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The Gods among Us: A Shared Recipe for Making Saints in Early Jewish and Daoist Hagiographies

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Abstract: This article examines the earthly journey of the saints in early Jewish and Daoist hagiographies. The major texts for comparative reading are *Sefer Shivchei Ha-Ar"i* and *Shenxian Zhuan*, namely, the foundation stones of each hagiographical tradition. Emphasis is laid on the most significant phases in the process of making saints while the candidates dwell in the worldly domain as quasi-divine beings: (1) Mystical Birth, (2) Life in Seclusion, and (3) Divine Encounters. During these stages of transition, the sages were imparted with the esoteric wisdom and the godly features that rendered them extraordinary exemplars of religiosity. My investigation demonstrates that this recipe is shared by both hagiographical traditions, despite the distance in time and space, to construct the image of saints, each expressed with culturally distinct characteristics of their own. I argue that both traditions display a pattern of human-centered sainthood instead of the divine-endorsed type—while the birth myth shows a discernible degree of predestined sagehood, painstaking periods, such as self-isolation and learning with the true masters, are more crucial to the sages' transformation of identity in the realm of Earth, the dynamic incubator that breeds holiness for the most qualified souls.

Keywords: hagiography; Kabbalah; Daoism; comparative mysticism; Isaac Luria; Ge Hong

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of saint veneration is a practice widely observed by cultures around the world; the rich literature of hagiographies produced thereof enables us to probe into the question of how the image of saints is portrayed by different traditions. In this research, I would like to look for answers to this question by the parallel reading of an unusual pair, namely, the early Jewish and the Daoist hagiographies. Indeed, the paucity of comparative studies on Jewish and Chinese thoughts may be justified by the scarcity of historical encounters or mutual influence between the two ancient civilizations.[1] Nonetheless, recent decades have witnessed increasing scholarly interest in searching beyond the familiar framework of comparing culturally related entities. The works by academic predecessors in this regard, such as Barbara Holdrege, Ji Zhang, Yair Lior, Robert Allinson, Martin Zwick, etc., have served as both an inspiration and an encouragement to my own project.[2] In the same vein, I wish to contribute a mite to the grand project of humanities to understand the "others" that fascinate "us", particularly via the transboundary dialogue between the Jewish and the Chinese cultures, which is still a budding domain yet shows great potentiality and calls for further scholastic endeavor.

Undoubtedly, a very distinct discrepancy between the two cultural entities is that Judaism has been very cautious about saint veneration or individual worship due to the second of the Ten Commandments against idolatry while the deification of extraordinary humans stands at the center of the Daoist literature. However, sainthood does exist in the Jewish culture under different manifestations, from the biblical heroes and Hellenistic martyrs to the exceptional rabbis of different periods,[3] as evidenced by the sporadic accounts of legendary curricula vitae.[4] The outburst of Jewish hagiographies came rather late in the seventeenth century when the first compilation *Sefer Shivchei Ha-Ar"i* [In Praise

of Isaac Luria] came into light. This compilation centers on the mystical rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–1572), also known as HaAri, one of the greatest figures in Judaism and the Jewish protagonist of this article. Both Luria's theological innovations and his legendary biography have cast a tremendous influence on the generations that followed. On the contrary, the Daoist side has favored hagiographical literature since the Han dynasty. The foundational compilations of Daoist hagiography are *Liexian Zhuan* [列仙传, Collective Biographies of Immortals], whose dating is still controversial,[5] and its successor *Shenxian Zhuan* [神仙传, Biographies of Divine Transcendents] by Ge Hong,[6] after which piles of other works followed throughout the dynasties.[7]

Since there are sufficient textual materials from each side for investigation, it is sensible to focus on the particularly representative ones of the two streams. Therefore, the main sources of this research are the foundation stones of hagiography on each side, namely: (1) *Sefer Shivchei Ha-Ar"i*, first published in 1629, a compilation of the miraculous life stories of the Safedian sage Isaac Luria, based on the letters written by Sholomon Shlomiel Dresnitz (b. 1572?), a Moravian Jew who immigrated to Safed in 1602;[8] (2) *Shenxian Zhuan*, a collection of legends on practitioners of Dao that successfully obtained eternal life, compiled by the significant Daoist adept Ge Hong (ca. 283–343/364),[9] that profoundly shaped the hagiographies written henceforth. Closely relevant texts, such as the autobiography by Luria's major disciple Hayyim Vital; *Shivchei HaBesh"t* [In Praise of Baal Shem Tov]; *Liexian Zhuan*; Ge Hong's *Baopuzi Neipian* [抱朴子内篇, Baopuzi Inner Chapters] and *Baopuzi Waipian* [Baopuzi Outer Chapters], etc., will be used as supplementary materials.

In the following sections, I will examine the life journey of the saints on Earth, featuring their transboundary interactions with messengers from Heaven. Emphasis is laid on the most significant phases in the process of making transcendence while the sages are still quasi-divine beings in the lower reality: (1) Mystical Birth; (2) Life in Seclusion; and (3) Divine Encounters with heavenly figures, be it angels, ancient sages, or God Himself/gods themselves. With this shared formula, my purpose is not to rewrite meticulous biographies of the saints for the various versions of their legends have already done so over the centuries. Instead, by investigating the crucial stages of transition that grant them esoteric knowledge and godly characteristics, I try to understand what "on earth" makes the saints extraordinary exemplars of religiosity. While the central motifs that constitute the marvelous life experience of these exceptional figures are expressed with culturally distinct features, I discovered that both traditions display a pattern of human-centered sainthood instead of the divine-endorsed type—while the birth myth shows a discernible degree of predestined sagehood, painstaking periods, such as self-isolation and learning with the true masters, are more crucial to the sages' transformation of identity in the realm of Earth, the promising land of in-betweenness and the dynamic incubator that breeds holiness for the most qualified souls.

2. Mythical Birth

Let us turn to the outset of the heroes' earthly journey. In both the Jewish and the Daoist contexts under examination, the motif of mythical birth appears frequently in the biographies of saints. Disregarding cultural origin, a hagiographical compilation seems incomplete when this element is missing. Unsurprisingly, *Shivchei HaAr"i* opens with the birth legend of the holy rabbi Isaac Luria, the central figure of myth in early modern Kabbalah:

> There once lived a man in Israel, the glorious land, and his name was Rabbi Solomon, of blessed memory. And this man was whole-hearted and upright and God-fearing and one who shunned evil. Now it came to pass one day, as he was in the synagogue studying by himself, that Elijah the Prophet—may he be remembered for good—appeared to him, saying: "Know that I am a messenger of God and I come to bring you tidings that your wife will conceive and bear you a son, and you shall call him Isaac. And he will set about to deliver Israel from evil spirits and through him many souls, now in a transformed state, will

> be brought to their perfection. He will reveal the hidden mysteries of the Torah and the meaning of the Zohar, and his fame will go forth throughout the world. Therefore take special heed that you do not circumcise him till I myself come and be the child's godfather."
>
> And it came to pass that when he finished speaking he disappeared, and Rabbi Solomon remained all that day in the synagogue, weeping and praying to God. And thus he spoke: "Master of the universe, fulfill the good tidings that You have brought me. And though I am not worthy, do it for Your sake and not for mine. And do not let my sins cause these good tidings to be of no effect." That night he went home but he did not reveal this matter even to his wife. And Solomon knew his wife and she conceived and bore a son, and the whole house was filled with light and the man rejoiced in his offspring. (Deraznitz 1970, pp. 5–6)

This miraculous event took place prior to the conception of the child and prophesies the sage's greatness in his upcoming life, reminding the readers of the famous Christian scene of Annunciation,[10] although it is not the mother who receives the good news. Instead, the encounter is between Luria's father rabbi Solomon and the biblical prophet Elijah, who usually plays the role of a divine messenger in the Jewish tradition.[11] The concise description of Luria's father rabbi Solomon and his prayer portrays a pious repenting Jew, spiritually qualified to receive the heavenly tidings from the biblical immortal and chosen to bear one of the greatest figures in the history of the Jewish faith. The revelation scene not only introduces the name of the child but also foretells the central axis of Isaac's adult life—he is born with the messianic mission to restore Israel to a collective perfection through purifying the souls of his fellowmen. The esoteric knowledge of the Torah and the Zohar is the prerequisite for the physician of the soul to heal the cosmos. Moreover, the miraculous light that filled the house at the sage's birth reminds us of the same midrashic theme, a prime example of which is the birth of Moses. According to the Talmud (Sotah 12a), the rabbinic tradition that designates a divine light to Moses' birth originates from the discussion in a *baraita* [oral traditions external to the Mishnah] that establishes an inter-textual relation between two verses within the Pentateuch—Moses' mother saw her newborn son was *good* [tov] (Exodus 2:2) while the scripture used the same wording when God saw that the light He created was *good* [tov] (Genesis 1:4)—hence, Moses was born with the divine light. In our context here, Moses being the hidden light of the nation to save his fellowmen from gentiles' oppression, as implied by the Talmudic rendering of light, greatly echoes with Luria's messianic mission among his own generation.[12]

The *Shivchei* narrative follows that on the day of the boy's circumcision ceremony at the synagogue, the father wept and prayed again as Elijah did not show up until an hour into the ceremony:

> And even as he wept, behold, Elijah appeared to him, saying: "Refrain from weeping, O servant of the Lord. Approach the altar and prepare your sacrifice. Take my seat and I myself will circumcise the child. For I did but tarry to know whether you would keep my commandments and hearken unto me.
>
> Then Elijah took the child from the woman and circumcised him, but no one saw him save the father. And as soon as the child arrived home, he was healed as though he had been circumcised many years before. (Deraznitz 1970, p. 6)

The fact that Elijah himself performed the circumcision on the baby, beyond his traditional legendary role of merely attending the ceremony, further testifies to the unusual destiny of the newborn. Interestingly, for all attendants at the ceremony, what happened seemed to be an invisible *brit milah* [circumcision ceremony] since only the father could see the heavenly messenger, adding to the legendary aura of the scene.

As a prototype for Jewish biographies in the modern era, *Sefer Shivchei HaAr"i* greatly influenced subsequent works of this genre, of which *Shivchei HaBesh"t* is a prime example. This compilation centers around the life and mystical deeds of rabbi Israel ben Eleazer (1698–1760), also known as Baal Shem Tov or Besht, who was rendered by tradition as the

founder of Hasidism. In the Beshtian birth myth, Rabbi Eleazer, father of the Besht, was captured by bandits to a country away from his wife and hometown. Years had passed when he eventually received the opportunity to return:[13]

> While he was on his journey, Elijah the Prophet revealed himself to him and said: "Because of the merit of your behavior a son will be born to you who will bring light to Israel, and in him this saying will be fulfilled: *Israel in whom I will be glorified.*". (Isaiah 49:3)
>
> He came home and with God's help he found his wife still alive. The Besht was born to them in their old age, when both of them were close to a hundred. (The Besht said that it had been impossible for his father to draw his soul from heaven until he had lost his sexual desire.) (Ben Samuel [1970] 1993, p. story 3)

In a very similar manner to the birth account of Luria, the biographer of Baal Shem Tov depicted the annunciation of the sage delivered by Elijah to the father of the child, though without much detail of the father's prayer or his constant repenting introspection. Interestingly, the theme of light also repeats itself here as in the Lurianic story, hinting at the messianic destiny of the Hasidic Master.

Additionally, among the members of the inner cycle of Luria, his most prominent follower Hayyim Vital reports a variation of the same theme. Interestingly, in Vital's autobiography, where he displays overwhelming egocentrism and emphasizes greatly his own holiness, the autobiographer did not copy the pattern of the Elijah-style revelation (though he does claim to have a close relation with the prophet) but recorded a humbler version of the birth myth:

> When my father and teacher z"l [of blessed memory] was living outside the land of Israel, before he migrated there, a great scholar, whose name was R. Hayyim Ashkenazi, was a guest in his home. He said to him: Know that in the future you will travel to the land of Israel to live there, and a son will be born to you there. Call him Hayyim after me. He will be a great scholar, and there will be none like him in his generation. (Vital and Safrin 1999, p. 43)

The abovementioned accounts and the biblical narratives of the same theme display the mythical birth with various details concerning the identity of the messenger, the fertility of the parents, the time and space of the annunciation, etc. Shared elements are usually the naming of the unborn child and, most significantly, the prophecy of his extraordinary achievements in this life that starts at this narrative point.

On the other hand, the motif of birth is also somewhat downplayed in the *Shenxian Zhuan*. Given the general Daoist doctrine that destiny is at one's own hand (Ge 2011, pp. 519–20)[14] and Ge Hong's particular task of showing that *xian*-hood is accessible to every human being via certain practices, the author makes more efforts to broadcast the effectiveness of the techniques and advocate the diligence of the practicing adepts rather than showing how the protagonists are already chosen before they enter the earthly realm.[15] Nonetheless, in the extant corpus of *Shenxian Zhuan*, the account of Laozi seems an exceptional case that provides a relatively rich discussion on the sage's unusual birth:[16]

> Laozi (Master Lao, or the Old Master) had Chong'er as his name, Boyang as his style. He was a native of Quren hamlet, Ku district, in the kingdom of Chu. His mother felt a great meteor enter her, and thus she conceived. But, although he received his pneumas [气, *qi*] from Heaven, since he was born into the Li family he took Li as his surname.[17] (R. Campany 2002, p. 194; Ge 2017, pp. 22–27)

Following the typical pattern of Chinese biographical writing, the narrative on Laozi starts with his personal information, including appellations[18] and hometown. Although Ge Hong's core argument here is that even the godly Laozi was a human being who achieved deathless *xian*-hood via practices, the biographer still preserves the divine conception of the Master in the narrative.[19] The passage is followed by a list of different versions of the sage's birth with which the author is familiar but downright disagrees:

> Some say Laozi was born before Heaven and Earth were. Some say he was produced from celestial cloud-souls or essences and that he must have been some sort of deity or numen. Some say his mother carried him seventy-two years before finally giving birth and that when he was born he emerged by piercing through her left armpit; and that he was born with white hair, hence was called Laozi. Some say that his mother had no husband and that Laozi was the surname of her family. Some say that his mother gave birth to him under a plum tree and that, being able to speak at birth, he pointed at the tree and said, "I'll take this as my surname."[20] (R. Campany 2002, p. 194; Ge 2017, pp. 22–27)

Historically, the apotheosis and worship of Laozi began in the Han dynasty. By the time of Ge Hong in the Six Dynasties, the image of Laozi was at a peak of legendary construction, overdrawing the sage's godhood.[21] This passage demonstrates the author's familiarity with the birth variations of Laozi, none implying a common conception.

After listing the multiple identities (as renowned figures) that the Master took during his continuous transformations throughout history since the era of the ancient Three Sovereigns (Ge 2017, pp. 22–27; R. Campany 2002, pp. 194–96),[22] Ge Hong vigorously refutes the popular trend of over-deifying Laozi:

> These sorts of speculations are the product of recent generations of practitioners, lovers of what is marvelous and strange, who have created them out of a desire to glorify and venerate Laozi. To discuss it from a basis in fact, I would say that Laozi was someone who was indeed particularly advanced in his attainment of the Dao but that he was not of another kind of being than we. […] From this it can be seen that the view that Laozi was originally a deity or numen must stem from practitioners of the Dao of shallow views who wished to make Laozi into a divine being of a kind different from us, so as to cause students in later generations to follow him; what they failed to realize was that this would cause people to disbelieve that long life is something attainable by practice. Why is this? If you maintain that Laozi was someone who attained the Dao, then people will exert themselves to imitate him. If you maintain that he was a deity or numen, of a kind different from us, then his example is not one that can be emulated by practice. (R. Campany 2002, pp. 196–97; Ge 2017, pp. 28–31)

Certainly, this does not mean that Ge Hong intended to dismiss the godhood of Laozi. Instead, the *Inner Chapters*, a more systematic guidebook to *xian*-hood by the same author, testifies to the bifold image of Laozi that combines humanity and divinity. As Campany summarizes, the image of Laozi is multi-faceted, although not lengthy, in *Inner Chapters*, which treats Laozi as "(a) a celestial deity or deified transcendent of whom mediating adepts seek longevity-inducing visions and to whom alchemy-practicing adepts direct offerings; (b) the possibility of achieving transcendence while nevertheless retaining certain ties to the social world; (c) the very synechdoche of the quest for transcendence, the prototype and ideal of all practitioners who seek to transform themselves into deathless beings; (d) the source of important methods, texts, and talismans used by transcendence seekers; these include but are not limited to alchemical methods" (R. Campany 2002, pp. 205–8). When the author collected the hagiographical materials that were passed down to him in oral or written form, different tales had already gained popularity and it was not possible to overlook these myths. Yet meanwhile, against the trend of apotheosizing Laozi by diminishing his humanity, Ge Hong sticks to his own agenda and tries to neutralize the birth myth of the sage with moderate deification.[23]

In short, while the motif of birth myth is given due attention in both the Jewish and the Daoist hagiographies, it is also downplayed by the authors to a discernible extent, particularly in comparison to traditions that emphasize the inherent holiness of the human embodiment of the high deity, a primal example of which is Christianity. At this point, we see that the sages in the earthly realm are entirely human, though their godhood enables them to connect the upper and the lower worlds, even before their own physicality. The

slight tinge of predestined sainthood endorses the extraordinary life of the sages; yet, on the other hand, the implication here is that it will surely be outshone by the persistent probing into the esoteric wisdom and the righteous deeds of the saints on their way towards true holiness.

3. Life in Seclusion

Mystical seclusion or solitude is another significant element in both hagiographical traditions. Being alone in far-off lands may be a long period before one's final enlightenment or a short-term withdrawal from the social network as one seeks inspiration from on high.[24] Despite the duration of social retreatment, such hermetic experience is not just a moment of contemplative enlightenment inspired by the divine but also a liminal state of empowerment for the adepts to enhance their esoteric skills, an accelerator in the making of transcendence. In other words, the sage's life of minimum social connection is a crucial phase when wonderous journeys into the sacred realm take place with high frequency, whether spiritually or physically.

For the kabbalists in general, to be alone with God is often referred to as *hitbodedut* [seclusion], an important meditative practice not limited to the Lurianic school.[25] As Moshe Idel points out, the biblical and the Talmudic traditions prior to Kabbalah preserved "solitude" to the sacred men of ancient times, like Moses on Mt. Sinai, the high priest in the Holy of Holies, etc., when they were separated from this world and alone with the divine presence.[26] This conventional approach saw changes in the ecstatic school of Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291) who, under Sufi influence, started to regard *hitbodedut* as a practical method of concentration towards higher spirituality (Idel 1988, pp. 103–8).[27] Works by the great Safedian sage Moses Cordovero (1522–1570) significantly helped disseminate this type of *hitbodedut* among the wider public through his incorporation of such a contemplative method into the ethical writings as a religious value (Idel 1988, p. 133).[28]

The very limited documentary materials on Isaac Luria show that he also dedicated a great portion of his short stay in this world to solitude. Soon after the undue death of Luria's father while he was still a child, his mother took him to her brother in Egypt for shelter. It was probably in the 1560s that Luria lived alone for about six years on a small island on the Nile called Jazirat al-Rawda, owned by his wealthy uncle Moderchai Franses, who was a tax farmer in Cairo (Fine 2003, pp. 29, 35). Shlomiel described Luria's isolation multiple times in his enthusiastic letters sent to the Jewish communities in the diaspora—the textual basis for *Shivchei HaAr"i*, each with different details while the key factors remain the same:

> After marriage he went in solitude with our honorable teacher and rabbi Bezalel Ashkenazi for seven years. Then he secluded himself for six years. He continued to sanctify himself with superfluous holiness for seven consecutive years in a house built on the Nile River. He was alone and no one was with him, and he did not converse with anyone. On Shabbat eve close to darkness, he came to his house and did not converse with anyone, not even with his wife—except for great necessity and in the holy language [Hebrew] which is brief and elevating. There he received the Holy Spirit, and Elijah the Prophet z"l revealed to him the chapters and he taught him the secrets of the Torah. Every night his *neshamah* [soul] ascended and legions of ministering angels came to guard him on the way until they send him into the Heavenly Yeshiva [school for traditional studies of Judaism]. They would ask him which yeshiva he chose to sit at. He once chose the yeshiva of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, once the yeshiva of Rabbi Akiva, once the yeshiva of Rabbi Eliezer the Great, and once the yeshiva of the prophets.[29] (Deraznitz 1991, pp. 4–5)

Here, the duration of Luria's isolation is measured with great exaggeration as the total already covers nearly half of his short lifespan of 38 years.[30] It is still hard to tell the "when, how, and why" of this period accurately, although there is indeed some time in the 1560s during which little record is found of Luria's activities. Yet we can be sure that

this Egyptian period preceded Luria's settling in Safed, where he established an unparalleled reputation in the formation of early modern Kabbalah and became the teacher of Hayyim Vital (Fine 2003, pp. 36–37).[31] When the Master visited home on Shabbat during his self-desocialization, even the minimum social interactions—conversations with the closest family member—seemed a mundane interruption to his ascetic lifestyle so he tried to avoid it as much as possible or sanctify it by using Hebrew only.[32] Undoubtedly, what empowered Luria the most was his initiation into the sacred wisdom of the godhead. Not only does he receive first-hand enlightenment from Elijah but his soul, guided by the angels, also ascends every night to the godly yeshiva of the greatest rabbis in Jewish history. The fact that he is free to choose any school among them indicates that the living sage is guaranteed a position alongside his predecessors in the celestial academy above.

Another version of the same story in *Shivchei HaAr"i* attributes Luria's decision on seclusion to his studying the holy books of secrets:

> One day, as he sat praying in the synagogue, a man sat next to him. The rabbi turned and saw a book in his hand in which he beheld heavenly mysteries. After the prayer, the rabbi said to the man: "Tell me what is written in this book". The man answered, saying: "What shall I say, inasmuch as the Lord hath withheld honor from me. For I am of the Marranos. Seeing that everyone prayed from a book, in my embarrassment, I also took a book, but I know not what is written therein". Said the rabbi to him: "In that case, sell me this book and I will give you a prayer book". He then said: "Do I lack money that I should sell you this book? Rather ask your father-in-law to remit the taxes on my merchandise and I will give you the book". As the rabbi was eager for the book, he entreated his father-in-law, who agreed to his request and obtained the book for him.
>
> The rabbi studied this book and the Book of Splendor—the Zohar—with all his might while he fasted and afflicted himself. Through these acts he merited that in dreams at night he would sometimes be told that his understanding of a passage of the Zohar was not correct. Again, at other times, he would be told that he understood correctly, but not in accordance with the meaning of Rabbi Simeon bar Johai. At long last he was told that if he truly desired to understand the text, he must increase his self-affliction. This he did.
>
> And when he saw that he was on the right path, he retired to the Nile region in Egypt for six years, and in holiness and purity occupied himself with study day and night. Thereby he merited that each night his soul was raised up and asked to which heavenly academy it wished to ascend—to the academy of Rabbi Eliezer the Great, or the academy of Rabbi Akiba, or to that of Rabbi Simeon bar Johai. And withersoever his soul desired, there it was taken and awesome mysteries were revealed to it. When morning came he had not forgotten anything and would reveal all to his disciples. (Deraznitz 1970, p. 8)

It can be inferred from the text that this incident occurred during Luria's early adulthood in Egypt. Interestingly, the hero's encounter with the mysterious book in the synagogue almost led the readers to an Elijah-style revelation of secret knowledge before the unnamed man revealed his very this-worldly concern to have taxes remitted. The narrative indicates that Luria's delving into the sea of the mysterious book and the Zohar directly triggered his decision to live in solitude.[33] However, it seems that studying the concealed secrets was both the reason for and the result of Luria's isolation. As a young man, Luria studied at the academy of David ben Solomon ibn Abi Zimra (1479–1573), one of the most eminent Jewish scholars of his time. It is known that in addition to being a prominent legalist of halacha, ibn Zimra also composed several treatises on Kabbalah. Evidence show that Luria was not at the periphery of ibn Zimra's circle but a core member of it and he was well trained in both halakhic and rabbinic studies. Although it is not clear whether Luria already studied Kabbalah with ibn Zimra, it is sensible to assume such influence before his life as a recluse. The period of seclusion is very likely when Luria studied the

Zohar intensively and started his own writings on mystical matters, even though little of his teachings were recorded by himself (Fine 2003, pp. 32–37).[34] Moreover, this version notably adds that Luria transmits the secret knowledge to his disciples after visiting the heavenly schools. Such transmission, alongside his frequent inter-territorial journeys between worlds, depicts the sage as a living Elijah among the earthly scholars who await his enlightenment. His messianic mission, though not overt in this picture, further elevates the sage's status to an even higher position than an angelic messenger.

According to Idel's research, the sixteenth-century Safedian Kabbalah inherited "the traditions and the practices of the ecstatic Kabbalists dealing with *hitbodedut* as mental concentration and seclusion" and served as a crucial "transmitter of the earlier techniques to both Sabbateanism and Hasidism" (Idel 2000, p. 199). Therefore, supplementing Luria's narrative, we may well juxtapose the account of the Besht's life in seclusion to better understand the significance of being alone with God in the curriculum vitae of Jewish mystics. Akin to Luria, the Baal Shem Tov also spent a considerable period in seclusion after marriage:

> The Besht arranged for a place in which she could live, and he secluded himself in the great mountains. She made her living in this way: two or three times a week she came to him with a horse and wagon; he would quarry clay, and she would cart it to town. In this way she made her living.
>
> The Besht fasted hafsakah for long periods. When he wanted to eat he dug a small pit and put in flour and water, which was then baked by the heat of the sun. This was his only food after fasting. All these days he was in solitude. (Ben Samuel [1970] 1993, p. story 8)
>
> […] He lived in a small village and made his living by keeping a tavern. After he brought brandy to his wife he would cross the river Prut and retire into seclusion in a house-like crevice that was cut into the mountain. He used to take one loaf of bread for one meal and eat once a week. He endured this way of life for several years. On the eve of the holy Sabbath he used to return home. (Ben Samuel [1970] 1993, p. story 19)

According to the narrative, not long after his wedding, the Hasidic Master arranged a place for his wife to stay while he himself went into seclusion in the great mountains. Obviously, it was not for the ease of quarrying clay in order to make a living but to ensure that the sage's spiritual communion with the godhead via fasts and prayers would meet with minimum distraction, as in Luria's story. From both biographies, some characteristics of the sacred solitude could be induced: (a) such temporary asceticism does not conflict with marriage despite the biblical teaching "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18) and the wife of the sage is not known to oppose her husband's decision (even being supportive in Besht's case); (b) coming home for Shabbat enjoys higher priority than staying in complete seclusion and is not considered an interruption to the rhythm of self-withdrawal.

Post-Beshtian mystics continued to value seclusion as an important preparation for those who wish to surf the waves of the hidden wisdom and this idea became one eminent feature of Hasidism. Variations, like Nachman of Bratslav's (1772–1810) treatment of *hitbodedut* as a means of mystical meditation, further popularized solitude as a daily practice of elevated communication with God instead of a liminal status for an extended period in desocialization.[35] After all, in the widest sense, "to be alone with God" is reflected in many kabbalistic techniques of spiritual concentration, disregarding duration. Worth noting, other communicative techniques, such as unification with the holy dead, also require a certain degree of self-seclusion (i.e., at the graveyard) for the proper elevation of the soul to take place (to be discussed anon). In short, the practice of *hitbodedut*, whether as a phase of continued isolation or a temporary state of meditative concentration, appears to be an individualistic approach towards higher religiosity, a disjunctive method very different from the biblical and rabbinic tradition, which is essentially conjunctive (Idel 2000, p. 211).

Now let us look at the Daoist sources where the practice of self-seclusion also enjoys great significance. Akin to the Jewish treatment of solitude as being alone with divinity, the Daoist seclusion largely denotes the adepts' attempt to be "alone with the Dao." A big portion of the *xian*-hood achievers recorded in *Shenxian Zhuan* have lived in isolation at certain points in their earthly life[36] as it is one of the central practices for the adepts to cultivate their inner world and obtain higher levels of transcendence. For Ge Hong particularly, to live in isolation (usually in remote mountains) is vital to his multivalent archetype of an ideal man that integrates both Confucian and Daoist spirits.

Before turning to the hermetic exemplars in *Shenxian Zhuan*, it is important to first understand Ge Hong's general view on seclusion, which is elaborated more comprehensively in *Baopuzi Outer Chapters*. While the title of the work implies the Confucian penchant for "entering the world" as it discusses the "external matters", the book opens with Ge Hong's straightforward support for the hermetic lifestyle, as stated explicitly in the first two chapters. The first chapter, *Jiadun* [嘉遁, Joyful Eremitism], presents the debate between the imaginary figures Mr. Huaibing and Mr. Fushi on whether to live in seclusion. The author, via the arguments made by Mr. Huaibing, articulates four major reasons for choosing life in isolation over pursuing a career in the court: (a) the pursuit of wealth and an official career is a path full of dangers; therefore, seclusion keeps the body away from physical and mental harms; (b) there are enough talents to serve the court already; (c) he lacks the ability to administer the country but only knows to embrace the classics and write books; (d) he prefers a free and unfettered way of life (Ge 2013a, pp. 1–46). *Yimin* [逸民, Hermitic People], the chapter following *Jiadun*, further clarifies the positive effects of the hermits on the society, directly or indirectly, through the dialogue between an official and a recluse: (a) the recluses voluntarily opt for a simple and humble life and pursue tranquility and nonaction so their virtues cleanse the social climate and make themselves models for morality; (b) they can participate in educational activities and cultivate talents for the country even in remote mountains; (c) the fame and influence of the recluses automatically involve them in the political scene and engage them indirectly into the interior and military affairs (Ge 2013a, pp. 47–86).

These chapters well exemplify Ge Hong's tremendous efforts to neutralize the major discrepancy between the Confucian and the Daoist ideologies, as eminent in the whole *Outer Chapters*. Traditionally, Confucianism advocates a very active approach towards political matters and the intellectuals are encouraged to serve in the court as a major means of self-actualization. On the other hand, the Daoist thinkers take physical and spiritual self-preservation as their foremost task and do not prioritize one's official career over the pursuit of Dao in non-political ways. Ge Hong's view on seclusion integrates the Confucian and the Daoist polars with an inclination towards the latter, pointing out that to reside in remote mountains for self-cultivation is also a means to make a contribution to the society and the regime,[37] thus dissolving the conflict between the two ideologies.

The reasons for his argument are embedded in the socio-historical milieu of the Jin dynasty, a chaotic era suffering from the constantly changing regimes after the fall of the Han dynasty, witnessing countless fatuous rulers, frequent wars, famines, disasters, and continual peasant uprisings. The absence of a unified polity with stable sovereignty dismissed the reverence for Confucian values, which could no longer function as the guiding principle for state administration, disappointing the literati who were believers of the central Confucian idea to "cultivate oneself, regulate one's family, govern the state, then lead the world to peace and justice [修身齐家治国平天下]."[38] Yet, on the bright side, the collapse of Confucian dominance made room for the blossom of other trends. The hermetic ideology of Daoism to live in tranquility undisturbed by external conditions, as well exemplified by Zhuangzi,[39] was brought to the foreground in such a socio-historical climate and became a major alternative for many to fulfill their interrupted self-realization or simply to shun the "physical and mental harms."[40] However, amplified escapism added to the collapse of the bureaucratic order while the provocative Daoist thinking of self-indulgence further corrupted the upper class. Therefore, to reconstruct the social order was an urgent need.

Ge Hong was among the intellectuals who took on the responsibility to find a solution to the social crisis, mainly by combining both Confucian and Daoist ethics. According to his hybrid ideology, the expediency of escapism is warded off by the recluses' indirect contribution to the state and the wellbeing of the people, concomitantly easing the tension between the priority to preserve one's physical and spiritual integrity in seclusion and the social responsibility imposed on the educated elites.[41]

In other words, Ge Hong's advocation for living in seclusion and making transcendence was his solution to offer the literati, including himself, the utmost protection and freedom in a time of crisis. Although both Confucian and Daoist thoughts relate to seclusion as an opportunity for self-cultivation, the former approaches this notion as a passive and temporary withdrawal in one's official career while the latter actively chooses isolation as an access channel to a higher state of existence.[42] Ge Hong's overt preference for the Daoist mode of seclusion is further explained in the *Autobiography* (which is also the epilogue) of *Outer Chapters*, arguing that Dao is not confined in the mountains and forests yet ancient practitioners resided there to shun the earthly noises and maintain the equanimity of the mind (Ge 2013b, pp. 1136–37)—such was the way to make transcendence. Accordingly, *Shenxian Zhuan* testifies to this idea with an impressive amount of immortals that have lived in seclusion during their earthly life.[43] Unexceptionally, this period serves as a crucial liminality for all these adepts in their pursuit of *xian*-hood; the main purposes are to (a) make elixir; (b) study the sacred texts; (c) concentrate on the inner-self through contemplation; and (d) learn the esoteric skills with a divine master who already obtained transcendence (or at least longevity).[44] These elements appear in different variations and combinations and the story of Zuo Ci is a relatively inclusive example:

> Zuo Ci, styled Yuanfang, was a native of Lujiang. From his youth he understood the Five Classics and thoroughly penetrated the principles of interpreting astral pneumas. Seeing that the fortunes of the Han house were about to decline, he sighed and said, "As we move into this declining astral configuration, those who hold eminent offices are in peril, and those of lofty talent will die. Winning glory in this present age is not something to be coveted." So he studied arts of the Dao. He understood particularly well how to summon the six *jia* spirits, how to dispatch ghosts and other spirits, and how to sit down and call for the traveling canteen. During his meditations on Heaven's Pillar Mountain, he obtained the Scripture of Nine Elixirs and the Scripture of Gold Liquor from inside a cave; these were methods from the Central Scripture of Grand Purity. He became capable of transforming into a myriad different forms.[45] (R. Campany 2002, p. 279; Ge 2017, pp. 197–98)

As a master of esoteric arts from Eastern Han, Zuo Ci has a special relationship with the Ge family. He was the teacher of Ge Xuan (i.e., the elder brother of Ge Hong's grandfather), who took Zheng Yin as his disciple, and Zheng Yin later became the teacher of Ge Hong. In this way, the transmission of the esoteric scriptures on making elixir reached Ge Hong (Ge 2011, pp. 110–12).[46]

Given the socio-historical milieu explained previously, another recurrent motif in the seclusion stories is the adepts' negative attitude towards official careers, frequently articulated by their abandonment of or refusal of court positions and unpleasant confrontation with the governor or emperor. Liu Gen is such a case:

> Liu Gen, styled Jun'an, was a native of the capital at Chang'an. As a youth he understood the Five Classics. During the second year of the *suihe* period of Han Emperor Cheng's reign, he was selected as a Filial and Incorrupt and was made a Gentleman of the Interior. Later he left the world behind and practiced the Way. He entered a cave on Mount Songgao that was situated directly above a sheer cliff over fifty thousand feet high. Winter or summer, he wore no clothing. The hair on his body grew one to two feet long. His facial complexion was like that of a lad of fourteen or fifteen. His eyes were deep-set, and he had a thick beard and

> temple hair; these were yellowed and were three to four inches long. Whenever one sat with him, at some point he would suddenly change his appearance, so that he wore a tall cap and a black gown; yet one would not be aware that he was donning clothes.
>
> According to a remark once made by Commandant Heng, one of Heng's ancestors was born in the same year as Liu Gen. During the era of Wang Mang, Heng repeatedly sent envoys with invitations to Liu, but Liu was unwilling to go. Heng then sent an adjutant, Wang Zhen, to ask after his welfare, but Liu made no reply. Heng tried once more, sending his supervisor of labor, Zhao Gong, to the mountain to see Liu and pay his respects. Liu said only, "Please give my apology to the Commandant", nothing more. (R. Campany 2002, p. 240; Ge 2017, pp. 105–9)

Liu Gen's course of life resonates with that of Ge Hong as they are both among the sages well trained in Confucian classics, dedicated to official careers for self-realization in their early years, and turned to the unsociable pursuit of Dao eventually. The author comes from an aristocratic family of military leaders who had been serving in the court since Western Han. As a child, Ge Hong lived a well-off and carefree life until age thirteen when his father died and the family fell into poverty, forcing him to complete hard labor in order to make ends meet. He started learning the Confucian classics only from age sixteen, which was quite late for a Chinese erudite. Meanwhile, he was greatly interested in preserving the body and practicing various methods of esoteric arts towards transcendence and became a student of the Daoist master Zheng Yin. When Shi Bing and Zhang Chang rose up in revolt in 303 CE, Ge Hong, in his early twenties, was appointed the temporary commander [将兵都尉] and contributed greatly to the suppression of the uprising, hence receiving the title "General of Appeasing the Waves" [伏波将军]. His military career had several chances to prosper yet he refused to take high offices and opted for an unsociable life to write books and cultivate the self already in his thirties. In his later years, Ge Hong settled down in Mt. Luofu as Deng Yue, the regional inspector of Guangzhou, supported him with ingredients for alchemical explorations.[47] In short, Ge Hong's own résumé was an archetype of a recluse story: a Confucian scholar and military leader disillusioned by his career in officialdom who willingly turned to the Daoist pursuit of transcendence.

Moreover, some hermits in *Shenxian Zhuan* appear as unconventional variations of the same motif and they are worth mentioning: Zhao Qu went into isolation due to a contagious disease (leprosy); Kong Yuanfang retreated to practice dietary avoidance in a basement dug by himself at the bank of a river and people did not know his whereabouts; Sun Deng dug a pit in the ground in the mountains and sat there to play *qin* [a string instrument] and read the *Book of Changes*, etc.[48]

To recap, in both Jewish and Daoist hagiographies, self-seclusion is a crucial period that empowers the living sages with divine knowledge and esoteric skills. It offers the saints-in-making liminal experience that imitates ordinary earthly living to the least degree. In this state of in-betweenness, the sages are both within and beyond the lower realm, with one step into the higher domain but not there yet.

4. Divine Encounters

Encountering the divine, whether angels, ancient sages, or God Himself/gods themselves, is probably the most significant booster for the making of saints while they remain candidates on Earth for heavenly positions. Such experience is an important channel of communication between the mundane world and the sacred realm and only the worthy can remain intact and benefit greatly from it.

In the Lurianic visitation stories, our Master takes a multivalent role, which is both passive and active.[49] As we have seen above in the section of the birth myth, being the object of visitation, Luria encountered Elijah both before his birth and at his circumcision ceremony. The angelic messenger was drawn by the sage's inborn purity attributed to the essence of his soul. At this point, the holiness of the infant was not yet a result of righteous deeds but a kind of chosenness embedded in the exalted status of his soul, which

is rooted in the Primordial Adam from where a chain of holy bodies was born throughout the Jewish history.

However, as the panorama of his life unrolled, the activeness of the Master's role in the visitation accounts became more eminent. As the subject of visitation, Luria had the power to commune freely with the ancient scholars (though they passed long before his own time) when he had questions concerning the holy scriptures and initiate visits to the heavenly court via different ascension techniques. One central practice is the *yihud* [pl. *yihudim*; unification], namely, a mystical technique to unify the male and the female attributes of the realm above, originated centuries before the school of Luria yet was tremendously popularized by this Safedian circle.[50] Via such method, a great *tsaddiq* [pl. *tsaddiqim*; righteous], like Isaac Luria, could communicate with a prophet or a *tanna* [rabbinic sage from the Mishnaic period]; the purpose was usually for enlightenment on his studies of the Zohar.

The following scene of sacred unification depicts Luria's marvelous capability at the gravesite of the ancient pair of sages Shmaya and Avtalon (1st century BCE) in Gush Halav in the vicinity of Safed:

> Whenever he desired to speak with a prophet or a certain *tanna*, he would travel to his grave and lay himself down upon it with outstretched arms and feet, "putting his mouth upon his mouth…" [2 Kings 4:34], as did Elisha with Habakkuk. He would concentrate upon a *yihud*, and elevate the *nefesh, ruah* and *neshamah* of this *tsaddiq* through the mystery of the Female Waters… He would bind his [own] *nefesh*, *ruah*, and *neshamah* to those of the *tsaddiq*, and bring about supernal unification. By means of the yihud, the soul of this *tsaddiq* would be invested with a new light, greater than that which he had previously [during his life]. In this way, the dry bones that lie in the grave revived: the *nefesh*, *ruah*, and *neshamah* of that *tsaddiq* descended to his bones, bringing him to actual life, [and] speaking with him [Luria] as a man speaks to his neighbor, revealing to him all the secrets of the Torah concerning which he asks of him. All of these yihudim are in my possession, written down, praised be God. (Fine 2003, p. 284; Deraznitz 1991, pp. 8–9)

To add to the messianic aura embedded in this rite, Luria's performance triggered a reenactment of the dry bones scene from Ezekiel 37. With many sages interred in its environs, the sixteenth-century Safed became a city shared by the living and the holy deceased and, therefore, "a natural locus for visionary contact with the dead" (Chajes 2012, pp. 33–34). Thus, the gravesite is undoubtedly also a privileged location for *yihud* as it is "where the contrasted poles of Heaven and Earth met" (Brown 2015, p. 3).[51] Here, sensory disturbance from this world was cut off so the living sage could experience a mystical contemplative rite of passage by taking a transitory journey to the meta-realm.

In this scene, the mighty living took the initiative to contact the holy dead: he connected at will the various parts of his own soul to those of the ancient sages who lived centuries prior to his time. Therefore, other than the signature method of Isaac Luria to communicate with the deceased, the mystical unification is also a testimony to the immortality of the righteous souls. When performing *yihud* with these souls, the saint on Earth is the one that actively cancels the spatial and the temporal differences and neutralizes the meaning of life and death in a transcendent dimension.[52]

Following this scenario at the gravesites of Shmaya and Avtalon in Gush Halav, the hagiographer continued with the learning result of Luria's disciples:

> All of these *yihudim* are in my possession, written down, praised be God. For the rabbi transmitted them to his disciples, all ten of whom successfully practiced them. As a consequence, the *tsaddiqim* [with whom they commune] spoke to them, answering all their questions. However, they possessed the strength to do this only during the rabbi's lifetime. After his death, their efforts were without success, with the exception of [those of] our teacher, Rabbi Hayyim Calabrese,

> may God protect and preserve him, who successfully practices them to this day. (Fine 2003, p. 284; Deraznitz 1991, p. 9)

Obviously, Luria was not just a skilled performer of *yihud* but also a trainer of this esoteric art.[53] Only in the Master's illuminating presence did most of his disciples manage to perform the ritual and, thereby, benefit spiritually from the liminal practice of conversing with the holy persons between life and death, Heaven and Earth. Inasmuch as the immature trainees—indubitably a circle of selected elites themselves—were facing a process replete with dangers and chances to make mistakes,[54] they needed constant correction and detailed guidance from the instructor. One instance from *Shivchei HaAr"i* records that a disciple tried to perform the unification rite at the graves but failed to receive revelations from the ancient *tsaddiqim*. The Master pointed out that it was simply because he greeted someone at a certain place despite Luria having instructed him specifically not to do so (Deraznitz 1970, pp. 20–22). Such careless mistakes impeded the mystics' reception of concealed wisdom and only the godly Master could diagnose and rectify their path. Even for Vital, whose outstanding capability was testified by the hagiographer, *yihud* was still a big challenge. Oftentimes, Luria prescribed methods of penance for Vital's transgressions since performing the ritual requires great piety and spiritual purity. Despite the guidance to qualify his soul, Vital failed at the practice regularly and was reproached by his teacher (Fine 1989, pp. 88–92). In other words, Luria's overwhelming perfection often mediates between the deceased sages and the living disciples, enabling their cross-boundary encounters by purifying the semi-worthy so they become qualified for revelation.

Another type of Luria's active encounter with the divine figures, as already mentioned in this research, is his ascension to the heavenly academy where the long-parted scholars unveiled to him mystical knowledge. Such inter-territorial experience is certainly not exclusive to the period of self-seclusion and dreams are usually the occasion when revelatory ascensions occur. In one of the hagiographical accounts, Rabbi Abraham Halevi wondered at Luria's sleep-talking and Luria explained his heaven-wards journey in detail:

> The Ari, of blessed memory, answered: "Always when I sleep, my soul ascends to heaven by divers paths known unto me, and the ministering angels come forth to meet me and welcome my soul and bring me before Metatron, Prince of the Divine Presence, who asks me to which academy I desire to go. In these academies are revealed to me the secrets and mysteries of the Torah which were neither heard nor known even in the days of the *tanaaim*, on whom be peace." Said Rabbi Abraham: "Will not my Master reveal to me what they taught him this time?" The Master, on whom be peace, laughed and said: "I call heaven and earth to witness that were I to talk for eighty consecutive years, it is no exaggeration that I would not be able to complete what I learned this time on the portion concerning Balaam and the ass."
>
> All this he merited after he came up from Egypt to the Holy Land. (Deraznitz 1970, pp. 8–10)

The theme of ascension, whether temporary or permanent, is nothing new to the readers of Jewish literature since there exist rich accounts that depict the upward journeys of holy persons, ranging from biblical figures to Hellenistic martyrs and rabbinic sages, let alone kabbalists.[55] We see that among the Safedian mystics, with Luria being an archetype, traveling to the upper realm has become a very applicable method for the living to obtain heavenly enlightenment—especially to understand the Zohar.[56] Thus, the individualistic perspective that emphasizes the sage's extraordinary sainthood, overwhelming power, and charisma was brought under the spotlight; the approach significantly differs from that of the biblical or rabbinic tradition, which is essentially collective. In the Lurianic circle, vision in ascension appears at an even higher frequency in the autobiographic recordings of Hayyim Vital. The narrative often sounds less like an effort-taking technique but comes naturally as "I dreamed" so and so. People of his social network (including Luria before and after death), angelic figures like Elijah and Metatron, and even God Himself are all

familiar characters in Vital's dreams.[57] Following this vein, later trends, such as Hasidism, further disseminated the practice of mystical ascension in a more personal form.[58]

Moreover, other than being an inquirer and a mediator, Luria was also a revealer, namely, an Elijah-like figure who visits others usually in dreams. In this type of visitation, the sage is not the one who gains inspiration and empowerment through encounters but turns into the source of revelation and enlightenment. Luria already mastered such telepathic communication while residing in the earthly domain, as demonstrated by the instance that he summoned Vital to Safed while the latter sojourned in Damascus:

> Every night the Master would remove Rabbi Hayim's soul from its earthly garb and hold discourse with him. In the morning Rabbi Hayim would relate this to his disciples, saying: "There is a learned Ashkenazi in Safed and each night he holds discourse with my soul and urges me to come to him that he may teach me the Torah." And since in his own view he held himself to be wiser than the Master, he spoke almost with scorn; the more so seeing that he had already written a commentary on the Zohar. (Deraznitz 1970, p. 12)

Only when Vital was stuck in learning a few passages from the scripture did he think about visiting Safed. There he was warmly received by the Master who explained two of the difficult passages to him with ease:

> When it came to the third passage, the Master said: "This is the limit of your understanding. You are not worthy to delve further." Rabbi Hayim was as a fox who stands before the lion. Crestfallen, he left him, came to his house, took off his garments and clothed himself in sackcloth and sat all that day and fasted, weeping and praying to the Lord that he might find grace and favor in the eyes of the Master, so that he would accept him as a disciple.
>
> The next morning he returned to the Master and implored him to take him as a disciple. Then the Master replied: "By right I should not accept you because you tarried these three months before coming to me. But your act of penance yesterday has been in your favor so that I shall accept you and not hide anything from you." Whereat Rabbi Hayim prostrated himself before the Ari and cried out: "May the King live forever." He sat and studied together with the other scholars. However, he would always forget what he had learned until one day the Master went with his disciples to Tiberias and had him drink water from the well of Miriam. Thenceforth he retained whatever he would learn. (Deraznitz 1970, p. 12)

As known from the narrative, arrogance retarded the earthly journey of Vital to a significant extent—the loss was certainly not just measured by the three months wasted but was also reflected in his unworthiness to be a disciple of Luria until he repented sincerely.[59] It is unclear what the immediate empowerment would have been had Vital come to Safed without hesitation. Yet from a retrospective, we know that the most meaningful outcome of Vital's visit to Safed—for him personally and for the Jewish cultural heritage as a whole—was his apprenticeship under Luria's guidance. It is known from the symbolic ending of this narrative that becoming a student of Luria was only the first step in Vital's path to obtain secret knowledge of the Torah and fulfill his messianic mission. Well-learned as Vital was, he still needed constant guidance from the Master since Luria was his living fountain of concealed wisdom in the earthly world. After all, theoretical understanding alone is not sufficient to bring God's presence into one's daily life. Living with the true *qadosh* [holy] provides the disciples with a unique sample of sanctity that imparts precious instructions that could not be obtained elsewhere.[60]

Luria's contact with the disciples continued in dreams even after his death. Thenceforth, the sage descended from his heavenly seat to the lower world as an informant and inspirer of secret wisdom instead of a seeker (as when he was alive). This meaningful change of Luria's identity fulfilled his own prophecy on his deathbed to Isaac Sagis that he would come back "in a dream or while awake or by whatsoever way it may be" to teach

the disciples, had the generation proven worthy (Deraznitz 1970, p. 62). The posthumous communication between the deceased teacher and his disciples did not seem essentially different from that when he was alive. Vital reported on such dreams as soon as three days after Luria's death when the Master came to console him:

> Three days after my teacher's death, I saw him in a dream and asked him why he had died so hastily. He told me: Because I had not found even one who was complete, as I desired. I said to him: If so. Heaven forbid, I despair of everything you promised me and of all the good that you told me will come into the world through me. He told me: Do not despair; when the time comes I will come and reveal to you what to do. And I awoke.
>
> From then on, he revealed himself to me most nights to console me, that I should not despair. This continued for twenty years after his death. For the next ten years he only came to me once a month. From then on he came once every three months. All the dreams I had of him were always in one form. He taught me Torah and consoled me that I should not despair. (Vital and Safrin 1999, p. 90)

On another occasion, Rabbi Joshua al-Boom brought down an angel who was one of the servants of Zadkiel (the archangel of mercy in Jewish and Christian angelology) and revealed it in a glass mirror. The messenger explained to Vital that the decreasing frequency of Luria's visitations was because Vital distanced himself from his messianic mission. The whole world depended on him and he should have continued preaching and reproving people, urging them to repent. However, he isolated himself completely in a corner so the departed sages stopped speaking to him via mystical unifications and his holy teacher also refrained from contacting him (Vital and Safrin 1999, pp. 62–63).

Despite the mist created by the sages' supernatural power which may hinder our vision to discern a historical reality, it can still be inferred from the tales that communication between the living and the dead was a very common practice in sixteenth-century Safed, taking place both in the mystic's sleep and while awake, merging Heaven and Earth in specific liminal moments. In a broad sense, cross-boundary journeys between the realms above and below are a recurrent element in mystical writings and folklore, with the Jewish tradition as no exemption. Nonetheless, the Safedian kabbalists made theological innovations mainly by absorbing external influences via the Conversos. As Roni Weinstein points out, for the Lurianic circle, "direct contact with the divine realms was one source of prestige" and "it furnished the basis for their claim that in order to understand the Zohar—the grounds for all theological, halakhic, and ritual innovations—one needed to contact the same founts of inspiration that had inspired the composition of the book in the first place. Hence the Lurianic school's claims to the monopoly on mystical truth and the priority of the new kabbalah" (Weinstein 2016, p. 160).[61]

On the other hand, I would suggest grouping the encounter stories in *Shenxian Zhuan* into "accidental" and "intentional" cases. The former type refers to unplanned encounters between the adepts and the holy masters while the latter appears to be bi-directional: they may be initiated by the mortal practitioner's arduous and persistent search for *xian*, as well as by the transcendent's own will to transmit the esoteric knowledge to those who possess outstanding qualities.[62] In both types, encountering the saints is often the point where the amateur Dao lovers turn into full-hearted practitioners, indicating that instructions from the transcendence achievers are crucial in the making of a *xian*.[63] The story of Ma Mingsheng [Master Horseneigh] is a representative example of the first type of literary expression:

> Master Horseneigh was a native of Linzi. His original surname was He, and his given name was Junxian. When he was young, he served as a district-level lictor, rounding up bandits, and he was once injured by a bandit and temporarily died. But he suddenly encountered a divine person on the road, and this person gave him medicines and saved him, bringing him back to life. Master Horseneigh had nothing with which to repay this divine person, so he quit his office and followed

> him. So it was that he took Master An Qi as his teacher, following him all over the world and enduring all manner of hardships for many years so as to prepare himself to receive scriptures. At first he merely wanted methods for making gold; only later did he realize that there was a Way of long life. He followed An Qi for a long time, carrying his writings for him. To the west they reached Nüji Mountain; to the north, Xuandu; to the south, Lujiang. An Qi finally bestowed on him two alchemical scriptures, the *Grand Purity and the Gold Liquor*. He entered mountains and refined the medicine. When it was completed, he took only half the dose, as he took no delight in ascending to Heaven but preferred to become an earthbound transcendent. He traveled about through the nine provinces for over five hundred years, no one realizing that he was a transcendent, as he built himself a house and raised animals just like ordinary people, moving every three years or so. People did wonder at his nonaging, however. Then one day he ascended to Heaven in broad daylight.[64] (R. Campany 2002, p. 325; Ge 2017, pp. 91–93)

Ma Mingsheng's biography depicts his encounter with the transcendent as neither planned by the protagonist nor by the Master but triggered by a fatal incident at work. Out of his simple wish to pay back the divine savior, Ma daringly made a life-changing decision to quit his official position and follow the master of esoterica to the edge of the familiar world. With the historical background of Ge Hong's time explained previously in this chapter, we see the hagiographer's choice of career and ideology projected on the life track of Ma Mingsheng.[65] Moreover, Ma's ignorance of the ways towards longevity and immortality before his whole-hearted dedication further enhanced the accidental feature of this account. In other words, Ma's pursuit of the ultimate Dao was far from an elaborate plan, showing that resolution, persistence, and diligence are more important prerequisites than prior knowledge or even interest in the adept's onerous path of making transcendence. Many accounts in *Shenxian Zhuan* attest to this point that Ge Hong raised in *Inner Chapters* (Ge 2011, pp. 395–97).

Accordingly, accounts of Dao-seekers who take the initiative to approach the masters of esoterica despite the difficulties also reflect the author's emphasis on the good qualities of the candidates. The story of Yin Changsheng well demonstrates how much effort it takes for the aspirant to establish a master–disciple apprenticeship:

> Yin Changsheng ("Long-Life Yin"), a native of Xinye, was related to a Latter Han empress. He was born into a rich and highly placed family, but he had no fondness for glory and honor, instead devoting himself exclusively to the cultivation of arts of the Dao. Having heard that Master Horseneigh possessed a Way to transcend the world, Yin sought him out, and eventually obtained an audience. Yin treated Horseneigh as if he were Horseneigh's servant, personally performing menial tasks for him. But Horseneigh did not teach him his Way of world-transcendence; he merely singled him out for lofty conversations on current affairs and principles of agriculture. This went on for over ten years. But Yin did not give up. During this same time, there were twelve others who served Horseneigh; but they all quit and went home, and only Yin kept up his behavior without flagging. Finally Horseneigh declared to him: "You truly are capable of obtaining the Way."
>
> So he took Yin out to Green Citadel Mountain. There Horseneigh decocted yellow earth to make gold, as a sign to him. Then he raised an altar facing west and bestowed on Yin the *Scripture on the Divine Elixir of Grand Purity (Taiqing shendan jing)*. Having done this, Master Horseneigh said farewell and departed. (R. Campany 2002, pp. 274–75; Ge 2017, pp. 158–60)

After the departure of Ma, Yin went back to make elixir according to the divine scripture and succeeded. He took only half a dose and continued to travel in the mortal world as an earthbound transcendent for another 300 years before his final ascension in broad day-

light. Note that in the biographies of Ma and Yin, both masters took their disciples into the mountains for the training of esoteric arts and making gold and elixir. Although this period is not overtly referred to as self-seclusion since a certain degree of social network remains (with the Master and other disciples), we may well regard it as "communal seclusion", which is a collective version of the individual type, both implying a condescending attitude towards the decayed officialdom.[66]

For the masters of Dao, testing the candidates is a convenient way to see whether they are ethically qualified to receive the sacred knowledge. Examples of qualification examination are abound in *Shenxian Zhuan*: Li Babai was disguised as a servant at Tang Gongfang's household and tested his kind-heartedness by feigning illness; Zhang Daoling predicted that Zhao Sheng would be worthy to impart the elixir scriptures and tested him seven times; Fei Changfang proved his loyalty to Hu Gong [Sire Gourd, as he lived inside a gourd] by sweeping the ground of the master's seat and provided him with daily food for a long time, etc.[67] Nonetheless, it is not an axiom that the disciples have to go through difficult tests in order to win the mater's grace. As mentioned above, in the part of self-seclusion, Kong Yuanfang made himself an unconventional hideout by digging a spacious basement at the riverbank:

> Now there came a youth from the east whose name was Ping Yu. He loved the Way. He watched Kong Yuanfang, then went looking for his cave dwelling and managed to find it. Kong said to him, "Many people have come out here, but no one has been able to find me. You have succeeded in doing so. You seem to be teachable." With that he bestowed on him a silk text in two fascicles, saying, "These are the essential words of the Way. This text is to be transmitted to only one person in every forty-year period. And if you cannot find a suitable person, do not wantonly transmit it just because the year limit is up. If in forty years there is no one to whom it may be transmitted, then within an eighty-year period there will be two people to whom it may be given. Receive those two persons promptly, for if there is an opportunity to transmit the text and you fail to do so, you block the Way of Heaven. If, on the other hand, you transmit it to someone who is not worthy to receive it, you leak the Way of Heaven. In either case you will bring disaster on your descendants. Now that I have accomplished the transmission, I am leaving here." And so he abandoned his wife and children and entered the Western Marchmount. (R. Campany 2002, p. 315; Ge 2017, pp. 230–31)

The lucky young man passed his qualification test simply by locating Kong's cave, showing that he was already able to decipher some simple tricks by the Dao master. This narrative also demonstrates the criteria for transmission, which reminds us of that among the Jewish mystics, the sacred knowledge is prepared only for the worthy and wanton impartment should be carefully avoided.

Even luckier are those who did not set out to search for a master but were chosen by the transcendents for the impartment of the sacred scriptures and techniques. Cai Jing's encounter with the transcendent Wang Yuan is such an example. As Wang was passing through the area of Wu on his way eastwards to Mount Kuocang, he came to the house of Cai:

> Cai Jing was only a peasant, but his bones and physiognomy indicated that he was fit for eventual transcendence. Wang Yuan realized this, and that is why he went to his home. Said Wang to Cai: "By birth, you are destined to transcend the world; you will be chosen as a replacement for an office. But your knowledge of the Way is scant; your pneumas are few and you have much flesh. You cannot ascend directly in this condition, but must avail yourself of *shijie*. It's like passing out through a dog's hole, that's all." Then Wang declared to Cai the essential teachings, and left him. (R. Campany 2002, p. 260; Ge 2017, pp. 77–79)

Cai's *shijie* [尸解, corpse liberation] process is one of the very few detailed cases of transcendence via corpse liberation in *Shenxian Zhuan*. His entire body went hot, as if on

fire, and his family had to pour cold water on him for three days until he was left only with skins and bones. Cai went into his room, covered himself with a blanket, and suddenly vanished. The family found the outer skin intact in the blanket, like the shell shed by a cicada. Over a decade later, Cai returned home with rejuvenated physicality, looking young and strong with thick black hair, and foretold the second coming of his teacher Wang Yuan.

Reasons for the immortals' visitation vary greatly in *Shenxian Zhuan*. As Cai was selected for his extraordinary physiognomy, the biographies of Mozi[68] and Liu Gen, for instance, report the same kind of chosenness of the protagonist by a divine man, implying a certain degree of predestination. The case of Shen Xi displays a rare situation in which a heavenly caravan descended to welcome the mortal because his merit and integrity greatly touched the upper world—later, Shen was granted a talisman to travel freely between worlds.[69] Sometimes the reason for intentional encounters initiated by the *xian* is simply omitted, such as in Zhang Daoling's case—he retreated into the mountains with disciples to write Daoist books and meditate. One day, countless celestial persons (some with official positions in Heaven) descended to bestow on him the newly promulgated methods to make talismans.[70]

Here, I shall not exhaust the readers with excessive examples but cast the crucial question: while the Lurianic causal explanation for one's sainthood and messianic responsibility is mainly the doctrine of soul root, what, in turn, are Ge Hong's criteria for a mortal to succeed in achieving transcendence? Sensitive readers have noticed the dilemma between Ge Hong's belief in the predestination of *xian*-hood, as proposed in chapter *Bianwen* [辩问, Discerning Questions] of *Inner Chapters* (Ge 2011, pp. 385–409), and his claim that transcendence is acquirable by all, as testified by *Shenxian Zhuan*.[71] It is often regarded as an irreconcilable flaw in Ge Hong's attempt to systemize the Daoist doctrines till his time.[72] Some see it as a reflection of his anxiety in a position stuck between "entering" and "exiting" the world, namely, between the Confucius and Daoist values (L. Liu 2003, pp. 37–39); others take the perspective of historical materialism and claim that the author's time and religious piety confined his logical thinking (Ge 2011, p. 386).

My stance follows those who manage to bridge the seemingly irreconcilable gap. Indeed, it is Ge Hong's own writings that relate *xian*-potential to the celestial constellations at the moment when one obtains life. He claims, quoting an unnamed *xian* scripture, that those who can achieve *xian*-hood are naturally endowed with the "pneuma of transcendence" in embryo. However, Ge Hong's concept of inborn sainthood should be understood as talents and gifts instead of predeterminism. In his copious discussion on the matter of *xian* dispersed in several compilations, emphasis is clearly laid on (a) resolute determination, (b) guidance from proper teachers, and (c) correct techniques (including sacred scriptures, elixir recipes, etc.)—these are the three major factors on which the achievement of immortality depends. Whether one is endowed with the *xian*-pneuma is a deep and mysterious matter hardly visible to the mortals. Yet it is known that those who possess innate *xian*-root are prone to believe in the existence of transcendents and pursue the Way of immortality; otherwise, one will not be attracted to the cause of seeking Dao and, therefore, not be "destined" to obtain *xian*-hood. In other words, one's *xian*-root is verified retrospectively by the end result. Without resolution, diligent practice, and the right methodology, even those gifted are doomed to fail (Tsung-Ting 2008, pp. 172–80; Ge 2011, pp. 392–95). Interestingly, this is a point that echoes the Lurianic doctrine of soul root: although one's divine genealogy of the soul means elevated identity in the realms above and below, it also puts a heavier yoke on the mystic's shoulders.[73] Diligent probing into the world of concealed knowledge, unremitted efforts to bring the nation to repentance, and the fulfillment of all other commandments are required of the sage in order to fasten the coming of the messianic era. For both traditions, the predestined condition is a minor prerequisite that by no means guarantees success for the sage's life mission; despite that, it does provide theoretical endorsement to one's sagehood. It is the will and deeds of the living saint,

as well as the right techniques, that weigh more to the perfection of both the macrocosm and the micro one.

5. Conclusions

Via the examination of the saints' earthly journey in early Jewish and Daoist compilations, it is shown that these culturally remote entities share a recipe for depicting the image of the saints. While the same motifs might be expressed with distinct characteristics of their own, a pattern of human-centered sagehood, rather than a divine-endorsed type, is clearly indicated by both sides: although the sages' birth myth displays a discernible degree of predestined holiness, painstaking practices like self-isolation and learning with the divine masters are more decisive to their transformation of identity. By virtue of these dynamic interactions between the upper and the lower domains, Earth becomes the promising land of in-betweenness for the incubation of saints. As the scope of my survey is limited to the early Jewish and Daoist hagiographies, further investigations are welcomed in the field of Judaism–Daoism comparisons, as well as of how this formula may be applied to other cultures of world mysticism.

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Notes

1 For a brief description of this topic, see, e.g., (Wald 2018, pp. 15–18); see also (Ehrlich 2008).

2 Holdrege's work sets up a model of phenomenological comparison between the Jewish tradition and the Indian one by taking the Torah and the Veda as symbol systems that transcend their textual boundaries and become a multileveled cosmic reality for certain ethnic groups, see (Holdrege 2012). Ji Zhang proves that Daoist traditions are no exception to the fact that phenomenological dialogue is a meaningful solution to comparisons between entities unrelated in time and space, see (J. Zhang 2012). Fruits yielded in the comparison of Jewish Confucian thoughts, see (Lior 2020, 2015a, 2015b; Allinson 2003; Patt-Shamir and Rapoport 2008). Attempts to compare the Jewish and the Daoist traditions include (Zwick 2009; Chung 2009, pp. esp. 64–80; Levenda 2008; Kutliroff 2019).

3 For a summary of the saintlike manifestations in Jewish history, see (Cohn 1990, pp. 48–59; Jacobs 1990).

4 It is necessary to differentiate between the "hagiographical stories" and the "hagiographical literature", see (Dan 1981, pp. 82–84). The Hasidei Ashkenaz [Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany], a short-lived Jewish mystical movement during the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, produced several hagiographical works on its leading figures, though such efforts did not result in a literary trend. See (Zfatman 2020).

5 The Han scholar Liu Xiang (77–6 BCE) is traditionally believed as the author of *Liexian Zhuan*. Such a claim is both supported and refuted by many scholars, and recent arguments suggest that the work went through layers of editing and addition. For an outline of the philological debates on the dating and authorship of *Liexian Zhuan*, see (Yang 2018, pp. 25–27; Wei 2015, pp. 8–9). Although there has not been a consensus, it is known that at least by the time of Ge Hong, *Liexian Zhuan* had been in wide circulation and enjoyed great popularity. See (S. Wang 2007, p. preface).

6 Other variations of translation apply to the same book, such as *Traditions of Divine Transcendents* by R. Campany (2002). In this research, I will resort to transliterations of the Jewish and the Daoist works in most cases to avoid confusion.

7 For a framework of Daoist hagiographies throughout the dynasties, see (Penny 2000). On the narrative changes from *Liexian Zhuan* to *Shenxian Zhuan*, see (Li and Xu 2020).

8 Shlomiel's letters were first published in Joseph Solomon Delmedigo's work *Ta'alumot Hokhmah* and later the tales concerning Isaac Luria were circulated as *Shivchei Ha-Ar"i* from the end of the 18th century. See (Scholem and Idel 2007, p. 263). For a summarized profile of Shlomiel, see (Wilke 2022, pp. 261–64).

[9] The birth and death years of Ge Hong remain a debatable topic. Two major scholarly traditions regarding his age are 61 or 81 years old. Fortunately, such a discrepancy does not affect this research. Some recent studies on the topic include, for instance, (Cui 2006; Mei and Dai 2018), etc.

[10] Certainly, this is not to say that the revelation to rabbi Solomon about his unborn son is molded after the Annunciation to Mary. The Christian scene became well-known by virtue of the popularization of Christianity, including the unremitted missionary efforts, the Renaissance artworks depicting Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, and many other propelling factors throughout history. As a matter of fact, the motif of annunciation is deeply imbedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition and multiple variations of the same theme can be found in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the birth accounts of Ishmael (Genesis 16), Isaac (Genesis 17:15–19), Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:23–26), and Samson (Judges 13) all center on the divine message that foretells an impossible conception by the barren parent/s.

[11] For the multifaceted role of Elijah the Prophet in Jewish writings and arts, see (Gutmann et al. 2007, pp. 331–37).

[12] Unsurprisingly, according to the doctrine of soul roots theorized by the Safedian rabbi, Luria sees himself as the latest reincarnation of Moses and the two share the same soul root. See (Fine 2003, pp. 322–30).

[13] For the brief life story of rabbi Eleazer, see (Ben Samuel [1970] 1993, pp. stories 1, 2). Cf. Genesis 37:18–36, 39:1–6, 40, and 41, namely the biblical account of Joseph who was sold to Egypt and gained success at the foreign court. The biblical pattern of the chosen gaining success in a gentile land resonates with the narrative of rabbi Eleazer to a great extent.

[14] On this topic, see also (G. Li 1994).

[15] In some paragraphs, Ge Hong does claim a certain degree of predestination, which is to be discussed anon.

[16] There are two major textual traditions of *Shenxian Zhuan*, namely versions accord with the one preserved in *Siku Quanshu* [Complete Library of Four Treasures] or that in *Guang Han-Wei Congshu* [Supplement to Han-Wei Collectanea]. The former includes fewer transcendents and lacks the hagiography of Laozi. Although neither tradition claims uninterrupted transmission from Ge Hong's time, it is unlikely that the omission of Laozi fits the author's intention especially as the Old Master is depicted in a godly manner in Ge Hong's *Inner Chapters*. On the problem of textual versions, see (R. Campany 2002, pp. 121–26; Ge 2017, pp. 9–10).

[17] The English translations of *Shenxian Zhuan* accounts in this research are from Campany's work unless otherwise noted, followed by the page numbers of the corresponding Chinese text in Ge Hong's work. The explanations in square brackets, for instance, "气 *qi*" here, are by myself; unnoted signs and italicized terms or sentences are part of the original quotation.

[18] Other than one's family name and given name, the most common appellations for Chinese literati are *zi* [字, style, courtesy name] and *hao* [号, pseudonym, art name]. The former is often semantically related to one's given name as its explanation, synonym, or antonym; the latter indicates freer derivations. On this topic, see, e.g., (L. Wang 2014, pp. 124–27). In the case of the Old Master, "Laozi" is an honorific title while there exist many versions of his other names.

[19] The earthly mother of Laozi, though not elaborated in *Shenxian Zhuan*, also claims a cosmic status in her own hagiographical accounts. Shengmu Yuanjun [圣母元君, Holy Mother Goddess] descends into the lower realm to give birth to the corporeal form of the sage and ascends back to Heaven in broad daylight at the end of her this-worldly journey. See (Luo 2013, pp. 569–74). Further on this female image, see (Despeux and Kohn 2003, pp. 48–63).

[20] Tradition renders Laozi's surname as Li [李], which means plum when used as a noun—the announcement of the infant is therefore a pun in this regard. Moreover, Buddhist influence is obvious in the birth variations. Elements such as conception by a meteor, born from the left armpit, under the tree, etc., greatly overlap those in the birth story of the Buddha. See (R. Campany 2002, pp. 208–10).

[21] The process of the apotheosis of Laozi is a miniature of the Daoist history, marked by the canonization of *Daode Jing* and the worship of the Old Master inspired by Buddhist tradition in the Han dynasty. Despite the vicissitude of Laozi's position in the heavenly hierarchy, his godhood remains a focus of literary and religious creativity, both by the literati who deemed the old sage as a superhuman thinker and by the Daoist leaders who elevated him as the godly founder of their faith. See (Y. Wang 2013; Hui Wang 2018; Tan 2007; Z. Liu 2005).

[22] I have omitted this section for it is not relevant to the discussion on birth. Nonetheless, this historical chain of the Old Master's changing identity in different bodily forms reminds us of reincarnation, whether in the Buddhist or the Lurianic vocabulary. Telling from the Daoist context that regards free bodily transformation as one feature of transcendence, I suppose that these identities are not experienced in various rounds of living but designated to Laozi in one continuous life as long as Heaven and Earth.

[23] To a certain extent, Ge Hong's stance on the identity of Laozi resonates more with that of the Western Han texts before the widespread worship of the Old Master since Eastern Han. For instance, both *Shiji* [史记, Records of the Grand Historian, by Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BCE)] and *Liexian Zhuan* [列仙传, Collective Biographies of Immortals, by Liu Xiang (ca. 77–6 BCE)] include Laozi's name, hometown, occupation, extraordinarily long life, and the writing of *Daode Jing* while neither mentions an unusual birth. Although the former is more detailed as Sima Qian offers the genealogy of Laozi and places him in the network of his contemporaries from different schools, both authors hold Laozi's thoughts in high esteem for his mastery of the mysterious *Dao* [道] and *De* [德], enabling him to achieve all through non-action. In a similar manner, Ge Hong does not shun the man side of Laozi but rather depicts him as a transcendent who attains divinity through practicing the esoteric techniques that bring one close to the ultimate Dao. Cf. (Sima 2022, p. chapter 63; S. Wang 2007, p. 18).

[24] This is echoed by hagiography-heroes from numerous other cultures. For instance, Buddha is believed to have dedicated many years to spiritual striving on his own, and Jesus, according to the New Testament, prayed multiple times alone in the wilderness, etc.

[25] For a general overview of solitude as a preparation for one's involvement in the knowledge of mysteries, see (Hallamish 1999, pp. 49–53). Hallamish emphasizes that solitude with the godhead is "suggestive of moralistic manuals rather than of strictly kabbalistic works."

[26] Similar to the biblical approach towards sacred seclusion, the Qumran sect practiced a kind of collective separation and withdrew into the desert for the sake of their own spiritual purity, eschewing not just the profane gentiles but also their fellowmen who chose the wicked ways. See (Schremer 2006).

[27] Philosophical and astrological writings were two other medieval sources that greatly influenced the Jewish mysticism to approach isolation in a positive manner. See (Idel 2000, pp. 200–11).

[28] Idel also points out that closing one's eyes is a feature of this concentrative practice. An example from the Lurianic circle is Hayyim Vital's *Sha'arei Kedushah* [Gates of Holiness], an instructive guide for mystics to attain divine inspiration via mediative practices. In this work, Vital resorted to self-seclusion as the final stage in the process of purification for the ultimate purpose of obtaining prophecy. See (Idel 1988, pp. 132, 135; Vital 1926, pp. 60–61).

[29] This is my translation with explanations in square brackets; when this research resorts to the existing English translations of some Lurianic tales by L. Fine, the page numbers of the corresponding texts in Hebrew found in Shlomiel's letters are also noted. In another letter, Shlomiel writes that Luria's seven-year isolation together with Bezalel Ashkenazi was dedicated to the study of the revealed Torah and the Talmud. Elijah came to inform that he should stay alone in an isolated place without talking to others or any social connection. See (Deraznitz 1991, pp. 21–22); cf. (Deraznitz 1991, pp. 99–100).

[30] See also (Vital 2016, p. 39). The editor follows Shlomiel's tradition that Luria stayed in seclusion for twenty years.

[31] The documentary record by Hayyim Joseph David Azulai (1724–1806) testifies to the six-year seclusion of Luria. The author states that he personally saw the birthplace and the prayer house of Luria in Jerusalem as well as his reclusion house in Egypt where he isolated himself six days every week for six years. See (Azulai 1864, p. entry 332 Rabbenu HaAr"i).

[32] Speaking Hebrew instead of vernaculars on Shabbat and festivals was customarily practiced by Luria not just in self-seclusion, as Vital provided records about his Master being particularly careful with speech on holy days. See (Fine 1984, p. 76), no. 35.

[33] *Toledot HaAr"i*, the other major source of Lurianic tales, specifies the identity of this strange man as a Converso who, like many of his fellow immigrants to the Land of Israel after the 1492 Spanish Expulsion, knew very little of the Jewish textual tradition. It is said that he had possessed the book for many years but did not know what was written there. See (Benayahu 1967, p. 153). Nonetheless, the Conversos are one of the most important forces in the Safedian innovation of Jewish mysticism, as already proved by many scholars. See, e.g., (Weinstein 2016, pp. 142–65). Additionally, in (Magid 2008), the author examines the Lurianic exegetical tradition of the Scripture against its sociohistorical nexus between Judaism, Christianity (via the Conversos community), and Islam (via the Ottoman Empire), showing that the Lurianic circle integrated contemporary social changes into their canonical body and reshaped the Jewish metaphysic literature by absorbing influences from the "others."

[34] Cf. (Vital 2016, pp. 41–49), where the revelatory period of Luria is divided into three stages: (1) the second self-seclusion of six years in Egypt; (2) the third self-seclusion of seven years in Egypt; and (3) his time in Safed of about two years and four months. After his first self-isolation, namely studying the revealed knowledge with his teacher Bezalel Ashkenazi for seven years, it is believed that Luria started learning the secrets of the Torah, i.e., the Zohar, with the help of the heavenly academy during the second self-seclusion, after which he received higher revelation from Elijah the Prophet during the third self-seclusion. The Safedian period was the climax of his greatness as Elijah came frequently to teach him face-to-face about the hidden wisdom. Due to the abundance and depth of his spiritual achievements, it was impossible for Luria to conclude and utter his unprecedented knowledge. Nonetheless, Luria began to write commentaries on the Zohar, e.g., commentary on *Sifra DeTzniuta* [The Book of Concealment], while still in Egypt. See (Aviv"i 2008, pp. 32, 81–83). On the various copies of Luria's writings transmitted by his disciples, see (Aviv"i 2008, pp. 77–97).

[35] On Nachman's *hitbodedut*, see (Green 1979, pp. 145–48; Mark 2009, pp. 129–47; Persico 2014).

[36] The more extreme version is that some practitioners simply end up "transcending away into the mountains" and no one knows where they travel henceforth.

[37] Further on Ge Hong's view on seclusion, see (Ding and Wu 2009).

[38] The motto from chapter *Daxue* [大学, Great Learning] of *Liji* [礼记, Book of Rites], one of the core Confucian canons, greatly summarizes the Confucian ideal of a noble man whose self-cultivation serves not just to manage interpersonal relations but also to fulfill one's political ambitions eventually.

[39] On Zhuangzi's view on seclusion, see (Sun 2021).

[40] I believe that the Jewish hero Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who hid in a cave with his son for twelve years in order to flee the Roman authorities (BT, Shabbat 33b) would well sympathize with this approach.

[41] On the historical context of Ge Hong's hybrid theory of seclusion, see (Di 2020; S. Liu 2021; L. Liu 2003; Han and Lei 2023; Ding and Wu 2009).

[42] On the differences and similarities between the Confucian view on seclusion and its Daoist counterpart exemplified by Ge Hong's ideology, see (Haiyan Wang 2021; Chen 2017).

[43] Ge Hong's *Autobiography* mentioned another work titled *Yinyi Zhuan* [隐逸传, Biographies of the Recluses] which is long lost. See (Ge 2013b, pp. 1139–40) for the list of Ge Hong's writings. Fortunately, we find seclusion to be a crucial theme also in *Shenxian Zhuan*.

[44] Note that seclusion in the mountains also helps with the practice of keeping special diets, whether herbal, mineral, or complete avoidance, since rare ingredients are more accessible in places where they grow. Some cases indicate that special diets may also be kept while living one's normal social life. Ge Hong dedicated a whole chapter on the "divine medicines" in the *Inner Chapters*, see (Ge 2011, pp. 337–84). On seclusion as an efficient way towards transcendence, see (Lu 2010; Campany 2009, pp. 106–8).

[45] In a similar manner, Ge Xuan refused to take the court position offered by the emperor.

[46] There Ge Hong also confessed that due to financial distress, he was unable to make elixir according to the scriptures even twenty years after receiving them from his teacher.

[47] On Ge Hong's biography, see (Ge 2017, pp. Preface 1–4; 2013a, pp. 1098–114, 1129–40, 1144–51). On Ge Hong's legacy in today's Mt. Luofu, see (H. Zhang 2013).

[48] For details, see their respective stories in (Ge 2017) under each name.

[49] Different from my own approach, Yoram Bilu discusses the phenomena of *dybbuk* [possession by evil spirit] and *maggid* [angelic messenger who passes revelation] in Jewish mysticism, following Erika Bourguignon's categorization of "possession trance" and "nonpossession trance" as two types of altered consciousness (Bilu 1996; Bourguignon 1973, p. Introduction). To resort to Bilu's vocabulary, albeit oversimplified, the cases that I examine in this section, both Jewish and Chinese, are mainly "nonpossession trance."

[50] The earliest use of the *yihudim* as combinations of the divine names seems to have developed in the writings of the "Circle of Contemplation" (termed by Scholem due to its central work The Book of Contemplation attributed to R. Hammai) probably in the 13th century in Castile. The dating and locating of these writings are still under scholarly discussion. See (Verman 1989, pp. 25–27).

[51] In Christianity, the holiness of the deceased extends beyond tombs also to fragments of bodies, physical objects that had made contact with these bodies, etc.

[52] In a more radical sense, it is possible to claim that the departed leaders of the Safedian fraternities were not just considered saints but also objects of worship. Notably in the Hasidic adaptation of the interworldly communication, the focus is usually the living sage. See (Garb 2008, pp. 207–8, 226–27).

[53] It is reasonable to assume influence from the Catholic idea of "sacred archaeology", mediated by the Converso immigrants' community in Safed, on the Lurianic circle who also showed great interest in discovering the magical power of the tombs and the deceased. See (Weinstein 2016, pp. 158–61).

[54] Individual devotion is discouraged by Luria since the graves of the ancient Jewish sages—that of Rashbi being a prime example—are infested by demons. Incomplete visitors are very likely to suffer from negative consequences and the soul-to-soul impartment of secret knowledge is possessive by nature, hence vulnerable to demonic attacks. See (Garb 2008, pp. 220–23).

[55] For a brief list of the sages who ascended into heaven throughout the ages, see (Kohler and Ginzberg 1906, pp. 164–65); see also (Idel 2005, pp. 23–71). Cf. the famous story of the four sages entering paradise (Tosefta, Hagiga 2:2, BT Hagiga 14b, Zohar I, 26b, Tikunei HaZohar 40, etc.), an archetype of ascension narrative (though also interpreted in other metaphorical ways) indicating that only the worthy could travel between realms freely with physicality and spirituality unharmed.

[56] Jonathan Garb innovatively relates the mystical movements of ascent and descent of the sages in the Jewish accounts to the shamanic experience of trance as traveling into the imaginal landscape to rescue the lost souls, namely a journey away from the social order into the realm of dangers, is a process of psychological healing which often takes place in a trance. Garb takes the liturgy of *nefilat appayim* as an example of a trance technique and points out that symbolic death is a transformative rebirth to empowerment. This well applies to Luria's experience of ascension in dreams since sleep is often understood as temporary death, especially in mystical writings. See (Garb 2011, pp. 21–36).

[57] For instance, see (Vital and Safrin 1999, pp. 78–84, 91–92). Garb interprets Vital's ascension dreams in terms of trance experience, indicating a strong connection between ascent and trance. See (Garb 2011, pp. 51–60). It should also be noted that many of Vital's first-person accounts express a sense of frustration at his failure to complete the messianic mission by bringing his fellowmen to repentance. See (Weinstein 2016, p. 131).

[58] Multiple cases are found in the Beshtian hagiographies, for example, see (Ben Samuel [1970] 1993, pp. stories 78, 146, 227), etc.

[59] Vital's egotistic personality is quite telling in his autobiographic writings where arrogance never seems a surprising trait. In another dream, he asked a question of kabbalistic wisdom and an old man came to reveal to him secrets. Due to his egotism, he did not realize that was Elijah in disguise, and the heavenly messenger left without further conversation. See (Vital and Safrin 1999, p. 84).

[60] A close relationship between the master and the disciples is commonly seen in the rabbinic tradition. The Safedian mystics of the sixteenth century formed a new pattern of this custom by presenting incredibly intimate details about the sages' private lives,

eventually giving birth to the writings of autobiography, a genre barely seen in the Jewish literature before. See (Weinstein 2016, pp. 52–53).

[61] See also (Elior 1986). Elior observes that the Lurianic Kabbalah was the culmination of the post-expulsion preoccupation with messianism and the tendency to detach Jewish religiosity from historical and rational schemes.

[62] I resort to a slightly different method of categorization for the encounter stories in *Shenxian Zhuan* than that for the Lurianic ones. Contrary to the Jewish exegeses that tend to find an explanation for the most trivial details in the scriptures, the Daoist hagiographers preserved very limited room for predestination, thus making more space for "accidental encounters." Although the grouping here is still essentially a contrast between the sage's active or passive participation, the incidental nature of some cases deserves due attention.

[63] As M. Puett has noted, Mircea Eliade's view of mountains as the *axis mundi* greatly influenced scholars of the Chinese Bronze Age (Puett 2002, p. 32). Despite my own approach here that examines the encounters between the sacred and the profane both in and out of the mountainous area, it should be noted that Eliade's notion also inspired studies on the hermetic lifestyle in Daoism since mountains are indeed the major revenue for the practitioners to establish the master-disciple relation and make elixir, hence a crucial location for one's transformation of identity from mortal to *xian*. On the significance of mountains reflected in *Shenxian Zhuan* and *Inner Chapters* by Ge Hong, see (Michael 2016; 2022, pp. 183–211).

[64] Note that the identity of the saintly Master An Qi is specified in Campany's translation as he integrates various sources of the same story. See (R. Campany 2002, pp. 325–26, 506). The Chinese text based on the tradition of *Supplement to Han-Wei Collectanea* obscures this point, adding to the mystical aura of the apprenticeship. The historical figure of Master An Qi lived under the reign of the first emperor Qin Shi Huang (r. 221–210 BCE). He had a reputation for a long life and was selling medicines by the Eastern Sea where he met the emperor and inspired the ruler's later excursion to search for the elixir of immortality. Early mentions of him are found, for instance, in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*; *Liexian Zhuan*, the predecessor of *Shenxian Zhuan*, also contains his legendary biography. See (S. Wang 2007, pp. 70–72; R. Campany 2002, pp. 226–27).

[65] Although Ma Mingsheng lived in the Eastern Han dynasty—at least over six decades prior to Ge Hong's birth, the familiar pattern of abandoning one's official career for the path of Dao is distinct in the narrative. Tradition renders Ma as the teacher of Yin Changsheng (also recorded in *Shenxian Zhuan*, to be discussed anon), who imparted the secrets of Dao to Ge Hong's father-in-law, thus also including the hagiographer in this line of transmission. See (Ge 2017, pp. 91, 158).

[66] Beyond the scope of hagiographical/biographical writings, the praise of unfettered life in isolation is a significant theme in ancient Chinese art, including poetry and drawing, which reflects the intellectuals' pursuit of a noble and unsullied mind away from worldly corruptions. See, e.g., (He and Li 2022; Zhou 2023).

[67] For details, see their respective stories in (Ge 2017) under each name. Note that being tested by the Master is not exclusive to the encounter stories initiated by the Dao-seeker. In the case of Li Babai, it is the transcendent who came to the mortal for Li knew that Tang wished to learn the ways of Dao but did not find a fit instructor. See also (Campany 2009, pp. 104–6).

[68] Mozi (ca. 470–391 BCE) was the founder of Mohism, one of the major schools during the Hundred Schools of Thought period. For a brief review of the historical figure and the hagiographical tradition around Mozi, see (Ge 2017, pp. 304–5).

[69] Note that according to Campany, Shen Xi is not considered a complete transcendent as his longevity is sustained by the elixir given to him at the heavenly court, his travels were enabled by a talisman, and his fixed station was on Earth to heal the sick. See (R. Campany 2002, p. 258). I would regard this as a minor issue in Shen's *xian*-hood and rather take it as an expression of the various supernatural experiences and capabilities of the adepts.

[70] For details, see their respective stories in (Ge 2017) under each name.

[71] The argument that *xian*-hood is accessible is also a core doctrine in *Inner Chapters*. For instance, chapter *Qinqiu* [勤求, Diligent Seeking] focuses on the importance of a good teacher in one's path towards sainthood.

[72] For the major arguments on this point in contemporary Chinese academia, see (Tsung-Ting 2008, pp. 168–69).

[73] This may also remind us of the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election, a crucial part of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century (around the same period as Luria). According to Calvinist theology, God chooses those who are to be redeemed even before the Creation of the world, and only the elected are destined for salvation. In other words, such chosenness is innate, which resonates with Luria's doctrine of soul-root. Yet unlike Luria who, via "predestination", formed a sacred fraternity with past sages across time and space for the sake of the great messianic mission, Calvin was more concerned with the theological issue, namely the certainty of salvation, as his fellow Reformers did. He believed that the Spirit provides such certainty, and good works are a testimony to one's salvation—this retrospective approach also coincides with Ge Hong's explanation of the practitioner's *xian*-root. On the debates on certainty of salvation among the Protestant Reformers, see (Schreiner 2011, pp. 37–77).

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