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THE SNAKE AND THE *AYALTA*: A SABBATIAN REWORKING OF A ZOHARIC
MYTH

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1.

The *ayalta*, the doe—female deer; “hind,” in the older translations—is the heroine of a remarkable myth, contained in several versions in the Zohar. Pregnant, her womb stopped up, this doe “puts her head between her knees, crying out and screaming, and the blessed Holy One feels compassion for her and provides her with a serpent who bites her genitalia, opening and tearing that place, and immediately she gives birth.”¹ Waters gush forth from her, in the course of her birthing, to satisfy the world’s thirst.

The myth’s roots are tangled, and go back to antiquity. Fragments surface in Talmud and midrash. Yehuda Liebes calls attention to a variant in the New Testament Book of Revelation, where a woman in childbirth is confronted by a dragon-serpent who seeks to devour her child, and afterward squirts copious waters at the woman from its mouth (ch. 12). The elements pregnancy-snake-water occur in Revelation, as in the Zohar, but combined differently. This suggests we are not dealing with literary dependence, or even shared tradition, but with primal themes rooted in the group unconscious, which surface and resurface in different forms.

Obviously these themes relate to sex. Just as obviously, their sexual meaning does not exhaust their content or provide a full explanation of their power. In Revelation the myth is given a messianic significance: the woman’s child “is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron ... caught up to God and to his throne” (12:5), while “the rest of her offspring” are “those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus”

¹ Zohar, II, 52b; tr. Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. IV (Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 266.

(12:17). Sixteen hundred years after Revelation, the Zohar's formulation of the myth is once more caught up in a web of messianic imaginings, those spun around Sabbatai Zevi. Only here the Messiah is not merely the female's offspring, though he is that. He is also the snake, her enemy, lover, and savior, who releases her from her birth-agonies by his bite to her genital. In a remarkable twist, the female of the story (the Zohar's "doe") is herself turned into a serpent.

The focus of today's paper is a Sabbatian exegetical text written in the late 1670s, a few years after Sabbatai Zevi's death, probably by Israel Hazzan of Kastoria. The text survives in one manuscript (Budapest, Kaufmann 255), probably the autograph, and is untitled. Scholem spoke of it as the *Commentary on Psalms*;² a more accurate title would be *Commentary on the Midnight-Vigil Liturgy (tiqqun hazot)*. Avraham Elqayam, tracing the early Sabbatian use of the *ayalta* myth, briefly summarizes Hazzan's interpretation on the basis of extracts published by Scholem and by Rivka Shatz-Oppenheimer.³ Use of the manuscript permits a somewhat fuller account. But first we must review the myth itself, as found in the fullest of the Zohar's versions: *parashat Pinhas*, III, 249a-b.

2.

The starting point is Psalm 42:2, *ke-ayyal ta'arog 'al afiqei mayim*, "as a [male] deer longs for streams of water," and the incongruous pairing of the feminine verb *ta'arog* with the masculine noun *ayyal*.⁴ This grammatical coupling, like the alternation

² "Perush Mizmorei Tehillim mi-Hugo shel Shabbetai Zevi be-Adrinopol," in *Alei Ayin: The Salman Schocken Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem, 1948-52), pp. 157-211; reprinted in Yehuda Liebes, ed., *Researches in Sabbateanism* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1991), pp. 89-141.

³ Elqayam, "The Rebirth of the Messiah" (Hebrew), *Kabbalah* 1 (1996), pp. 85-166; on Hazzan, pp. 121-122. Earlier studies: Abraham Berger, "Ayalta: From the Doe in the Field to the Mother of the Messiahs," in *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1974), pp. 209-217; Ronit Meroz, *Redemption in the Lurianic Teaching* (Hebrew; dissertation submitted to the Hebrew University, 1988), pp. 306-315; Yehuda Liebes, "'Two Young Roes of a Doe': The Secret Sermon of Isaac Luria before his Death" (Hebrew) in R. Elijor and Y. Liebes, eds., *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: Lurianic Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, 1992), pp. 113-169.

⁴ A point made somewhat more clearly in the parallel in II, 219b.

of *ayyal* here with *ayyelet* in the superscription to Psalm 22 (*'al ayyelet ha-shahar*), points to the fusion of male and female within divinity—and here the text's focus shifts to the mysterious *ayyelet ha-shahar*.

The “doe of dawn” is the Shechinah. She “rises while it is still night” (Prov. 31:15), goes out in search of food for “all the animals.” At the first trace of light amid the darkness (*be-'od de-ihl lelya ve-qedruta seliqat le-anhara*), she distributes the food. But first she must brave the hazards of “the mountain of darkness” (*tura de-hashokha*), where “a certain crooked snake [*hivya hada 'aqima*] appears at her feet and travels at her feet. She goes from there to the mountain of light. When she gets there, the Blessed Holy One prepares for her another snake; he incites [the two snakes] against each other, and she is saved.”

The scene then shifts to “the top of a high mountain,” where the doe “enwraps her head between her knees, and moans over and over again.” This is the referent of Psalm 42's “longing for streams of water”—the doe's yearning, on behalf of a parched world, that its dried-up streams once more be made full. A parallel passage (II, 219b) applies the same verse to the female's sexual longing (*te'uvtah*) for the male “streams of water.” Perhaps some such understanding is hinted at here, for the text goes on to speak of the doe's pregnancy.

Escaped into hiding (cf. Rev. 12:6), ready to give birth, the doe finds herself closed up. She “moans and emits cry after cry,” whereupon “the blessed Holy One hears her and appears beside her.”⁵ He then brings forth a great snake from among the mountains of darkness. It goes among the mountains, its mouth licking dust, until it reaches that doe. It comes and bites her on that place⁶ twice. The first time, blood comes out, and it [the snake? the doe?] licks it up. The second time, water comes out and all the animals in the mountains drink it, and she is opened and gives birth. This is indicated by

⁵ Cf. Hazzan, 17a, who glosses *zamen le-gabbah* as *nimza ezlah*.

⁶ II, 52b is more explicit: *'arayata dilah*.

the verse [*ve-simanakh*], ‘And he struck the rock with his rod twice ... and the congregation and their cattle drank’ [Numb. 20:11].”

This last citation links the doe to the rock that Moses struck twice and—as the story is filtered through the midrashic tradition—“the first time dripped blood, the second time, much water came out”⁷ The serpent is thus identified with Moses’s rod, which, in the Bible, has a tendency to transform itself into a snake. The sexual content, latent in the Biblical story of Moses’s sin,⁸ is here brought to the surface.⁹

3.

Israel Hazzan’s manuscript begins with Psalm 42, and consequently with the myth of the doe. This is because his commentary is attached to the distinctive liturgy for the midnight vigil (*tiqqun hazot*) formulated by Sabbatai Zevi and promoted throughout the Diaspora, in 1666, by Nathan of Gaza. The traditional Lurianic *tiqqun le’ah*, on which Sabbatai based his new liturgy, does contain Psalm 42. It is evident, from remarks in Vital’s *Sha’ar ha-Kavvanot*, that the myth of the doe was the reason for its inclusion. But Sabbatai’s innovation gives the psalm yet greater prominence, shifting it from second to first place in the sequence. Given that Sabbatai persistently identified himself with the serpent—for *nahash* and *mashiah* have the same numerical value—this can hardly be without significance for Sabbatai’s self-understanding.

⁷ Targ. Pseudo-Jonathan *ad locum*; Ex. R. 3:13, Midrash on Psalms 105:12.

⁸ David J. Halperin, “The Hidden Made Manifest: Muslim Traditions and the Latent Content of Biblical and Rabbinic Stories,” in David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz, eds., *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 587-594

⁹ Still more so in the Lurianic exegesis of the Zoharic myth: the alternating rod and snake are *Ze’ir Anpin*’s sexual organ in their states of maturity and immaturity (*gadlut / qatnut*) respectively. This latter subject, Chaim Vital points out, is exceedingly dangerous. For “in the day that my teacher of blessed memory expounded this passage to us [the version of the *ayalta* myth in Zohar II, 52a], we were sitting in the field beneath the trees, and a raven flew over him crying as it went, and my teacher answered after it, *Baruch dayyan ha-emet*, ‘Blessed be the just Judge.’” That night Luria’s small son took ill, and three days afterward died, as punishment for Luria’s having “publicly revealed this mystery.” Vital, *Sha’ar ha-Kavvanot*, *Inyan ha-Pesah, drush* 12; ed. Brandwein, II, 186-188; Liebes, pp. 126-148.

For Hazzan, the doe is indeed the Shechinah. She is not, however (“God forbid”) the true *Malkhut* of the World of Emanation, but the lowest *Malkhut*, of the world of ‘*Asiyah*, the dangerous border territory with the demonic *qelippot*.¹⁰ Surrounded and at times oppressed by the *qelippot*, eager to attach themselves to her and nourish themselves from her effluence, her function is to shield her children, the people of Israel, from the dangers that would otherwise destroy them in their exile (7a). She is called “Messiah,” and the “birth-pangs of the Messiah” (*hevlei mashiah*) are the pangs she experiences in giving birth (7b). Those “born” (following a passage in *Ra’ya Mehemna*) are the two Messiahs (8a).¹¹

The snake that bites her genital (‘*arayata*) is Sabbatai Zevi. The snake’s “crooked” way of travel¹² points to Sabbatai’s apparently “crooked” ways; while its trick of lashing out with its tail, and striking anyone around, illustrates Nathan of Gaza’s warning to keep away from Sabbatai during his moods of exaltation, for in those moods “he wants to convert everyone around him to the Muslim religion.” But the Shechinah is herself a serpent, no less than Sabbatai.¹³ That is why the Zohar says that God *zamen leqabblah had nahash*, he prepares for her a serpent “corresponding to herself.” Messiah and Shechinah are two snakes, both compelled to travel in crooked paths to accomplish *tiqqun ha-‘olam*, the world’s mending (8b, beginning of 9a).

¹⁰ *Malkhut de-malkhut asher be-sof ha-malkhuyot de-‘olam ha-‘asiyah ... ha-malkhut ha-tahtonah* (7a). On the significance of this, cf. the parallel *malkhut de-malkhut de-‘asiyah de-tamman sharya ha-hu hoshekh*, in the contemporary Ber Perlhefter (Elqayam, p. 129), identified with Moses’s illicit “Cushite” (black, accursed) wife.

¹¹ *Ra’ya Mehemna*, III, 67b-68a. Hazzan quotes the *Ra’ya Mehemna* passage in full on 15a-b, and expounds it on 16a. *Ra’ya Mehemna* identifies the doe’s two thighs with the *sefirot Nezah* and *Hod*; Hazzan equates *Nezah* with “AMIRAH, Messiah ben David,” and *Hod* with the as yet unknown Messiah ben Joseph (*yihyeh mi she-yihyeh*). (But on 16b-17a, Hazzan seems to know who both Messiahs are: one entered *dat yishma’el*, the other *dat ‘esav*; for so God ordained in order to draw all the Gentiles to himself.) Hazzan seems to ignore the incongruity that the snake is here said to be the *yezer ha-ra’*; for his treatment of *Ra’ya Mehemna*’s predication that the snake is to be “removed from the world” at the Messiahs’ coming, see below.

¹² *Mit’aqem mi-zad hillukho*.

¹³ Supported by Zohar III, 119b: “When Israel is in exile she [the Shechinah] moves like a snake.” The pivot of Hazzan’s theology is the doctrine that “the Blessed Holy One, His Shechinah, the Beloved Son AMIRAH [Sabbatai Zevi]” constitute a trinity, “incorporated as one, with no screen or distinction among them” (9b).

The snake's intimate bite—equivalent to the sex act (*gillui 'arayot*)—is the act of taking on the turban (*levishat ha-zenif*), departing from the Torah of Moses. As messianic king, Sabbatai is the breaker of bounds (*porez*)¹⁴, specifically, the boundary of Moses's Torah. In “tearing” the Shechinah, he tears away the alien clothing that both she and he have been compelled to wear, and what is born is the true redemption (*ha-ge'ullah ha-amittit*).

Naturally, the agenda of Hazzan's exegesis is eschatological throughout. The first trace of light amid the darkness, when the doe distributes food to the animals, is when Sabbatai was anointed Messiah but had not been publicly revealed as such. The subsequent “morning light” is the proclamation of his kingdom, already accomplished; while the full “shining of the sun” is his second coming, his “true revelation” (*ha-gillui ha-amitti*), which the faithful now await.¹⁵

When, then, is the “mountain of darkness” that the Shechinah enters to gather food for her dependents, the Jewish people? It is Islam—or, more exactly, “the alien clothing that she wears in the Muslim religion” (*dat yishma'el*; 16a). The “crooked snake,” who is the Messiah, joins her in wearing this clothing “for the mending of the world.” Thus she ascends, rising to her supernal place (= “the mountain of light”), where the “supernal snake”¹⁶ appears to do battle against the Messiah-snake. If the Shechinah-snake and the Messiah-snake have been heroine and hero of this drama, the “supernal snake” is transiently its villain. He represents “the supernal princes”—themselves apparently representative of the Jewish establishment—who “denounce and rebuke the Messiah, have no wish for his kingdom, do not believe in him or in the faith of the Lord his God” (16a).

¹⁴ As Micah 2:13 calls him.

¹⁵ 15b, cf. the discussion of “morning” in 14b.

¹⁶ *Nahash ha-'elyon*; cf. Liebes, pp. 166-167.

The Shechinah's escape into hiding is her "concealment" (*he'lem*), which she shares with the Messiah, now supposed dead. The faithful seek, but do not find her. Meanwhile she remains parched and desolate, on account of her alien clothing. She is pregnant with the two Messiahs, whom she covers and protects (16b). Sabbatai, from being her partner, has shifted to being her fetus. But at once he shifts back again. When God "brings forth a great snake from among the mountains of darkness," this is the Messiah-snake, from the fog and darkness within which his light has been concealed, namely the *qelippot* among whom he has dwelt.

His bite, as we have seen, is his conversion to Islam.¹⁷ But why does he bite the doe twice? "The first [bite] was when he entered the Torah of Grace [*torat hesed*=Islam], and afterward disappeared [i.e., died]. When he shall appear a second time as a Muslim—these are the two [bites]." Hazzan perhaps recoils from the implication, that Sabbatai at his second coming will still be Muslim, for he now provides a different explanation. The blood of the snake's first bite is the "judgments" (*dinim*) of Sabbatai's first, incomplete manifestation on earth, which accumulate in the female genital. All these "King Messiah mends with his holy tongue and mouth"—the snake licks up the blood—"in order to purify the supernal woman for her husband" (17a bottom). But at his second coming, when "the light of his kingdom shall be revealed upon us," the living waters of grace (*hasadim*) will flow forth from the holy *Malkhut*,¹⁸ to satisfy the needs of "the congregation" (= the Sabbatian believers) and also "their cattle" (= the unbelieving Jews, presumably). Once more Sabbatai appears, in a different Biblical story, this time as Moses—a typology familiar in the Sabbatian literature—wielding the rod that evokes this water (17b).

"Remove the turban! Lift off the crown!" (Ezek. 21:31: *hasir ha-miznefet ve-harim ha-'atarah*). The snake now becomes a representation, neither of Sabbatai nor the

¹⁷ Since the genital where he bites her is *sod ha-torah*.

¹⁸ Following Zechariah 14:8: "On that day living waters shall go forth from Jerusalem."

Shechinah, but of the coiled-up turban, symbol of Islam in Sabbatian discourse.¹⁹ It is not the turban that is the true *'atarah* (“God forbid”), but rather the *sefirah Malkhut*, restored to her proper status of *'ateret ba'alalah*, “crown of her husband.”²⁰ “The name of the snake will be removed from the world,” as *Ra'ya Mehemna* says,²¹ in that Sabbatai will no longer be called “snake.” Elevated now to sefirotic rank, he will be “The Lord our righteousness,” just like his God (17b-18a).²²

4.

Rabbinic sources, normally though not exclusively linked to Psalm 22's *ayyelet ha-shahar*, underlie much of the Zohar's *ayalta* myth.²³ Normally, the “doe of dawn” is seen as Queen Esther. She is called “doe,” according to Yoma 29a, because the continuing sexual pleasure she gave Ahasuerus (akin to that given the doe's mate by her narrow womb). Psalm 22 is Esther's psalm; its opening “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” refers to the Shechinah's abandonment of Esther upon her arrival at Ahasuerus's idolatrous temple (Meg. 15b). Early Christianity had explained Psalm 22 as a messianic psalm, a prophecy of the crucifixion. The rabbinic *Midrash on Psalms* systematically expounds it with reference to Esther.

Palestinian texts, meanwhile, allude to an identification of *ayyelet ha-shahar* with the morning star; that is, the planet Venus. They represent the *ayyelet's* pre-dawn light as

¹⁹ As in 9b: “The Messiah is called ‘snake’ in accord with the secret meaning of ‘the coils of the ileum’ [*hadra de-khanta*, BT Hull. 113a; cf. Jastrow s.v. *hadura*], which is the secret meaning of the coiled turban, and the secret meaning of [the Mishnah, Ber. 5:1], ‘Even if a snake is coiled around his foot’—alluding to the secret meaning of ‘the footsteps of the Messiah’—he will not cease’; i.e., that you must not say, ‘Now that he is come to this [Sabbatai converted to Islam] there is no hope’; but rather, ‘he will not cease.’”

²⁰ In accord with the teaching of Nathan of Gaza, e.g., in his epistle to Raphael Joseph (September 1665). Cf. Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Engenderment of Messianic Politics: Symbolic Significance of Sabbatai Sevi's Coronation,” in Peter Schäfer and Mark Cohen, eds., *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco* (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1998), 203-258.

²¹ *Ve-yit'abbar shema de-nahash me-'alma*, misquoting *Ra'ya Mehemna* (III, 68a, *yit'abbar nahash me-'alma*), perhaps in accord with III, 271b, *ushevaq shema de-nahash*.

²² Following Jeremiah 23:6.

²³ Baba Batra 16b, for example, reports that “the doe [*ayyalah*] has a narrow womb.” When she comes to give birth, therefore, God must prepare for her a “dragon” (or “snake,” *drakon*, the Greek word used in Revelation 12), which “bites her at the opening of the womb, which then relaxes, so she can give birth.”

a token of the redemption of Israel, which, as prefigured in the Book of Esther, emerges in stages like the dawn itself.²⁴ Surely Israel Hazzan had these passages in mind when he represented Sabbatai's self-revelation as a stage-by-stage unfolding, prefigured by the dawn's growing light.

The story of Esther was a staple of post-apostasy Sabbatian apologetic. For Nathan of Gaza, for example, Sabbatai's fate was "just like Queen Esther's. She ate forbidden foods. Yet righteous Mordecai declared it was not in vain that Ahasuerus took her to his bed, for it was through her that redemption came."²⁵ Hazzan does not explicitly connect the *ayalta* with Esther. But after his exegesis of the Zoharic story, he gives a series of lengthy quotations from *Ra'ya Mehemna* to *parashat Ki Teze*,²⁶ the first of them (III, 275b-276a) dealing with Esther.

Ra'ya Mehemna represents Esther as the embodiment of the Shechinah, which "enclothes" itself within her.²⁷ In consequence, Esther "ruled over Ahasuerus and his people." She was no more joined to Ahasuerus than Joseph was to Potiphar's wife, albeit Joseph "left with her his *beged*'—not his *levush*, but only his [most external] *beged* ..." Commenting on *Ra'ya Mehemna*, Hazzan identifies this *beged* with Sabbatai's turban (18b-19a, 20b). "Had the Light of Israel not entered into this trial, it would not have been possible to rule over [the Gentiles], to bring them under the wings of the Shechinah But do not imagine, God forbid, that by entering their religion he became as one of them ..." (20b).

So Sabbatai Zevi is the serpent who bites the genital of the *ayalta*, who is herself a serpent like him. He is also the Esther in whom the Shechinah (= the *ayalta*) is incarnated, who enters the realm of the Other in order to dominate and thus transcend its

²⁴ PT Ber. 1:1, Yoma 3:2, *GenR* 50:10; cf. *EsthR* 10:14, *SongR* 6:25.

²⁵ Letter to Joseph Zevi (7 February 1668), translated in Halperin, *Sabbatai Zevi*, p. 68; cf. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, index, s.v. Esther; Elqayam, p. 142.

²⁶ Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19; Zohar, III, 275b-283a.

²⁷ *Va-tilbash ester malkhut* (Esth. 5:1), understood in accord with BT Meg. 15a. In quoting *Ra'ya Mehemna*, Hazzan follows the reading *itlabbesha be-ester*.

Otherness. How much of this was already in Sabbatai's awareness, when he placed Psalm 42 at the head of his "midnight-vigil liturgy"—which is to say, the extent to which the apostasy or something like it was part of his internal script, even before he appeared before Sultan Mehmed IV—can only be conjectured.

And while we are in the conjectural mode—where does the myth begin? In remote antiquity, perhaps, when Esther's pagan namesake (or prototype?) Ishtar²⁸ was worshipped as the morning star? Ishtar, like the Shechinah in the Lurianic and still more the Sabbatian Kabbalah, took a plunge into the underworld from which all the wiles of divinity could hardly extract her.²⁹ Does the parallel have any significance? If so, how did it manage to cross the millennia?

We stand in the presence of a mythic tradition which, like the snake it describes, wanders through the generations in crooked paths. Its numinous power, like the snake, could be deadly. We are told of Isaac Luria that his disclosing the secret of the *ayalta* was what killed his young son, that his revelation of the cognate mystery of the *tren urzilin de-ayalta* ("two fawns of the doe") cost him his own life.³⁰ That same numinous power was linked, a century later, to historical events which in the eyes of the Sabbatian faithful were as devastating and incomprehensible as the death of Luria's child. What can the myth teach us, about these events? The events, about the myth? With this paper, I hope to have broached these questions.

²⁸ The Talmud preserves a dim memory of this equation: "Rabbi Nehemiah said: Her name was Hadassah; so why was she called Esther? Because the Gentiles called her after Istahar" (Meg. 13a, *she-hayu ummot ha-'olam qorim otah 'al shum istahar*). Rashi glosses *istahar* as the moon, presumably deriving it from *shr*. On Istahar as the name of an astral goddess, cf. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, I, 149, V, 169-170.

²⁹ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 47-63.

³⁰ See Liebes's article, cited in n. 3 above.