the highest structure; it is a *leaked image* of it, and the leak is the only reason there is any hope at all.

What is the body for?

The Kabbalist: for performing the commandments, which is how the upper worlds are repaired.

The Gnostic: for getting out of.

What is knowledge for?

The Kabbalist: for directing intention, so that the act reaches its target above.

The Gnostic: for recognizing that you were never from here.

What is the end?

The Kabbalist: a wedding — the reunion of the Holy One and the Shekhinah, a rebuilt world, a gathered people, the vessels restored.

The Gnostic: a departure — the spark returned, the counterfeit left in place, the Pleroma complete.

The honest third possibility

There is a temptation, at the end of a comparison like this, to announce that the two traditions were describing the same reality in different idioms, and that the apparent contradiction is a matter of emphasis. The preface promised not to do that, and it is worth spending a few lines explaining why the temptation should be resisted.

The two traditions do not merely disagree about emphasis. They disagree about whether the world as we find it is the work of the highest good. That is not a difference of emphasis. It is the difference between two religions.

But refusing to harmonize does not require refusing to compare, and the comparison has produced something worth keeping: a sharper view of what each tradition is doing. Reading the Gnostics makes the Kabbalists' investment in the physical world legible — you see, by contrast, how much is at stake in the claim that matter can be redeemed. Reading the Kabbalists makes the Gnostic diagnosis legible as a diagnosis rather than a mere mood — you see that it is a coherent account of why the world feels like a place one has been placed in rather than a place one belongs to.

And both traditions, at their most serious, say something that no purely secular cosmology says. They say that the human being is not an accident in a foreign universe but the *form* in which the universe knows itself. The Kabbalist puts it as continuity: you are made of what the world is made of. The Gnostic puts it as exception: you are the one thing in the world that is not from the world.

One is a claim about belonging. The other is a claim about not belonging. They are the two most powerful descriptions of human experience that have ever been drawn from a cosmology, and they have never stopped competing.

There is one more thing to say, and it is not a resolution.

Both traditions hold that the primordial human is *still in progress* — that Adam Kadmon and the Anthropos are not merely past figures but present structures, and that the human being's own configuration is unfinished. The Kabbalist says the vessels are still being repaired and you are doing the repairing. The Gnostic says the spark is still in the world and you are the spark. In both cases the primordial human is not behind us. He is what we are in the middle of being.

That is a strange thought to end a cosmology on, and both traditions chose it deliberately. A cosmology that ended with a description of the world would be a physics. A cosmology that ends with the human being *in the middle of* the structure it describes is a way of life.

The shape was never the point. The shape is what you do next.

Conclusion: The Face at the Top of the Ladder

Both traditions in this book begin with a withdrawal and end with a face.

The withdrawal is different in each. For the Kabbalist it is *tzimtzum*: the infinite contracts, vacates a space, and leaves a residue; then a line of light enters and takes shape. For the Gnostic it is the unknowable Father's inaccessibility: the Monad does not withdraw, but it is beyond every category, and what emerges below it emerges through a series of beings who each understand less than the one above. One system begins with an act of self-limitation. The other begins with an unbridgeable distance.

But both systems end up needing a form, and both choose the same one. Not a sphere, not a flame, not a number — a human being, standing at the point where the highest structure becomes describable.

That convergence is the fact this book has been circling, and it deserves a plain statement of what it does and does not mean.

It does not mean the two traditions shared a doctrine. They shared a scriptural problem — Genesis 1:26–27, the plural deliberation, the image and the likeness, the male and the female — and they shared a set of cultural materials: the seven planetary spheres, the idea of emanation, the image of the ladder and the ascent, the assumption that the cosmos is graded. Given the same problem and the same materials, two communities producing a human-shaped cosmology is not a miracle of transmission. It is what the problem invited.

It does not mean the traditions are saying the same thing in different words. Part Four spent three chapters showing that they are not. The Kabbalist's Adam Kadmon is the first configuration of divine light, continuous with everything below him, and the purpose of existence is his repair through the sanctification of the physical world. The Gnostic's Anthropos is an aeon whose leaked image the Archons failed to counterfeit, and the purpose of existence is to leave. Between those two sentences there is a whole religion's worth of distance.

What it does mean is that the question *what is the human being?* has, in both traditions, been answered cosmologically, and that the answer took the same form because the question has a structure that constrains the answer. If you want to say that the highest reality is knowable, that the world is not absurd, that the human being has a place, and that the place has the shape of relationship rather than the shape of a location — then you need a figure that is simultaneously a structure and a person. There is only one such figure available. You will draw a human.

That is why the primordial human recurs. Not because everyone was secretly saying the same thing, but because the same question, asked honestly and pressed hard enough, has a shape.

And that shape has two faces, and the difference between them is the difference between the two traditions.

The Jewish face at the top of the ladder is the face of one who is *with* the world. Adam Kadmon is not an escape route; he is the pattern of a dwelling. He is the reason the commandments matter, the reason the body is holy, the reason the exile can end, the reason the Song of Songs describes the structure of reality

and a marriage at the same time. When the Kabbalist looks up the ladder, he sees a form that is also a family, and the top of the ladder is not a place you leave the world to reach. It is the world as it was meant to be, seen from inside.

The Gnostic face at the top of the ladder is the face of one who is *not* from here. The Anthropos in the Pleroma is the memory of a home, and the counterfeit body below is the reason the memory is hard to hold. When the Gnostic looks up the ladder, he sees a form he recognizes, and the recognition is the whole of salvation — not because the form helps him climb, but because recognizing it tells him which way is out. The world is not his. He was only ever a visitor in a house that lied about being his.

Both faces are the same face. Both traditions drew it from the same verse, and both were certain that the drawing mattered — that knowing the shape of the human being was the same as knowing the shape of the cosmos, and that this knowledge was not information but transformation.

That is the wager this book has been examining, and it is worth naming once, plainly, at the end.

The wager is that the human being is not a small thing inside a large thing. The wager is that the two are the same size — that the structure of the self and the structure of the whole are the same structure, studied from two sides, and that to know one is to know the other. The Kabbalists called that structure Adam Kadmon and said: repair it. The Gnostics called it the Anthropos and said: remember it.

They were not both right. But the reason both of them reached for a human shape when they reached for a cosmology is the reason this comparison will never be finished. A cosmology must explain where the knower stands. Take the knower's form seriously enough, and it turns out that the knower's form is the explanation.

Afterword: On Method, and on the Limits of This Book

Three cautions, offered because a book that ranges over this much territory should be honest about what it is doing.

On harmonization. This book has refused to collapse the two traditions into a single perennial doctrine, and it has refused in part because the collapse is usually performed for the benefit of the collapse. Readers who want the Kabbalists and the Gnostics to be saying the same thing are usually readers who want permission to believe something neither tradition taught — a general "cosmic human" spirituality with the sharp edges removed. The sharp edges are the traditions. Remove them and what you have is not a synthesis. It is a mood.

On the fourth category. The preface distinguished four kinds of claim: what a text says, what a tradition says it says, what a scholar infers, and what this author expands. The fourth category is legitimate, but it is only legitimate when it is visible. Where this book has reasoned beyond the sources — for example in the account of what the cosmic catastrophe does to ethics, or in the suggestion that the primordial human is best understood as a description of unfinished business rather than a past event — the reasoning has been flagged. Readers who want only the first category should read the primary texts, and Appendix III lists where to start.

On what is not here. There is a great deal that belongs to this subject and is absent. The Islamic material — the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) of Ibn Arabi

and the later Sufi tradition — is a third member of this family and would require its own volume; its absence here is a real gap, not a judgment. The Christian mystical tradition's own Adamic theology, from Paul's "last Adam" through the medieval *Christus totus*, is likewise missing. So is the comparative anthropology of the ancient Near East, where the "image of God" language has its own royal and cultic history, and so is the entire modern reception — Jung's *Anthropos*, the theosophical Adam Kadmon, the shelf of twentieth-century popular esoterica that has made these terms familiar to people who have never read the *Zohar* or the *Apocryphon of John*.

The last of those omissions is worth one sentence more. The popular esoteric reception of Adam Kadmon and the Anthropos has been, by the standards of the primary texts, extremely free. That is not a crime — traditions get read that way, and always have — but a reader who arrives at this subject through that literature will find the sources both stranger and better than the version they were given.

Appendix I: Glossary

Terms are given in the language of the tradition that uses them. Pronunciations are approximate.

Jewish material

Adam (אָדָם) — "human, humanity"; also the proper name of the first human; related to *adamah*, ground.

Adam Kadmon (אָדָם קַדְמוֹן) — "Primordial Human." In Lurianic Kabbalah, the first configuration of divine light to emerge from the *kav* after the *tzimtzum*, described in the form of a human body.

Adam ha-Rishon (אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן) — "the first Adam," the Adam of Genesis.

Adam ha-kolel (אָדָם הַכּוֹלֵל) — "the inclusive or collective Adam," the first human as containing all souls.

Atzilut (אַצִּילוּת) — Emanation; the highest of the four worlds.

Beriah, Yetzirah, Assiah — Creation, Formation, Action; the three worlds below Atzilut.

Demut (דְּמוּת) — likeness, resemblance (Genesis 1:26).

Ein Sof (אֵין סוֹף) — "Without End"; the infinite divine as it is prior to all manifestation.

Igulim (עגולים) — "circles"; the concentric configuration of the lights after the *tzimtzum*.

Kav (קו) — "line"; the thin line of light that enters the vacated space after the *tzimtzum*.

Kavvanah (כַּוְּנָה) — intention, especially the directed intention accompanying prayer or a commandment.

Kelipot (קליפות) — "shells" or "husks"; the outer, unredeemed dimension of reality that forms around the shattered vessels.

Merkavah (מַרְכָּבָה) — "chariot"; the divine throne-chariot of Ezekiel 1, and by extension the early Jewish mystical tradition focused on it.

Nefesh, Ruach, Neshamah — soul, spirit, breath; levels or aspects of the human soul.

Partzufim (פְּרָצוּפִים) — "faces" or "countenances"; the five configurations (Arikh Anpin, Abba, Imma, Ze'ir Anpin, Nukva) into which the sefirot reorganize after the *shevirah*.

Reshimu (רְשִׁימוֹ) — "residue"; the trace of divine light left in the space after the *tzimtzum*.

Sefirot (סְפִירוֹת) — the ten emanations or divine attributes: Keter, Chokhmah, Binah, Chesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Netzach, Hod, Yesod, Malkhut.

Sefirot belimah (סְפִירוֹת בְּלִימָה) — the "sefirot of nothingness" of *Sefer Yetzirah*; the ten foundational principles.

Shekhinah (שְׁכִינָה) — the indwelling divine presence; in Kabbalah, the feminine tenth sefirah, Malkhut.

Shevirah (שִׁבְרָה) — the breaking of the vessels; the catastrophe in which the containers of divine light shatter.

Shi'ur Komah (שִׁעוּר קוֹמָה) — "the measure of the stature"; the mystical tradition of describing the dimensions of the divine body.

Sitra achra (סִטְרָא אַחְרָא) — "the other side"; the realm of the shells, sometimes described in terms that approach a second, adversarial world.

Teshuvah (תְּשׁוּבָה) — return, repentance.

Tikkun (תִּקּוּן) — repair, mending; the task of restoring the shattered vessels and gathering the sparks.

Tzelem (צֶלֶם) — image (Genesis 1:26–27).

Tzimtzum (צִמְצוּם) — contraction, withdrawal; the self-limitation of the infinite that makes a world possible.

Yosher (יָשָׁר) — "upright" or "straight"; the configuration of the lights in the form of a human figure, as opposed to the circles of *igulim*.

Gnostic and related material

Aeon (αἰών) — one of the divine beings or levels of the Pleroma; also "age" or "eternity."

Anthropos (ἄνθρωπος) — "human being"; in Gnostic texts, the heavenly Human, whether an aeon or an archetype.

Archon (ἄρχων) — "ruler"; one of the powers that govern the material cosmos, usually identified with the planetary governors.

Barbelo — in Sethian texts, the first emanation of the invisible Spirit and the mother of the divine realm.

Demiurge (δημιουργός) — "craftsman"; in Gnostic systems, the maker of the material world, usually identified with Yaldabaoth and with the biblical creator.

Ekklesia (ἐκκλησία) — "assembly, church"; in Valentinian thought, the aeon paired with Anthropos.

Gnosis (γνῶσις) — knowledge; in these texts, saving knowledge of one's origin and of the structure of the divine realm.

Heimarmene (εἰμαρμένη) — fate; the deterministic rule of the planetary powers.

Hylic / Psychic / Pneumatic (ὕλικός / ψυχικός / πνευματικός) — material / soulish / spiritual; the three classes of human beings in Valentinian anthropology.

Monad (μονάς) — the One; the highest principle.

Ogdoad (ὀγδοάς) — the group of eight highest aeons, especially in Valentinian systems.

Pleroma (πλήρωμα) — "fullness"; the totality of the divine realm.

Pneumatic spark — the divine element in the human being, planted by the higher powers and trapped in the material world.

Syzygy (συζυγία) — a paired male-female couple of aeons.

Yaldabaoth — in Sethian texts, the chief Archon; the lion-faced serpent who claims to be the only God.

Cross-tradition

Antimimon pneuma (ἀντίμιμον πνεῦμα) — "counterfeit spirit"; the imitative power that binds the soul, especially in Sethian texts.

Sphragis (σφραγίς) — "seal"; the sealing of the soul against the Archons.

Manda d-Hayyi — "Knowledge of Life"; in Mandaean tradition, the heavenly revealer who brings knowledge to the world.

Adam Kasia — "the hidden Adam"; in Mandaean tradition, the heavenly or mystical Adam, an ideal counterpart of the earthly Adam.

Appendix II: Timeline

Dates are approximate and, for the ancient material, frequently contested. This is a reading aid, not a chronology.

c. 1000–600 BCE — Composition of the core of Genesis, including the creation accounts and the "image of God" language, with ancient Near Eastern royal and cultic parallels.

c. 6th–4th century BCE — Second Temple period; the exile, the development of angelology and the divine council imagery, Ezekiel 1 and the chariot vision.

c. 3rd century BCE – 1st century CE — Hellenistic Judaism; the Septuagint; the Wisdom of Solomon; Hellenistic Jewish readings of Genesis 1's human as an ideal or heavenly Man.

c. 20 BCE – 50 CE — Philo of Alexandria, who distinguishes the heavenly Man of Genesis 1 from the earthly Adam of Genesis 2.

c. 30–100 CE — Composition of the New Testament; Paul's "last Adam" and "image of the invisible God" language.

c. 1st–3rd century CE — Emergence of the Sethian texts among the Nag Hammadi library; the *Apocryphon of John* in its surviving recensions.

c. 120–160 CE — Valentinus and the development of the Valentinian school; Ptolemy, Heracleon, Theodotus.

c. 180 CE — Irenaeus writes *Against Heresies*, preserving detailed reports of Gnostic systems.

c. 2nd–3rd century CE — *Corpus Hermeticum*; the *Poimandres*.

c. 3rd–6th century CE — *Sefer Yetzirah* (dating contested); the earliest stratum of the *Hekhalot* literature.

c. 5th–8th century CE — The *Shi'ur Komah* material and the literature of the divine measurements.

c. 3rd century CE — Mani and the founding of Manichaeism.

c. 1st–3rd century CE onward — Mandaean literature takes shape; the community survives into the present.

c. 1100s — The *Bahir* appears; early Kabbalah in Provence.

c. 1280–1290 — The *Zohar* is composed or compiled, attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

c. 1190 — Maimonides completes the *Guide of the Perplexed*, with its radical rejection of divine corporeality.

c. 1540–1572 — Isaac Luria teaches in Safed; his system is recorded and developed by Chaim Vital in *Etz Chaim*.

c. 1548–1620 — Moses Cordovero systematizes Kabbalah in *Pardes Rimmonim*.

1486–1530 — Pico della Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin, and the Christian Kabbalah read Adam Kadmon through the Logos.

1665–1666 — The Sabbatean movement; the crisis over the messianic claim of Shabbetai Zevi.

1772–1810 — Schneur Zalman of Liadi and the Chabad formulation of divine unity; Adam Kadmon becomes the structure of reality itself.

1945 — The Nag Hammadi codices are found in Upper Egypt, transforming the study of Gnosticism.

Appendix III: Where to Read the Sources

A short guide for readers who want the primary texts in English.

Jewish material

- **Genesis 1–5** — read in Hebrew if possible; the words *tzelem*, *demut*, *adam*, *adamah*, and the plural *na'aseh* are the whole of the problem.
- ***Bereshit Rabbah* 8** — the rabbinic discussion of the creation of the human being, the androgynous Adam, the consultation with the angels.
- ***Sefer Yetzirah*** — several English translations exist; the translation by Aryeh Kaplan includes extensive commentary.
- ***Shi'ur Komah*** material — available in English in the collection *The Mystical Shape of the Godhead* by Gershom Scholem, and in the scholarship of Martin Samuel Cohen and Peter Schäfer.
- ***The Zohar*** — the Pritzker edition, translated and annotated by Daniel Matt, is the standard scholarly English edition.
- ***Etz Chaim*** — Lurianic system; no complete English translation. Chaim Vital's *Etz Chaim* is available in Hebrew, and the system is summarized in English in Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and in the work of Lawrence Fine, especially *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos*.
- **Maimonides**, *Guide of the Perplexed* — Part I, chapters 1–4, 26, and 46 for the critique of anthropomorphism.

Gnostic material

- ***The Nag Hammadi Scriptures***, edited by Marvin Meyer — the standard one-volume English collection.
- ***The Apocryphon of John*** — read in the edition of Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse for the synoptic versions.
- ***The Hypostasis of the Archons, Gospel of Philip, Tripartite Tractate, Exegesis on the Soul*** — all in the Meyer collection.
- ***Irenaeus, Against Heresies***, Book 1 — the heresiologist's report, essential precisely because it is hostile.
- ***The Excerpts of Theodotus*** — Valentinian teaching preserved in Clement of Alexandria.
- ***Corpus Hermeticum* I (*Poimandres*)** — the Salaman translation, or the Copenhagen edition.
- ***Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*** by Kurt Rudolph, and ***The Gnostic Religion*** by Hans Jonas — the two classic introductions, different in method and both still worth reading.
- ***The Gnostic Scriptures*** by Bentley Layton — with reliable translations and a judicious placement of the texts in their schools.

On the comparative question

- **Gershom Scholem** — *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* and *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, the foundational modern scholarship, to be read with awareness of its critics.
- **Hans Jonas** — *The Gnostic Religion*, the phenomenological approach at its best.

- **Moshe Idel** — *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, the essential corrective to Scholem, especially on the question of mystical experience and on the possibility of earlier Jewish esoteric traditions.
- **Guy Stroumsa** — *Another Seed: on Gnosticism and the Jewish background*, including the question of shared exegetical traditions.
- **Yehuda Liebes** — *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism*, on the relationship between Jewish mysticism and Gnostic motifs, argued with unusual care.

A note on the word "Gnosticism." The term is a modern scholarly construction, and its usefulness is contested. Some scholars argue it should be abandoned in favor of speaking of specific schools; others defend it as a convenient label for a real family resemblance. This book uses it as a label of convenience and names the schools whenever the distinction matters.

Appendix IV: A Comparative Table

This table is a study aid and an oversimplification. Every cell contains a doctrine that generated centuries of argument among the people who held it. Use it to locate differences, not to settle them.

Aspect	Jewish — Adam Kadmon	Gnostic — the Anthropos
Highest principle	Ein Sof, the Without-End	The Monad, the invisible Spirit
Access to the highest	None; Ein Sof is beyond all attributes	None; the Monad is beyond all names
First configuration	Adam Kadmon, emerging from the <i>kav</i>	The perfect Anthropos in the Pleroma
Mode of production	Emanation from the withdrawn light	Emanation through aeons, then counterfeiting below
Number of levels	Ten sefirot, four worlds	Thirty aeons (Valentinian); variable in Sethian texts
Gendered structure	Yes; sefirot configured male and female	Yes; syzygies of paired aeons
Origin of evil	Shattering of the vessels; privation and shells	Sophia's solitary act; the demiurge's ignorance
Status of the world's maker	The Holy One, blessed be he	Yaldabaoth, the blind god, a subordinate
Status of the material world	The farthest reach of the good; redeemable	A counterfeit construction; to be outlived

Aspect	Jewish — Adam Kadmon	Gnostic — the Anthropos
Status of the body	The cosmos in miniature; holy; the medium of ritual	A prison built to look like home
The human image	The divine configuration; participation	A leaked image; the one thing the powers could not copy
Where the divine is in us	Everywhere; the soul is a limb of Adam Kadmon	The pneumatic spark, planted by the Mother
Role of knowledge	<i>Kavvanah</i> : intention that operates above	<i>Gnosis</i> : recognition of origin
Role of practice	Commandments repair the upper worlds	Sealing, ascent, refusal, sacraments
The female principle	Shekhinah; exiled; to be reunited	Sophia; erring; mother of the seed and of the jailer
End of days	Repair, reunion, a rebuilt world	Ascent, extraction, departure
The final image	A wedding	A homecoming

This book was written as an exploration, not a verdict. The primary texts are better than any summary of them, including this one. Appendix III is the most useful page in it.