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Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism

By

Moshe Idel



Published by Continuum
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX
80 Maiden Lane, Suite 704, New York, NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

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First published 2007

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Idel, Moshe, 1947–

Ben : sonship and Jewish mysticism / By Moshe Idel.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8264-9665-2 – ISBN 978-0-8264-9666-9 1. Mysticism–Judaism.

2. Cabala–History. 3. Son of God (Judaism) I. Title.

BM526.I2963 2007

296.3'1–dc22

2007025855

Typeset by Data Standards, Frome, Somerset, UK

Printed and bound in the USA

ISBN-10: 0-8264-9665-2 (hardback)

0-8264-9666-0 (paperback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-8264-9665-2 (hardback)

978-0-8264-9666-9 (paperback)

To Yehuda
Who opened new vistas

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'Whoever possesses My *Mysterion* [which is the Mishnah] is My son.'
Pesiqta' Rabbati

'Whoever begets a righteous son, is considered as if he does not die.'
Genesis Rabba' 49.4

'Israel are the sons of the Place [God] because they are the offspring of His house because of their souls . . . and are called servants because of their body, in order to worship Him and serve Him . . . This is the reason for the descent of the divinity onto us and He brought us in the tradition of the covenant, and to the Torah and the commandments, which are the great entrance to the unification and amendment of God . . . And this is the reason why we have been bound by the bonds of worship and service of God, by a link that cannot be untied at all neither exit from the domain of the Most High. We have been destined to be His nation and He is our God, and He shall never change and displace His nation.'

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'*Ben*: when [the word occurs] alone it refers to *Tiferet*, and it is understood so in the *Zohar* and in *Tiqqunei Zohar*, in innumerable places.'

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 Restores the father.'

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Preface

The following pages are a first attempt to address the different categories of sonship in Jewish mystical literatures as a whole. My interest in the topic started when preparing a section of my doctoral thesis on Abraham Abulafia, in 1976, and since then I have collected pertinent material, which becomes here a full-fledged monograph. Many aspects of sonship have already been succinctly analyzed, and sometimes only touched on in a series of studies on Judaism, more conspicuously in Alon Goshen-Gottstein's monograph on *God and Israel* concerning early rabbinic literature, in Jon Levenson's study of sonship and sacrifice in ancient Judaism and early Christianity, in Yair Lorberbaum's *Image of God*, in Avraham Elqayam's analyses of Nathan of Gaza, in several of Yehuda Liebes's studies and in my own on Jewish mysticism. Nevertheless, when engaging the topic as recurring in Jewish mystical literatures as a whole it turned out to be much vaster than I originally imagined, and an initial modest effort turned into a much broader project.

Some of the necessary research and most of the writing were carried out over a number of years, but in a more intense manner during a leave of absence from the Hebrew University, when I served as Amado Professor of Sefardi Studies at the department of History at UCLA, and at the Shalom Hartman Institute of Advanced Studies in Judaica in 2004. The Charles Young Research Library at UCLA has been extremely helpful. My warmest thanks go to these institutions.

I have benefited from the conversations and remarks of several scholars and friends. First and foremost Yehuda Liebes, as well as Adam Afterman, Harold Bloom, Brian Copenhaver, Jonathan Garb, Moshe Halbertal, Mark Hirshman, Israel Knohl, Yair Lorberbaum, David Myers, Shlomo Naeh, Ishai Rosen-Zvi, Adiel Shremer, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Philip Wexler. Their help has only diminished any errors in the work, and those that eventually remain are my own.

This book is an attempt to examine the different subcategories of the wide category of sonship as found in Jewish mysticism. The aim of this book is to offer neither a theology, systematic or not, nor a proposal to find a new comprehensive clue to understanding Jewish mysticism, even less for a new understanding of Judaism as a whole. Its scope is much more limited and modest: to point out the many instances where Jewish thinkers, especially the mystics among them, resorted to concepts of sonship and their

conceptual backgrounds, and thus to show that they were not reticent in dealing with a variety of understandings of the hypostatic son. I hope that by this survey and the various distinctions it suggests, not only the mystical forms of sonship in Judaism may be better understood, but the concept of sonship in religion in general will be enriched in some way too.

In many of the following chapters, discussions which have more methodological dimensions are found in my analyses, especially reflections on problems relating to the transmission of religious themes and literatures from late antiquity to the Middle Ages. They are part of what I call a panoramic approach which strives to take into consideration as many possible sources as possible in order to better understand the emergence or the surfacing of themes that belong to the constellation of ideas that describe sonship.

Finally, I will note that most of the present work was written during 2004. Since then I have shifted my interests in other directions, but I have updated the content herein as much as possible.

Moshe Idel,
 'Erev Rosh ha-Shanah 5768
 Jerusalem, 2007

Abbreviations

1QH	<i>Hymns</i>	Jud.	Judges
4Q369	Prayer of Enosh	JBL	<i>Journal for Biblical Literature</i>
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Jer.	Jeremiah
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Jn	John
1 En.	1 Enoch	Jos. Asen.	<i>Joseph and Asenath</i>
2 En.	2 Enoch	JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
3 En.	3 Enoch	JSQ	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
1 Kgs	1 Kings	JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
2 Kgs	2 Kings	JTS	<i>Journal for Theological Studies</i>
Lev.	Leviticus	JSJT	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought</i>
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Lk.	Luke
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Malac.	Malachi
1 Tim.	1 Timothy	Mt.	Matthew
Acts	Acts	Mk	Mark
AHDMLA	<i>Archives d'histoire doctrinale et litteraire du Moyen Age</i>	Neh.	Nehemiah
AJS review	<i>Association of Jewish Studies Review</i>	Num.	Numbers
Apoc. Elijah	<i>Apocalypse of Elijah</i>	PAAJR	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research</i>
BT	Babylonian Talmud	Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians	PT	Palestinian Talmud
Dan.	Daniel	Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Ps./s	Psalms/Psalms
Est.	Esther	Rev.	Revelation
Exod.	Exodus	Rom.	Romans
Ezek.	Ezekiel	Theod.	<i>Theodotus</i>
Ezra	Ezra	QS	<i>Qiryat Sefer</i>
Gal.	Galatians	REJ	<i>Revue des études juives</i>
Gos. Thom.	<i>Gospel of Thomas</i>	VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
Hab.	<i>Habakkuk</i>	Wis.	<i>Wisdom of Solomon</i>
Hos.	Hosea	Zech.	Zechariah
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>		
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>		
JAOS	<i>Journal of American Oriental Society</i>		
Isa.	Isaiah		
Josh.	Joshua		
Jub.	<i>Book of Jubilees</i>		