

The Divine Attribute of Transcendence in Dionysius the Areopagite's Work

Differences and Confluences with the Jewish Kabbalah

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Abstract: This article undertakes a comparative analysis of divine transcendence as conceptualized in the Neoplatonically-infused Christian mysticism of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* and the esoteric tradition of Jewish Kabbalah, with a primary focus on the Zohar. It argues that despite their distinct theological origins and historical contexts, both systems develop sophisticated apophatic theologies to safeguard the absolute otherness of the Godhead, while simultaneously positing a structured series of divine emanations or processions that bridge the chasm between the transcendent source and the created world. The study explores the apophatic methodologies (the *via negativa*), the role of divine names, and the hierarchical structures of emanation (divine processions in Dionysius, the *Sefirot* in Kabbalah). A central, speculative hypothesis is advanced: the potential analogical identification of the *Sefirah Hokhmah* (Wisdom) with the Person of Christ as the *Logos* (the Verb). The article defines the necessary theological and philosophical conditions that would render such a comparison reasonably acceptable within a comparative mystical framework, highlighting both the profound confluences in their structural roles and the insurmountable dogmatic differences that prevent a full equation. The aim is not to syncretize, but to use the comparison as a heuristic tool to illuminate the unique contours of each tradition's approach to the paradox of a transcendent yet self-revealing God.

Keywords: Dionysius the Areopagite, Kabbalah, Transcendence, Neoplatonism, Proclus, Divine Names, Hierarchy, Mystical Theology.

1. Introduction: The Paradox of the Hidden and Revealed God

AT THE HEART OF THE great mystical traditions of the West lies a fundamental paradox: How can a God defined by absolute transcendence,

existing beyond being, thought, and language, simultaneously be the immanent creator, sustainer, and goal of a finite, material cosmos? This question of the relationship between the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*) and the revealed God (*Deus revelatus*) has given rise to some of the most profound and complex metaphysical systems in religious thought. Two of the most influential of these systems are the Christian Neoplatonism of the author known as Dionysius the Areopagite and the esoteric theosophy of Jewish Kabbalah. Though separated by centuries and profound dogmatic divides, they independently developed remarkably similar strategies to navigate this paradox. Both traditions posit a radically transcendent Godhead that is utterly unknowable in itself, and both describe a process of divine self-emanation or procession through a series of intermediaries that make possible the existence of the world and the soul's potential return to its source.

This article will explore the concept of divine transcendence in the works of Dionysius and in Kabbalah, examining their points of confluence and divergence. It will argue that their shared reliance on apophatic theology and hierarchical models of emanation stems from a common philosophical heritage (explicitly Neoplatonic in Dionysius, implicitly so in Kabbalah) and a shared theological necessity to protect the absolute sovereignty and otherness of the Divine.

1.1. *The Enigma of Dionysius the Areopagite*

The author of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*—comprising *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and ten epistles—presents himself as Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian convert of St. Paul mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (17:34). This claim, accepted for over a millennium, granted his work quasi-apostolic authority and an “indisputable centrality in philosophical-religious thought from the sixth to the sixteenth century”¹. However, modern scholarship has definitively demonstrated this to be a “literary forgery”, one of the most influential in Western history². Philological and doctrinal analysis reveals that the author was a Syrian Christian writing in the late 5th or early 6th century, deeply versed in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Proclus (d. 485), whose work is extensively paraphrased and adapted throughout the *Corpus*³.

This act of pseudepigraphy was likely a strategic move within the intense theological and political landscape of the early Byzantine Empire. The works first appear officially in 532 at a public dispute in Constantinople,

¹ Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul. Cel mai influent fals literar din istoria gândirii occidentale* (București: Editura Litera, 2021), 7.

² Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, title page.

³ Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, 12, 52–53. Mainoldi states the similarities are “macroscopic” and that Dionysius appears to have personally attended the Neoplatonic school in Athens.

where their authority was challenged⁴. Despite initial skepticism, their “high quality of content” and profound synthesis of Christian doctrine with Neoplatonic metaphysics ensured their unstoppable success⁵. The author, now commonly referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius, effectively “baptized” Neoplatonism, transforming its concepts to serve a Christian theological agenda. The Neoplatonic “One” becomes the Christian God, the theory of emanations is refigured as divine “processions” (*proodoi*), and the intellectual ascent to the One is transformed into a mystical union with God, achieved through the ecclesiastical and celestial hierarchies.

Dionysius is credited with inventing the term “hierarchy”, defining the medieval understanding of symbolism, and codifying the orders of angels that remain familiar today⁶. His work, a philosophical masterpiece of the Justinian era, provided a speculative justification for the Church's liturgical and monastic life, framing it as an earthly reflection of a divine cosmic order⁷. This aspect has been rigorously highlighted by Alexander Golitzin in his seminal work *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita* (2014). Golitzin argues that the *Corpus* is not merely a philosophical appropriation of Proclus, but is deeply rooted in the ascetic and liturgical experience of the Christian East, serving as a “mystagogy” that guides the monk toward union with the Divine.

1.2. The Emergence of Kabbalah

Jewish Kabbalah, a multifaceted esoteric tradition, emerged into public view several centuries after Dionysius, primarily in Provence and Spain during the 12th and 13th centuries. While its adherents claim an ancient lineage, tracing its secrets back to prophetic revelation, its medieval formulation represents a new flowering of Jewish mysticism. The foundational text of theosophical Kabbalah is the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Splendor), a sprawling mystical commentary on the Torah written in a distinctive Aramaic. Like the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, the *Zohar* is a pseudepigraphic work, attributed to the 2nd-century sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his circle, but composed in the late 13th century by the Spanish Kabbalist Moses de Leon⁸.

At the core of Kabbalah is a distinction between the Godhead in its ultimate essence—known as *Ein Sof* (אין סוף, “Without End” or “The Infinite”)—and God as He reveals Himself through ten divine emanations,

⁴ Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, 21. Hypatius of Ephesus accused the writings of being a forgery at this council.

⁵ Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, 16.

⁶ Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, 12.

⁷ Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, 64. The author suggests the *Corpus* was the “philosophical masterpiece of the Justinian era”, aligning with the emperor's political and religious program.

⁸ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 156–204.

the *Sefirot* (ספירות). *Ein Sof* is the absolute, undifferentiated, and unknowable abyss of divinity, analogous in its transcendence to the Godhead of Dionysius and the One of Plotinus. The Zohar states, “Before He gave any shape to the world, before He produced any form, He was alone, without form and without semblance to anything else”⁹. The *Sefirot* are the archetypal potencies or attributes through which *Ein Sof* creates, sustains, and interacts with the cosmos. They form a dynamic, interconnected structure, often depicted as a tree (*Ilan*) or an archetypal human (*Adam Kadmon*), representing the inner life of God and the blueprint for all of creation.

1.3. Methodology and the Central Hypothesis

This study will employ a comparative methodology, analyzing the primary texts of Dionysius and the Zohar to identify structural and conceptual parallels in their treatment of transcendence. It is not an argument for direct historical influence, though a shared Neoplatonic cultural substratum, however diffuse, is a plausible background¹⁰. Rather, the comparison serves as a heuristic device to illuminate how two distinct traditions addressed a common problem.

The article will culminate in an examination of a specific, speculative hypothesis: that the *Sefirah Hokhmah* (חכמה, Wisdom), the second *Sefirah* and the first point of conscious, articulated thought in the divine emanation, can be seen as structurally analogous to the Person of Christ as the *Logos* (the Verb or Word) in Christian theology. The Zohar describes *Hokhmah* as the primordial point from which all else emerges: “When the Most Hidden of the Hidden wished to reveal Himself, He first made a single point: the Transcendent Light. This is the ‘beginning’ (*reshit*) which is the first word of creation”¹¹. This “beginning” is explicitly identified with *Hokhmah*.

While this resonates vividly with the prologue of the Gospel of John — “In the beginning was the Word” — critical theological nuance is required. As noted in Patristic literature, the “Beginning” (*Archē*) in John 1:1 is not typically interpreted by the Church Fathers as the *Logos* himself, but rather as the Father (the Principle) in whom the *Logos* eternally exists. Consequently, the comparison between *Hokhmah* and the *Logos* is not one of strict terminological identity (i.e., *Reshit* = *Logos*), but of functional analogy. Both *Hokhmah* (as the primordially revealed point) and the *Logos* (as the begotten Son) serve as the initial, creative articulation of the Divine, bridging the silence of the absolute Source with the multiplicity of creation.

⁹ Zohar I, 2a. (Translation by the author, based on standard English versions like Pritzker or Sperling & Simon).

¹⁰ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 33–36. Idel discusses the complex issue of Neoplatonic influences on Kabbalah, suggesting indirect transmission through various philosophical and mystical currents.

¹¹ Zohar I, 15a. This passage is a cornerstone of Zoharic cosmology.

This comparison is fraught with peril and requires careful qualification. To make it “reasonably acceptable” as a subject for academic inquiry, several conditions must be met:

1. Structural Equivalence: The comparison must be limited to the *structural role* played by *Hokhmah* and the *Logos* within their respective systems—as the first principle of divine self-revelation, the blueprint of creation, and the bridge between the infinite source and finite reality.

2. Theological Neutrality: The analysis must acknowledge and respect the fundamental, irreconcilable dogmatic differences. The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation—the *Logos* becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ—has no direct parallel in Kabbalah. Likewise, the Kabbalistic understanding of the *Sefirot* as divine attributes or vessels, not distinct “persons” in the Trinitarian sense, must be maintained.

3. Focus on Mystical Function: The comparison should focus on the function of these principles within the mystical path—how the contemplation of *Hokhmah* or union with Christ provides a way for the mystic to approach the otherwise inaccessible Godhead.

By defining these conditions, the hypothesis can be explored not as an attempt to equate two faiths, but as a tool to deepen our understanding of the archetypal patterns that emerge when the human mind grapples with the ultimate mystery of the transcendent God.

2. The Unknowable Godhead in the *Corpus Areopagiticum*

Dionysius's theology is fundamentally a meditation on the paradox of a God who is both radically transcendent and lovingly provident. His entire system is built upon this tension. To grasp his concept of transcendence, one must first understand its philosophical roots in Neoplatonism, its methodological expression in apophatic theology, and its resolution in the doctrine of divine processions.

2.1. The Neoplatonic Inheritance: *Proclus and the Super-Essential One*

The discovery of Dionysius's dependence on the Athenian Neoplatonist Proclus was the key that unlocked his historical context. As Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi notes, “the work of Proclus is almost completely paraphrased” throughout the *Corpus*¹². Proclus's system is a vast, hierarchical structure emanating from a primary principle, the One (Τὸ Ἔν). This One is utterly simple, beyond all predication, beyond even being itself (*hyperousios*, or super-essential). It is the source of all things, but it is not any of the things

¹² Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, 52.

it produces. From the One emanates a series of divine “henads”, followed by Being, Life, and Intellect, which in turn produce the World Soul and the material cosmos. Every effect remains in, proceeds from, and returns to its cause (*monē, proodos, epistrophē*), a triadic structure that Dionysius adopts wholesale¹³.

Dionysius takes this Procline framework and “re-signifies” it within a Christian context. The Neoplatonic One becomes the Holy Trinity, a “super-essential Godhead” that is nonetheless a personal, triune God. He writes, “it is the All-Cause, being neither soulless nor lifeless, not without reason or intelligence... It is not a body... It has no shape, or form, or quality, or quantity, or weight”¹⁴. While Proclus's One is an impersonal philosophical principle, Dionysius's Godhead is the God of the Bible—a living, willing, loving being, yet one whose inner essence remains as transcendent and inaccessible as the Neoplatonic One. The “philosophical concepts are terminologically resumed but with a radically changed meaning”¹⁵. This act of appropriation allowed Dionysius to use the most sophisticated philosophical language of his day to defend the profundity of Christian revelation.

2.2. *Apophatic Theology: The Via Negativa as Ascent*

If the Godhead is “super-essential”, beyond being and knowledge, how can anything be said about it? Dionysius's answer lies in his famous distinction between two theological paths: the cataphatic (*via affirmativa*) and the apophatic (*via negativa*).

Cataphatic theology proceeds by affirmation. It takes the names and attributes ascribed to God in Scripture—Good, Just, Wise, Being, Life—and understands them as reflections of God's “processions” or self-revealing energies. God is the cause of all things, so the perfections of creatures must pre-exist in a transcendent way within Him. Thus, we can call God “Good” because He is the source of all goodness. However, this path is ultimately inadequate, because God is not good in the same way a creature is good. All affirmations fall infinitely short of the divine reality.

Therefore, the higher path, detailed in *The Mystical Theology*, is the apophatic. This path proceeds by negation, systematically stripping away every attribute and concept from God, even the highest ones. The mystic, seeking union, must “leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intelligible... and press forward...

¹³ Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, ed. E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), Prop. 35.

¹⁴ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, Ch. I, 5. In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 53.

¹⁵ Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, 56.

towards union with Him who is above all being and knowledge"¹⁶. Dionysius describes this as entering into the "divine darkness" or the "luminous gloom", a state of unknowing that is paradoxically a higher form of knowing.

He writes in a climactic passage:

We say that the Cause of all things is not body, nor has figure, nor form... It is not in place, or seen; It is not sensible perception... It is not soul, or mind... It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness... It is not Being, nor Eternity, nor Time... It is not one, nor oneness, not divinity, or goodness; nor is It spirit, as we know spirit; not Sonship, not Fatherhood... It is of a truth nothing of things that are not, nor of things that are¹⁷.

This radical negation is not an expression of atheism or agnosticism. It is a devotional and intellectual discipline designed to purify the mind of all finite concepts, which inevitably become idols when applied to the infinite Godhead. For Dionysius, transcendence is not merely a philosophical attribute; it is an experiential reality that the mystic must enter through the "unknowing" of apophatic prayer. This is the very definition of "mysticism, as a spiritual experience that goes beyond the limits of the intellect"¹⁸.

2.3. The Divine Processions (Proodoi): From Unity to Multiplicity

If the Godhead is so radically transcendent and unknowable, how does the world exist? Dionysius resolves this through the doctrine of "processions" (*proodoi*), his Christianized version of Neoplatonic emanation. The super-abundant goodness of the Godhead cannot contain itself; it overflows, "as if a kind of ecstatic love", bringing all things into being while itself remaining undiminished and unchanged in its transcendent unity¹⁹. This creative outflow is not a depletion of the divine essence but an extension of its power and goodness.

These processions are structured hierarchically. The highest realities are the "divine names" themselves—Goodness, Being, Life, Wisdom—which are the first self-revelations of the Godhead. From and through these, God creates the *Celestial Hierarchy* of angels, which in turn transmits the divine light and energy to the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* on earth (bishops, priests, deacons, monks, laity). This entire cosmic structure is a great chain of being, a "sacred order" whose purpose is to lead all creation back to God. As

¹⁶ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology*, Ch. I, 1. In *The Complete Works*, 135.

¹⁷ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology*, Ch. V. In *The Complete Works*, 141.

¹⁸ Mainoldi, *Dionysie Areopagite*, 12.

¹⁹ Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Continuum, 2002), 35. Louth discusses the concept of ecstatic, creative love in Dionysius.

Dionysius states, "Hierarchy is a sacred order, and knowledge, and activity, assimilated as far as possible to the God-like, and conducted to the illuminations granted it from God"²⁰.

This hierarchical system serves a dual purpose. First, it safeguards divine transcendence. God does not interact with the material world directly, but through a series of intermediaries. This preserves His otherness. Second, it makes God accessible. The divine light, too brilliant to be perceived directly, is "veiled" and mediated by the ranks of angels and the sacraments of the Church, allowing finite beings to receive it according to their capacity. The hierarchy is therefore the very structure of divine immanence, the means by which the transcendent God makes Himself present to creation without compromising His transcendence.

2.4. *Divine Names and the Limits of Language*

The treatise *The Divine Names* is a detailed exploration of cataphatic theology, yet it is everywhere conditioned by the apophatic principle. Dionysius analyzes names from Scripture like "Good", "Being", "Life", and "Wisdom". He argues that these names are true and revealed by God, but they refer to the *dunameis* (powers) or "energies" of God that flow out into creation, not to His hidden "super-essence" (*hyperousios*).

The name "Good" is preeminent because it signifies God's self-diffusive, creative love. The "Good" is what "all things desire", and it is this ecstatic, loving goodness that causes the Godhead to "proceed" forth and create²¹. The name "Being" is also fundamental, as God as "He Who Is" (an allusion to Exodus 3:14) is the cause of all existence. However, Dionysius is quick to add that God is "pre-eminently Being" (*pro-ōn*) and "super-essential" (*hyperousios*), meaning He is beyond the category of being as we understand it.

Every name is thus a paradox. It reveals something true about God's relationship to the world, but it simultaneously conceals His inner nature. Language, for Dionysius, is symbolic. The names are "symbols", not literal descriptions. This understanding of symbol, as something that both reveals and conceals a higher reality, became foundational for medieval thought²². Ultimately, even the most exalted names must be negated. The path of the mystic leads beyond names, beyond concepts, into the silent darkness of the unknowable Godhead, where union is found not in knowledge but in love. In this system, transcendence is not a static quality but a dynamic reality that structures all of reality and the soul's journey home.

²⁰ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Ch. III, 1. In *The Complete Works*, 153.

²¹ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, Ch. IV, 1. In *The Complete Works*, 71.

²² Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, 12.

3. The Infinite *Ein Sof* and the World of *Sefirot*

While the language and historical context of Jewish Kabbalah are vastly different from those of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, its aetiological structure exhibits a surprisingly similar response to the problem of transcendence. Kabbalah posits an ultimate, hidden Godhead (*Ein Sof*) and a series of emanations (the *Sefirot*) that bridge the gap between the infinite and the finite. This framework allows for a rich and dynamic theology that preserves God's absolute otherness while describing His active involvement in creation.

3.1. *Ein Sof*: *The Absolutely Transcendent and Unknowable*

The Kabbalistic concept of *Ein Sof* (אין סוף, literally “Without End”) represents the most radical apophaticism in Judaism. *Ein Sof* is God in His purest essence, prior to any self-revelation, thought, or will. It is the infinite, undifferentiated abyss of divinity, about which nothing can be posited. It is not “He” or “She”, not a person, not a being, not even “God” in the sense of the God of the Bible who interacts with humanity. The Zohar describes this state as “the Most Hidden of the Hidden” (*Atika Kadisha*), a realm of pure, undifferentiated light that is conceptually equivalent to absolute darkness because it is beyond all perception²³.

Gershom Scholem, the founder of the modern academic study of Kabbalah, emphasizes that “*Ein-Sof*... does not have any attributes at all”²⁴. Any attribute, even omnipotence or omniscience, would imply a limitation, a definition that the limitless *Ein Sof* must transcend. This is why the Kabbalists do not direct their prayers or religious life to *Ein Sof*. It is a philosophical and mystical limit-concept, a necessary postulate to safeguard the absolute freedom and otherness of God, ensuring that the revealed God of the *Sefirot* does not exhaust the mystery of the Godhead. The Zohar is emphatic on this point: “No thought can grasp You at all”²⁵. This phrase, directed at the divine will emerging from the abyss, applies with even greater force to *Ein*

²³ Zohar III, 128b (*Idra Rabba*). This section of the Zohar, the “Great Assembly”, is a primary source for the description of the divine countenances (*partzufim*) that emerge from the ultimate divine mystery, referred to as *Atika Kadisha*, the “Holy Ancient One”. See Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, 273–277.

²⁴ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 215. Scholem's analysis distinguishes between the personal, revealed God of the *Sefirot* and the impersonal, hidden Godhead of *Ein Sof*, a distinction he saw as a Gnostic-like innovation within Judaism.

²⁵ Zohar I, 1b (Introduction). This phrase appears in the Zohar's opening hymn, “The Rose” (*Patach Eliyahu*), and sets the apophatic tone for the entire work. The full context addresses the divine Will (*Ratzon*) that emerges from *Ein Sof*, which itself is beyond even Will.

Sof itself. This absolute transcendence is the Kabbalistic parallel to the “super-essentiality” of Dionysius’s Godhead. Both systems begin with an axiom of divine unknowability.

3.2. *The Sefirot as Vessels of Divine Light*

If *Ein Sof* is unknowable and inactive, how does creation come into being? The Kabbalistic answer is the doctrine of the *Sefirot*. In an act of primordial will, *Ein Sof* withdraws or contracts itself (*tzimtzum*, a concept developed most fully by Isaac Luria but with roots in the Zohar) to make a “conceptual space” for creation²⁶. Into this space, a single ray of divine light shines from *Ein Sof*, unfolding into ten distinct stages or vessels, the *Sefirot*. These are not separate gods, but rather the attributes, potencies, or “faces” of the one God as He turns towards creation. The Zohar describes them as “lamps of darkness” which, when illuminated by the flow from above, shine with different colors and qualities²⁷.

The ten *Sefirot* are typically listed as:

1. *Keter* (כתר) – Crown (The primordial will)
2. *Hokhmah* (חכמה) – Wisdom (The primordial point of intellect)
3. *Binah* (בינה) – Understanding (The intellect developed and articulated)
4. *Hesed* (חסד) – Loving-kindness (The expansive impulse)
5. *Gevurah* (גבורה) – Strength/Judgment (The contracting, limiting impulse)
6. *Tiferet* (תפארת) – Beauty/Compassion (The balance between Hesed and Gevurah)
7. *Netzach* (נצח) – Victory/Endurance
8. *Hod* (הוד) – Splendor/Glory
9. *Yesod* (יסוד) – Foundation (The channel of creative energy)
10. *Malkhut* (מלכות) – Kingdom (The final expression, the Divine Presence or *Shekhinah* in the world)

This system, like Dionysius’s hierarchies, serves two functions. It breaks down the singular, blinding light of *Ein Sof* into a spectrum of attributes that can be comprehended by the human mind and can form the archetypal structure of creation. At the same time, it mediates the divine power, creating a distance between the infinite source and the finite world. The *Sefirot* are both the inner life of God and the blueprint for all lower worlds. As Rabbi Azriel of Gerona, a pre-Zoharic Kabbalist, wrote: “The *Sefirot* are the synthesis of the essence of God and His existence for us... they are like the

²⁶ The doctrine of *tzimtzum* (contraction) is most famously and systematically developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria in the 16th century. However, its conceptual roots are present in the Zohar, for instance in the idea that God had to “engrave a void” or create a “darkness” to make a space for revelation. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 129–135.

²⁷ Zohar I, 15a. The full metaphor is that of a lamp. The hidden source of light is *Ein Sof*. The *Sefirot* are the “lamps of darkness” (i.e., non-luminous vessels) until the divine light flows into them, at which point each shines with its own particular color and quality.

charcoal and the flame"²⁸. The essence remains hidden, but its energies become manifest.

3.3. The Role of Apophatic Language in Kabbalistic Theosophy

Like Dionysius, the Kabbalists employ a profoundly apophatic approach, but it is integrated with a complex symbolic and cataphatic system. The absolute apophasis is reserved for *Ein Sof*. Regarding the *Sefirot*, however, the Kabbalists engage in a torrent of symbolic language, using anthropomorphisms, metaphors, and allegorical readings of Scripture to describe their inner dynamics. The *Sefirot* are called "garments", "lights", "colors", "mirrors", and "pillars". They are mapped onto the human body (*Adam Kadmon*), forming a divine anthropos.

Yet, even here, an apophatic caution prevails. The Kabbalists constantly warn against reifying these symbols or taking them literally. The descriptions of divine wrath (*Gevurah*) or compassion (*Hesed*) are not human emotions but metaphysical principles of contraction and expansion. The Zohar itself is a testament to this method. It takes the biblical text, which is full of seemingly simple narratives and laws, and reveals a hidden, dynamic interplay of the *Sefirot* behind the literal meaning. For the Kabbalist, every word of the Torah is a symbol pointing to the world of the *Sefirot*. As the Zohar puts it, "Woe to the man who says that the Torah comes to tell stories and profane matters... The Torah has a body, which are the commandments... and it has a soul, which is the inner meaning"²⁹.

This is a form of "relative apophasis". While the *Sefirot* can be named and described symbolically (unlike *Ein Sof*), their true essence remains divine and ultimately beyond the grasp of the symbols used to represent them. The symbols are tools for contemplation, rungs on a ladder of ascent, but the mystic must eventually transcend the symbol to experience the divine light directly.

3.4. Keter (Crown): The Bridge Between Infinity and Emanation

The highest *Sefirah*, *Keter*, occupies a unique position analogous to the boundary between the knowable and the unknowable. It is the first stirring

²⁸ This famous simile is found in Rabbi Azriel of Gerona's *Sha'ar ha-Sho'el*. A translation and discussion can be found in Joseph Dan, *The Early Kabbalah* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 93–94. Azriel was a pivotal figure in the 13th-century Gerona circle, which systematized many pre-Zoharic Kabbalistic ideas.

²⁹ Zohar III, 152a. This passage is a locus classicus for the Kabbalistic hermeneutic, distinguishing between the external "body" of the Torah (its literal narratives and laws) and its inner "soul" (the mysteries of the *Sefirot*). See Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of the Kabbalah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 37–40.

of will within *Ein Sof*, the point where the Infinite begins its process of self-limitation in order to become manifest. *Keter* is sometimes called *Ayin* (אין), or “Nothingness”, because from the perspective of the lower *Sefirot*, it is so transcendent as to be non-existent³⁰. It is the “darkness” of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* translated into a specific point on the map of divinity.

The Zohar describes the emergence of *Keter* from *Ein Sof* through the metaphor of a spark of “impenetrable darkness” which then ignites the process of emanation. It is the root of both being and non-being. As the primordial will to create, it is the ultimate source of the processions, yet it remains intimately linked to the silent abyss of *Ein Sof*. In many Kabbalistic schemes, *Keter* is considered too sublime for direct contemplation and is often identified with the divine will, a force that is itself beyond comprehension but whose effects are seen in the subsequent *Sefirot*. This “Crown” hovering above the head of the divine anthropos is the ultimate link, the final veil between the absolute transcendence of *Ein Sof* and the dynamic, immanent world of the revealed God. It functions as the crucial hinge in the Kabbalistic system, making the transition from absolute apophysis to symbolic cataphasis possible.

4. A Comparative Analysis of Transcendence and Emanation

Having separately examined the theological structures of Dionysius the Areopagite and the Kabbalah, we can now bring them into direct comparison. This analysis will illuminate their shared strategies for grappling with divine transcendence—the confluences—while also respecting their profound and irreconcilable theological differences—the divergences. The parallels are not necessarily evidence of direct influence but rather of a typological similarity, a shared “logic of mysticism” that emerges when monotheistic traditions integrate Neoplatonic or Gnostic-style emanative frameworks to explain the relationship between the infinite One and the finite many.

4.1. Confluences: *Apophaticism, Hierarchy, and the Flow of Divinity*

The most striking confluence between the two systems is their foundational commitment to apophaticism. Both Dionysius and the Kabbalists insist that the ultimate divine essence is radically transcendent and unknowable.

³⁰ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 198–201. Idel explores the dialectic of *Ayin* (Nothingness) and *Yesh* (Being) in Kabbalah. *Keter* is the paradoxical point of transition, the “Nothingness” from which all Being (*Yesh*) emerges. It is *Ayin* from the perspective of creation, but the first existent reality from the perspective of *Ein Sof*.

The Unknowable Source: Dionysius's Godhead is *hyperousios* (super-essential), existing beyond being, knowledge, and language. He must be approached through the negation of all concepts in the "divine darkness"³¹. Similarly, the Kabbalists' *Ein Sof* is the Infinite, a realm of pure potentiality about which nothing can be affirmed. It is the absolute zero-point of theology, a necessary void of meaning that precedes all revelation³². Both systems posit a silent abyss at the origin of all things, a crucial move to prevent the revealed God from being idolized as the totality of the Godhead.

Hierarchical Mediation: To bridge the chasm between this unknowable source and the created world, both traditions develop a sophisticated model of hierarchical mediation. Dionysius conceives of the Celestial and Ecclesiastical Hierarchies as a series of mirrors, transmitting the divine light in a measured, graded fashion. The purpose of this order is "to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him"³³. The Kabbalistic Tree of the *Sefirot* performs an identical function. The infinite light of *Ein Sof* is channeled and differentiated through the ten *Sefirot*, which act as vessels, lenses, and archetypes for all of creation. In both systems, the intermediaries do not diminish the source but rather make its overwhelming power accessible to finite beings. This hierarchical structure is the very grammar of divine self-revelation.

The Emanative Outflow: The motivation for this self-revelation is described in remarkably similar terms. For Dionysius, the procession of creation is driven by the "ecstatic", super-abundant nature of the Divine Goodness, which cannot remain enclosed within itself³⁴. It is a non-compulsory, loving overflow. The Zohar uses similar imagery, describing the primordial will of *Ein Sof* to reveal itself and the subsequent flow of divine light and life-force (*shefa*) that sustains all worlds. This concept of a dynamic, overflowing divinity stands in contrast to a static, Aristotelian Unmoved Mover. In both Dionysian and Kabbalistic thought, God is not a distant, indifferent entity but a vibrant fountain of being whose transcendence is paradoxically the very source of His immanence.

The Role of Symbolism: Both traditions understand that language about the divine is necessarily symbolic. Dionysius explicitly defines the divine names and liturgical rites as "symbols" that both reveal and conceal the higher reality they signify³⁵. For the Kabbalists, the entire Torah is a symbolic

³¹ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology*, Ch. I, 3. In *The Complete Works*, 137.

³² Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88-95. Scholem describes *Ein Sof* as "the absolute perfection in which there are no distinctions and no differentiations".

³³ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Ch. I, 3. In *The Complete Works*, 198.

³⁴ Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 159-161. Rorem analyzes the theme of divine "eros" or love as the motive for creation and procession.

³⁵ Mainoldi, *Dionisie Areopagitul*, 12. Mainoldi credits Dionysius with defining "the concept of symbol, as it was understood by medieval thought".

text, a “garment” for the living body of the *Sefirot*. The Zohar states, “If the Torah were only stories, we could make a better one today. But every word contains a sublime mystery”³⁶. This shared hermeneutic of symbolism allows both traditions to maintain a rich, descriptive (cataphatic) language for the divine manifestations while simultaneously upholding the apophatic truth that these descriptions are not literal.

4.2. Divergences:

Creation, Incarnation, and the Nature of the Intermediary

Despite these structural parallels, the theological content and ultimate aims of the two systems are fundamentally different. The divergences are as significant as the confluences.

Creatio ex Nihilo vs. Emanation: While both systems use emanative language, their underlying cosmologies differ. Christian orthodoxy, to which Dionysius adheres, insists on *creatio ex nihilo*—creation out of nothing. God creates a world that is ontologically distinct from Himself. Dionysius is careful to frame his “processions” as acts of the divine will that bring forth a separate creation³⁷. Kabbalah, on the other hand, is more purely emanationist. The *Sefirot*, and by extension the world, are not created *ex nihilo* but are emanated from the divine substance itself. They are, in a sense, God in His manifest form. This leads to a more pantheistic or panentheistic worldview than is permissible in orthodox Christianity. As Joseph Dan notes, “the *Sefirot* are divine; they are God, and there is no ontological abyss between them and the divine essence”³⁸.

The Incarnation: The most profound and unbridgeable gap lies in the doctrine of the Incarnation. For Dionysius, and all of Christianity, the ultimate self-revelation of God is not a system or a hierarchy but a person: Jesus Christ, the *Logos* made flesh. Dionysius speaks of “the philanthropic and deifying condescension of Jesus”, the God-man who unites the created and uncreated in his single person³⁹. This historical, singular event is the axis of Christian theology and has no parallel in Kabbalah. The Kabbalistic system is concerned with the eternal, cosmic processes of divinity, not with a singular, historical incarnation. The absence of this doctrine in Kabbalah and its centrality in Dionysius’s thought fundamentally shape their respective views of salvation, history, and the means of mystical ascent.

³⁶ Zohar III, 152a. This is a classic statement of the Zohar’s hermeneutical principle.

³⁷ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 170–172. Louth emphasizes that for Dionysius, creation is a willed act, preserving the distinction between Creator and creature.

³⁸ Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 46.

³⁹ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Ch. III, 13. In *The Complete Works*, 223. Dionysius’s Christology, though cautious, is central to his entire system.

The Nature of the Intermediary: This leads to a difference in the nature of the intermediaries. Dionysius's "divine names" and "energies" are distinct from the divine essence, a distinction crucial for Eastern Orthodox theology (developed later by Gregory Palamas, who drew heavily on Dionysius)⁴⁰. They are the actions or powers of God, but they are not God's very being. The Kabbalistic *Sefirot* are more substantial. They are the constituent elements of God's manifest personality, the very substance of the divine world. The mystic who meditates on the *Sefirot* is engaging with the inner life of God Himself in a way that is more direct and theosophical than the Dionysian ascent through the hierarchies.

Torah and Church: The practical path to God also differs. In Kabbalah, the path is through the meticulous observance and mystical interpretation of the Torah and its commandments (*mitzvot*). The performance of a *mitzvah* is believed to have a theurgic effect, directly influencing the flow of divine energy within the *Sefirotic* system and promoting cosmic harmony (*tikkun*)⁴¹. For Dionysius, the path is sacramental and liturgical, mediated through the "Ecclesiastical Hierarchy". The sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist are the primary means by which divine grace and deifying energy are transmitted to the faithful⁴². The Torah is the blueprint of the Kabbalistic cosmos; the Church is the vessel of salvation in the Dionysian universe.

4.3. The Speculative Hypothesis: *Hokhmah and the Logos*

We now turn to the central, speculative hypothesis of this article: the proposition that the *Sefirah Hokhmah* (Wisdom) in Kabbalah is structurally analogous to the Person of Christ as the *Logos* in Christian theology. This is a comparative, not a syncretic, exercise. Its goal is to use the comparison to illuminate the specific function of each principle within its own system. To make this comparison "reasonably acceptable", we must first define the conditions under which it can be made, then explore the structural analogies, and finally, re-assert the irreconcilable differences.

4.3.1. Defining the Conditions for a Plausible Comparison

For this analogical study to be academically sound and theologically respectful, three conditions must be strictly observed:

⁴⁰ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 67–90. Lossky explains the Essence-Energies distinction as the cornerstone of Orthodox theology, with its roots in the Cappadocians and Dionysius.

⁴¹ Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 3, 1157–1163. Tishby explains the theurgic dimension of the *mitzvot* as a central innovation of the Kabbalah.

⁴² Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Ch. II & III. Dionysius dedicates extensive sections to the mystical significance of Baptism and the Eucharist (Synaxis).

1. *Functional, Not Ontological, Identity*: The comparison must focus on the *function* or *structural role* of *Hokhmah* and the *Logos*. It does not propose an ontological identity. We are asking, “Do they do the same *job* in their respective metaphysical blueprints”? not “Are they the same *thing*”?

2. *Suspension of Exclusive Truth Claims*: The analysis must proceed from a phenomenological standpoint, temporarily bracketing the exclusive truth claims of each tradition. It acknowledges that for a Christian, the *Logos* is a unique and final revelation, and for a Kabbalist, the *Sefirot* are the true structure of divine life. The comparison operates at a meta-level of religious studies.

3. *Primacy of Incommensurability*: The analysis must conclude by highlighting the ultimate incommensurability of the two concepts, particularly regarding the Christian doctrines of Personhood and Incarnation. The goal is not to create a hybrid concept but to use the friction of comparison to generate insight.

4.3.2. Structural Analogies: The First Principle of Manifestation

With these conditions in place, we can identify several powerful structural analogies between *Hokhmah* and the *Logos*.

The “Beginning”: Both are identified as the primordial “beginning” of God’s self-revelation and creation. The Gospel of John famously opens, “In the beginning (*en archē*) was the Word (*Logos*)”⁴³. The Zohar, in its commentary on Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning...”), explicitly identifies this “beginning” (*reshit*) with the *Sefirah Hokhmah*. “The first thing of all was *reshit*, and this is the supernal *Hokhmah*”⁴⁴. In both systems, this principle is the first egress from the silent, unknowable Godhead (the Father / *Ein Sof*).

The Archetype of Creation: Both serve as the divine blueprint or intelligible form of the cosmos. The *Logos* in Hellenistic and Christian thought is the divine Reason, containing the ideal forms of all created things. St. Paul refers to Christ as the one “in whom all things were created, in heaven and on earth... all things were created through him and for him”⁴⁵. Similarly, *Hokhmah* is described in the Zohar as the primordial, undifferentiated point of thought that contains the seed of all subsequent emanations and all of creation in potential. It is the “primordial idea” or “cosmic thought” of God⁴⁶.

The Principle of Revelation: Both act as the primary agent through which the hidden God becomes known. The Father is known only through the Son (*Logos*). As John’s Gospel states, “No one has ever seen God; the

⁴³ John 1:1 (RSV).

⁴⁴ Zohar Hadash, 56d, on Song of Songs. See also Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, 252.

⁴⁵ Colossians 1:16 (RSV).

⁴⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 218. “Hokmah, ‘wisdom,’ is the primordial idea of God, in which the whole of creation is contained as a yet undifferentiated unity”.

only-begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known"⁴⁷. In Kabbalah, the unknowable *Ein Sof* is revealed only through the *Sefirot*, and *Hokhmah* is the very first moment of that revelation, the dawning of divine consciousness that makes all subsequent knowledge possible. *Hokhmah* is the "father" of the lower *Sefirot*, begetting *Binah* (Understanding), which articulates the potential inherent in *Hokhmah*.

Association with "Wisdom": The identification is explicit in their names. The *Logos* is frequently identified with the personified Wisdom (Hebrew: *Hokhmah*, Greek: *Sophia*) of the Old Testament Wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs 8:22-31), who declares, "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his way, before his works of old". Early Christian theologians like Origen and Athanasius systematically identified the *Logos* with this divine Wisdom⁴⁸. The *Sefirah Hokhmah* is, by definition, this very principle, elevated to a central position within the Godhead itself.

4.3.3. Irreconcilable Differences: Personhood vs. Attribute

Despite these compelling structural analogies, the differences are profound and ultimately define the boundaries between the two faiths.

The primary difference is *Personhood*. In Trinitarian theology, the *Logos* (the Son) is a distinct Person (*hypostasis*) within the Godhead, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is a "Thou" to the Father's "I," existing in an eternal relationship of love. The *Sefirah Hokhmah*, while sometimes personified with masculine symbolism as the "supernal father" (*Abba*), is not a distinct person in the Trinitarian sense. It is an attribute, a potency, an organ, or a dimension of the one God. While the *Sefirot* have their own dynamic life, they do not constitute a "social Trinity". The Jewish insistence on the absolute unity (*Yichud*) of God precludes such a formulation⁴⁹.

This leads directly to the second, and most critical, difference: Incarnation. The Christian faith hinges on the belief that the *Logos*, this divine Person, "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. This event, the *unio hypostatica* of divine and human natures in one person, is the ultimate scandal and glory of Christianity. It grounds salvation in a specific historical moment and a specific person. *Hokhmah* does not and cannot become incarnate. It remains a cosmic, metaphysical principle. While the righteous individual (*tzaddik*) might be

⁴⁷ John 1:18 (RSV, alternate reading).

⁴⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 191–193. Pelikan details the early Church's identification of the Johannine *Logos* with the *Sophia* of the Old Testament.

⁴⁹ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 140–143. Idel discusses the Kabbalistic concept of *Yichud* (unification) and its tension with the multiplicity of the *Sefirot*, a problem the Kabbalists constantly sought to resolve.

seen as a conduit for the light of *Hokhmah*, he never *becomes Hokhmah*. The ontological barrier between the divine principle and the human person remains intact.

Therefore, while *Hokhmah* and the *Logos* can be seen as analogous solutions to the problem of how the Infinite One produces a finite, intelligible world, they are embedded in fundamentally incompatible soteriological and theological narratives. The *Logos* points to a salvation achieved through faith in an incarnate God-man; *Hokhmah* points to a gnosis and cosmic harmony achieved through contemplation and theurgic practice within the framework of the Torah.

5. Conclusion: Two Paths to the Transcendent

The mystical systems of Dionysius the Areopagite and the Jewish Kabbalah represent two of the most sophisticated and enduring attempts in Western religious history to reconcile divine transcendence with divine immanence. Born of different worlds—one in the crucible of late antique Christian Neoplatonism, the other in the heart of medieval Jewish esotericism—they independently arrived at a similar architectural solution: a radically unknowable Godhead whose creative power flows into the world through a series of hierarchical emanations.

Their shared reliance on apophatic theology to guard the mystery of the divine essence, coupled with a rich cataphatic and symbolic language to describe the divine manifestations, demonstrates a common mystical logic. Both systems create a pathway for the human soul to ascend towards its source, not by a direct assault on the infinite, but by a disciplined journey through the mediated structures of revelation—the hierarchies for Dionysius, the *Sefirot* for the Kabbalists.

Yet, this comparative study also throws their profound differences into sharp relief. The Dionysian cosmos is Christocentric, oriented entirely towards the singular event of the Incarnation and mediated through the sacramental life of the Church. The Kabbalistic cosmos is theocentric and Torah-centric, focused on the inner dynamics of the Godhead as revealed in the eternal structure of the *Sefirot* and activated through the performance of the *mitzvot*.

The speculative comparison of the *Logos* and *Hokhmah* serves as a powerful test case. The structural parallels are undeniable: both are the “beginning”, the archetypal wisdom through which the hidden God creates and reveals Himself. But the divergence on the doctrines of Personhood and Incarnation reveals an unbridgeable theological chasm. The comparison is valuable not because it suggests an identity, but because it clarifies precisely what is unique to each tradition. It shows how a similar metaphysical problem can

be resolved in two profoundly different ways, one leading to the God-man on the Cross, the other to the intricate and dynamic Tree of Life.

Ultimately, Dionysius and the Kabbalists offer two distinct paths into the "luminous darkness" of the transcendent God. They stand as monumental testaments to the human spirit's enduring quest to name the unnamable and to build a bridge of meaning to the silent, infinite source of all being. Their differences are a vital reminder of the particularity of religious experience, while their confluences hint at a shared deep structure in the human encounter with the divine mystery.

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