

Adam Afterman. *“And They Shall Be One Flesh”: On The Language of Mystical Union in Judaism.* Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy Series. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2016. Illustrations. x + 279 pp. \$145.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-32872-3.

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In this first book-length historical overview of mystical union in the Jewish tradition, the thesis is stated succinctly in the introduction (chapter 1): “The history of Jewish unitive language is constituted of ... two trends: the lineage of Philonic or Neoplatonic mystical union, in which the human is elevated to God’s dwelling and becomes one with Him; and the lineage of mystical embodiment, the notion of the divine indwelling by means of its name, light and spirit, in the midst of the human” (p. 3). Adam Afterman contends that the historical arc traces a movement that begins with the upward unitive trajectory predominating, until the downward integrative dynamic took the fore, corresponding to a gradual historical shift of religious focus from the Godhead to the human body and psyche in premodern and modern Jewish mysticism. In Afterman’s telling, medieval Judaism posited metaphysical structures extending between God and man that allowed for spiritual or intellectual ascent, leading to forms of intimacy and union with God and the development of new forms of religious expression.

Chapter 2 makes the bold statement that *unio mystica* (mystical union) begins with Philo and thus begins in the Jewish tradition. As a result, with his influence on Plotinus, Philo effectively had an impact on Platonism and then the entire

Western mystical tradition. Distinctive to Afterman’s argument regarding Philo is his examination of Philo’s treatment of the biblical verses containing the root *dvq* (cleave). In these locations, Afterman demonstrates Philo’s positive position regarding mystical union, specifically with the personal God of scripture. The short third chapter reviews the scholarship that considers union with God in ancient Judaism; Afterman emphatically denies the possibility based on the lack of metaphysical structures upon which such union could stand.

Chapter 4 lays out the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian metaphysical foundations for the subsequent medieval mystical unions: the Aristotelian epistemological notion of “knowledge as union,” the “Active Intellect” in later Aristotelian philosophy, and the “Nous” in Neoplatonism. Proclus and his three-stage “path of return” was the best-known route of epistemic union in the Neoplatonic tradition. Some Muslim and Jewish interpreters of the Neo-Aristotelian tradition—including notably Maimonides—understood Aristotle’s conception of the Active Intellect as the last of ten separated intellects, with which noetic union can be attained, even while in the body.

Chapter 5 introduces the eleventh- to twelfth-century Jewish philosophers who integrated Neo-

platonian ideas into their creative readings of the Jewish spiritual tradition, including and serving as vital channels of transmission for the later kabbalah. In Afterman's words, Isaac Israeli "viewed the three stages of Proclus's ladder of ascension—purification, illumination, and mystical union—as the inner meaning of Judaism and its religious path" (p. 79). Writing in Hebrew, Abraham ibn Ezra used the idiom of *devequt* independently, not necessarily as translations of such Arabic terms as *ittisal* (conjunction) and *ittihad* (union). His terminology of union enables a description of how the human soul undergoes a process of universalization, becoming one with the divine *Nous* (*hakol*, All, in his usage), a form of the divine wisdom that contains all the ideas or principles of everything.

Yehudah Halevi is the first in Afterman's reckoning to offer the second aspect of Jewish mystical union: the descent of Divinity, and its taking up residence within the body of the living mystical adept. In a striking formulation, Afterman states that the "miracle of the embodiment of the divine in human flesh ... was ... the fundamental truth of religion and its eschatological promise" (p. 90). Following mystical union with the individual, it is also possible for the community as a whole to attain the mystical embodiment of divine light and the Tetragrammaton.

The sixth chapter considers the meaning of union in Maimonides and, briefly, Nahmanides. In the Neo-Aristotelian mode of thinking, union "occurs through the clinging of the intellect ... to a divine or metaphysical intellect ... [and] could be characterized as a form of 'integrative union'" (p. 103); it draws on the key principle from Aristotle's *De Anima* (430a3), stating, "that which thinks and that which is known ... are the same" (p. 104). In Maimonides's adaptation, union is possible at the time of death or afterward. This approach differs from Neoplatonic *unio mystica* insofar as it is *only* union with intellect, and not with God who is above all being. Nahmanides adopts his basic ap-

proach from Maimonides, but shifts the site of noetic union to being within the Godhead, rather than a subordinate locale. He also develops an esoteric theory of embodiment of the divine essence in angelic beings and the perfected human.

Chapter 7 treats the thought of the late twelfth-century Provençal kabbalist Isaac the Blind and that of his Geronese students. For Rabbi Isaac, theurgy and mystical union are two parts of the same dynamic, with two unitive aspects: the union of human thought with the corresponding element in the Godhead, and embodied union when the unified divine name dwells within the kabbalist. What is innovative here is that "concrete halakhic performances were perceived as ritualistic embodiment of the Torah" (p. 135). Some of the formulations regarding mystical union among these kabbalists are quite explicit; however, Afterman argues that it is not mystical union because it is only partial, and because it is only with thought, rather than an encompassing of the entire human being.

In an anonymous text that probably emerges from this circle we read: "The righteous man, who raises his pure and immaculate soul to the supernal 'holy soul' unites with it... With his intellect [he] fulfills the Torah, for they [the commandments] are incorporated within him. That is why our sages said that the Patriarchs fulfilled the Torah in their intellect, and they said that the patriarchs are themselves the chariot" (p. 138). From this remarkable text, Afterman derives his far-reaching conclusion here that serving as chariot implies being "embodied with divine fullness" (p. 140). What would have been interesting to pursue as a next step is the meaning of this infusion. How is the body transformed as a result? Is any kind of immortality attained? Does the person become angelic?

One of the most original ideas produced by the Geronese kabbalists is articulated by Yaakov bar Sheshet, that a mystic may erotically unite with the Divine by means of his body. Afterman

comments with regard to the anonymously written *Iggeret ha-Qodesh* (late thirteenth century) that intercourse becomes “perhaps the most representative (if also most radical) of the Kabbalistic understanding of ‘embodied union’” (p. 150).

On account of the extensive scholarly attention devoted to mystical union in the ecstatic kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia, Afterman provides only a “general exposition” in chapter 8 to this important figure (p. 151). Chapter 9 treats the tropes and images of mystical union in Rabbi Isaac of Acre, an important aggregator of kabbalistic lore and practices. He was one of the first to draw on Sufi imagery, and while deploying imagery of drowning and burning, Isaac emphasized both the dangers and desirability of *unio mystica*.

The symbolic literary quality of Zoharic homilies (examined in chapter 10) is generally non-philosophical and thus harder to pin down regarding mystical union, and Afterman is led to understand the pervasive use of such terms as *devequt* as referring only to mild union. He quotes Hartley Lachter regarding the strong literary ambiguity in this literature regarding full union, while also bearing in mind the approach of Elliot Wolfson, that one must investigate “the language of union and unification ... as an axis of principle around which revolves a diversity of discursive, mytho-poetic, symbolic, and practical contexts” (p. 203).

Afterman draws attention to specific symbols that are employed to overcome the distance between human and the Godhead, most significantly the kiss, coronation, and the rose. His most pointed suggestion in his reading of mystical intimacy in the *Zohar* is that first, the mystical adept must be integrated into the Godhead either as a member of the communal collective or as a result of personal practice, and then he can participate in higher levels of unity within the Godhead. In his treatment of *Raza de-Shabbat* (*Zohar* 2:135b), following the sequence of the passage, Afterman suggests that individual Jews are adorned with

new souls as a direct result of the collective being integrated within the Godhead. I believe that the author mistakes narrative sequence for a logical process—sequence does not necessarily imply chronology.

Afterman shows that while mystical union was considered a rare achievement at the beginning of the thirteenth century, it became articulated gradually in terms of mystical moments in day-to-day life. The projection of new religious values onto biblical and rabbinic terms, and the lack of theological dogmas in classical rabbinic literature regarding these unions allowed philosophical and mystical trends to articulate robust understandings of union.

Among the book’s many values are its provision of a historical narrative that accounts for the shift from emphasis on human ascent to divine descent over the ages, marked clarity and readability in articulating complex issues, and philological attention to the adaptation of Greek and Arabic terms. Among its few deficiencies, the book does not always offer citations of primary sources in the construction of arguments, relying on secondary scholars. Secondly, while the number of typos and stylistic errors do not abound, at the price of a book published by Brill there should be none.

Overall, this book will play a crucial role in future scholarly thought about mystical union in Judaism and it is highly recommended for all those interested in Jewish and cross-cultural mysticism, as well as medieval Jewish thought more generally.

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