**The Figure of Moses in Medieval Kabbalah**

In medieval Kabbalah, as in earlier traditions, the figure of Moses occupies a central position. Overall, one can say that this figure transverses a liminal space between the realistic and the mythic. On the one hand, the Kabbalistic tradition preserves his character as a flesh-and-blood political and religious leader, as the simple meaning of the biblical story indicates, and on the other, it elevates him sometimes to superhuman dimensions in a way that recalls the Christian messianic myth.

Moses the earthly man is described at length in Kabbalistic literature. The *Zohar* sees Moses as “the master of the prophets,” as someone who reached the loftiest mystical heights that a human being can experience. Medieval Kabbalistic literature emphasized Moses’s elevation over the mystic level of the other prophets, and even over that of the biblical forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. According to a common Kabbalistic formula, Moses’s prophetic superiority and seniority derive from the fact that, in his visions, he was able to reach a higher place on the tree of the *sefirot*. While the rest of the prophets attained their prophetic visions by means of the lowest *sefira*, *Malkhut*, alone, and while the forefathers succeeded in creating a visionary connection with the *sefira* *Tiferet* only through the mediation of *Malkhut*, Moses was able to create mystical, visionary contact with *Tiferet* itself, directly and unmediated.

In Kabbalistic literature, Moses the man is ascribed the qualities of a sorcerer and master of physiognomy. It is in this context, especially in the later sections of the *Zohar*, that the discussion turns to Moses’s magical staff. But more than anything else, the first Kabbalists in the Middle Ages emphasized Moses’s historical position as the one who received the “wisdom of the Kabbalah” from heaven on Mount Sinai and bequeathed it to subsequent generations.

Alongside the mundane depictions of Moses the man, Kabbalistic legends also painted him, as mentioned, in superhuman and even mythic colors. Already in the story of Moses’s birth, one can see tendencies to exalt his soul beyond the sphere of human existence, and emphasize the active and exceptional participation of the *Shekhina* in his soul’s prophetic inspiration.

From the beginnings of the Kabbalah, Moses was identified with *Tiferet*. Sometimes he is a symbol of this *sefira*, but, in many instances, we find that the character of Moses has entirely merged with *Tiferet* — the same male entity that, according to the Kabbalists, emanates abundance to the female *Malkhut* below it. For this reason, the *Zohar* sees Moses himself as the “master of the *Shekhina*” (Aramaic, *mara d’matronita*), the one who has forged an intimate and personal connection with the *Shekhina*, which is itself the *sefira* of *Malkhut*, and thus also controls it. So, too, the Kabbalists explained the biblical story of Moses’s separation from his wife as inevitable because he had to forge a connection with the mythical woman — *Malkhut*. The identification of Moses with *Tiferet* is connected also to his status as the giver of the Torah, which also, according to the Kabbalistic myth, was inspired by *Tiferet*.

Just as Moses’s birth was, in the eyes of the Kabbalists, different than the birth of all other men, the same holds true of his death. In this context, the *Zohar* and related texts adopt an unusual exegetical position, according to which Moses did not die at all. They describe his departure from the world as akin to disappearing over the horizon, and just as the setting sun continues giving light by means of the moon, so, too, the power of Moses’s Torah and inspiration continue to act, even after his death, on Joshua his successor, and on the sages of Israel through during the long years of exile. This illumination and inspiration is the wellspring for new interpretations of the Torah by the sages of Israel during the exile.

In this context, the discussion turns to Moses’s messianic role. If Moses’s death is understood, as mentioned, as merely the setting of the sun during the exile, he is destined in the future to shine again and to rise during the time of redemption; the Torah itself will be renewed by him in the future.

The senior stature of Moses is expressed in a surprising way in several passages in the *Zohar*, where it seems that he is even more elevated than the hero of the book, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. The height of this literary tendency can be seen in the later sections of the *Zohar*, especially in the composition called *Re’ayah Meheymana* (“The faithful shepherd”), after Moses himself. The literary frame of this work is built around a dialogue between Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and Moses, and it is actually the latter who reveals sublime secrets to the hero of Zoharic myth.

Various studies that have addressed the figure of Moses raise the possibility that the *Zohar*’s literary depiction of Moses, especially in the later layers of the book, is meant to represent a concrete personality who lived in the environment of the Spanish Kabbalists of the 13th century. There are those who saw in Moses the figure of Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (Nachmanides); others speculated that he represents the figure of a different Moses, Moses de Leon. Still others saw in this figure a reflection of the character and self-awareness of the writer of the *Zohar* himself — whomever that may have been.