

Lecture III: Pardes: From Sefiroth to Demonology

Monday 22 April 1991

We have already examined two paradigms for reading the story of the entry into Pardes. Tonight, I want to talk about two others: the Theosophical and Theurgical paradigms. The paradigms already covered in the first two lectures, different though they were, had a common feature: both deal with inner experience, whether intellectualistic or ecstatic. The drama takes place in consciousness. Even if ecstasy involves possession, it is still occurring in human consciousness.

The Divine is not affected by the entrance of the philosopher or mystic into the Pardes. This activity only affects the human intellect or soul - not the Divine.

The two other paradigms also have an assumption in common: that the entry into the Pardes has a deep effect on the non-human realms. In the Theosophical paradigm, the Divine is not a simple entity, but a system of divine powers. The entry into the Pardes influences the relationships between these divine powers. The other paradigm, the Theurgic, involves an influence on, or struggle with, the demonic realm. These two may seem quite different, but, according to the Kabbalah, the demonic and the Divine share a common anthropomorphic structure. The Sefiroth are prototypes for the demonic as well as the Divine realms. Both paradigms, then, deal with attempts to affect the structure and relationship of external entities, either by inducing harmony in the Divine world or by combatting some aspect of the demonic world.

In both cases, the Pardes again represents a danger zone: an aspect of these realms that is too strong for most mortals. And both approaches, in their reading of the Pardes story, take as the key figure that of Akher, or Elisha ben Abuya, the heretical figure, he who "peeked and cut the shoots." He is seen as one who was unable to understand appropriately either the sefirotic or Demonic realm.

I would like to deal first with the demonic, so that we can finish with something more positive. The basic assumption of this type of Kabbalah became important around the end of the Thirteenth Century (it is not generally found earlier):

that the knowledge of the structure of the demonic is the most profound form of Kabbalah, the most recondite. A commonly used name for members of this tradition can be translated, "The More Profound Kabbalists." Their texts run to long lists of evil angels, and detailed discussions of the relationships between the demonic and the Divine. The tradition also includes a strong reinterpretation of the Pardes story. In this tradition, it was held (e.g. by Moses de Leon) that it was a religious duty to know, and pursue knowledge of, the demonic world - but not to be immersed in it. Only when one has the ability to distinguish good and evil can one truly know the good, and truly worship God. But this must be done so that one is not attracted by or immersed in or inundated by the demonic realm.

Thus, one also finds in these texts long lists of sinners, with Akher as the last major figure.

These sinners were those who were attracted by the demonic realm, who were, in essence, sexually seduced by it. They were those who had become immersed in a certain commerce or intercourse with demonic sexual figures. Thus one finds Adam (seduced by Lilith), and Solomon, whose "thousand wives" were regarded as a multitude of demonic powers, and Balaam, said to have had intercourse with his ass. These figures were all seduced into sin. Sexual attraction, then, becomes an explanation of the power of the Pardes, which one must understand but not be immersed in.

Why did this paradigm arise at the end of the Thirteenth Century? Most of the Kabbalists who used it lived in Castile, where there was a certain phenomenon of Jews having sexual relations with Christians, or, more often, with Muslims. There are discussions of this phenomenon in de Leon and others: the fascination with the Other is there portrayed as a demonic attraction.

Now, there is a basic pattern well-known in the history of religions, often called "katabasis:" the descent into hell to perform some rite. Usually the katabasis is a salvific descent - an attempt to rescue some of the dwellers in hell (though generally not demons). But in Cabalistic tradition it often ends negatively: the person who makes the descent is unable to surface. Already in the Talmud Ben Abuya is described as being in some relationship with

a prostitute. Kabbalists exploited this to portray him as indulging in sexual transgression.

The others are portrayed as more successful. R. Aqiva entered, but did not get involved. A parallel was seen with Abraham, who descended into Egypt (often taken as a type of the demonic realm) and who was able to emerge in peace. Another similarity was found with Noah, who experienced the Flood but who came out in safety. This is, in other words, a typological approach. The Pardes story is used to summarize certain prototypical stories from Adam onward. That the interpretations are typological is obvious because of the range of figures adduced to make the point. One of the most exciting is the projection of the Pardes story onto the Biblical story of Samson. At the beginning, Samson is able into a relationship with Delilah, and ultimately he is able to destroy the realm of evil. Samson met Delilah in the equivalent of Pardes: in a vineyard. All of these are instances that indicate that medieval Jewish hermeneutics was in fact very typological - which quite contradicts the claims of certain modern scholars, who see the typological approach as typical of scholastic philosophy, and not at all Jewish.

This approach remains, from the Thirteenth Century up through the Lurianic Kabbalah, where it reaches an apex.

The other paradigm I wish to consider addresses itself to the Sephirotic realm. This paradigm was typical of those Kabbalists who assumed that the crucial issue was to induce or re-induce the harmony in the Divine spheres which had been disturbed by primordial human transgression. There were two metaphors for the Divine: that of the Tree, and (to simplify) the anthropomorphic one of the couple. In the latter, the first nine Sefiroth were taken as male, and the last as female. The basic sin of Akher was to break the connection between the first nine and the tenth (seen as the shoots, or as a female figure). The challenge created by this transgression is to see the Pardes as a Garden.

In Paradise, the transgression was the separation of the fruit from the tree, projected on high. The transgression was not eating, but separating one aspect of the Divine from the rest. By separating the

fruit from the Tree, Akher (or Adam) separated aspects of the Divine from each other, thus inducing a disturbance in the Divine realm often referred to as "the devastation of the plantations." Even more dangerously, by affecting the Divine world in this way you are prone to accept the assumption that there are two different powers, to believe no longer in a Unity on high, but a Duality. In the moment of separation, in other words, the possibility of a dualistic misunderstanding arises. The challenge, then, is to heal this rupture, which took place in the primordial era.

The work of restoring the lost unity is open to Jews in general, but especially to the Kabbalists, by the use of Jewish ritual, which is seen as a Theurgical technique, i.e., one able to influence God (which is one way of understanding the word "theurgy"). According to the Theosophical-Theurgical Kabbalah, the major role of the Kabbalist is to restore the organic unity between the Divine powers.

It is, in a sense, the transposition of the mystical project into another key, the attempt to repair the rupture in the Divine (rather than between the human and the Divine) induced by human transgression.

R. Aqiva, then, was seen as one who was able to act ritualistically to restore the relationship between the two last Sefiroth [the ninth and the tenth]. This projected a certain type of sacramental value onto Jewish ritual which was absent in other forms of Kabbalah or in Maimonides. In other traditions, the individual was the center. But in these demonic or Sephirotic pursuits, the focus is on repairing the cosmos, on inducing a more harmonious state in general, in the nation, and in the cosmos.

The last issue I wish to consider involves making a comparative observation about the distribution of the discussions of the Pardes story. It is found of course in ancient literature, but in the medieval period, surprisingly (and this surprised me when I first looked into this question), only the Sephardi were interested in it. It does not appear in medieval Ashkenazi texts. The Sephardic literature is less interested in the Talmud and the Hekhaloth, and more interested in the Pardes. It was in the Sephardi literature that the interpretations we have discussed were invented.

Now, Sephardi culture was in much more open contact with alien cultures, and thus more endangered. Muslim (and even Christian philosophic/scholastic) culture were perceived as a danger, and openness to it was experienced as a danger - a dangerous ideal.

Ashkenazi society of the period was closed; there was not much scholarly interchange with other cultures. Ashkenazi culture was very confident, and it was not open precisely because it was confident that Jewish culture was the highest form of religion. Thus for it there was no dangerous ideal. The story of "Entering Pardes," then, did not meet any cultural need, because there was no sense of cultural danger. Even later, in the Sixteenth Century, when the Pardes story is discussed, the discussion is inspired by Sephardi literature, and this is true even up to the mid-Eighteenth Century. But by the Nineteenth Century, a deep change has occurred: all interest in the Pardes theme is found among the Ashkenazim. This, I think, is connected with the entry into interaction with general culture, with the Enlightenment. There came to be a need to explain the meaning of this interaction. Elisha ben Abuya, in fact, could be seen as one of the major protagonists in much modern Hebrew literature.

It was, then, cultural exposure and openness which invoked, provoked, and evoked (all three!) the interest in the Pardes theme. The Pardes story explained the encounter between the Jewish and other mentalities. In fact, this may also be the explanation for the Talmudic treatment of Elisha Akher, especially if he is taken as a Gnostic, as modern scholars often do. Even the early forms of his story, then, would typify the encounter of Jews with a general culture - in this case, a Gnostic culture. Akher would be someone open to a non-Jewish type of culture - though in fact it is hard to be sure which of many it might have been.

There are as many different scholarly Elishas as there were contemporary cultures. Akher typifies a situation in which there is a willingness to be open, but a danger of being unable to return to one's patrimony. There is a danger that one will be seduced by, and remain immersed in, philosophy, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism ... or whatnot. His plight is used to describe an existential situation in which Jews found

themselves between Judaism and a general culture that fascinated and endangered them.

Questions

Q: Is there any connection between these interpretations and a current of opposition to Maimonides?

A: Well, I don't believe in single explanations. All of these Cabalistic explanations became published or exposed after the period of Maimonides. Most Cabalists were probably acquainted with Maimonides. But this was probably not so much a matter of a silent polemic with Maimonides as a matter of a tension between a ritualistic and experiential approach and an intellectualistic one (often regarded as alien).

Q: One interpretation of the Pardes theme is of an entry into the demonic sphere. How was this combat carried out?

A: By the commandments - mitzvot. The idea was to explore, and attempt to subdue, by performing the Commandments in a Cabalistic manner, thus extricating some part of the demonic world. In the Sephirotic realm, by means of the positive commandments, one worked to unify the Divine world; by observing the prohibitions, one could subdue (but not eradicate) the demonic world. The Kabbalists were quite uneasy with the idea of destroying an aspect of reality, even a demonic one. As a part of reality it was needed, and had to be not destroyed but managed or coped with.

Q: How is the Pardes story understood and used by Kabbalists now?

A: I don't know. I haven't yet discussed this with them. After I make up my mind on the basis of the texts, then I will go to them and see what they think.

Q: What about Ben Zoma: how was he seen?

A: As someone who had progressed to a certain level, but who was not able to enter metaphysics, so to speak. He forced himself into the Physics, but he became mentally disturbed. The ecstatic Kabbalists took him as one who had entered the strong experience and become crazy. Others assumed that he had been damaged by the demonic world. But he did

not receive much treatment as an ideal type, unlike Akher or Ben Azai, or Elisha the prototype of imperfection. Ben Zoma was not a strong type, he was not so interesting, so he was not taken as a type. And I have not found him interesting enough to discuss much myself...

Q: What if you are in a group having religious experiences, can you then go out into the world to change the world?

A: Look: most Kabbalists functioned at a social level. Some were leaders, and were very important members of their communities, so often they naturally were social figures. But even ecstatic Kabbalists who were sometimes very individualistic became messianic in their external activities. Most known Kabbalists contributed the perfection of the Divine, or of individual perfection, in service of messianic aims. The same by the way is often true of non-Jewish mysticism, which could also be a way to energize the personality to return to the group in an activist manner.