

Mansur al-Hallaj

Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922), a martyr who viewed himself in the mold of Jesus Christ, gave his life for his impassioned Sufi beliefs. He was crucified for his blasphemy in asserting that “he was He” – that is to say, that his mystical attainment had led al-Hallaj to the realization that he and God were one and the same. It is interesting to note that a later Sufi chronicler, Farid al-Din Attar (d. 1220) justified al-Hallaj’s seemingly blasphemous saying by comparing it to the burning bush seen by Moses, which uttered the phrase, “I am I, God.” Although the words came from the bush, it was really God who was speaking. Attar was implying that al-Hallaj was no different than Moses’ burning bush – a mouthpiece for the eternal God.

Al-Hallaj played a seminal role in the development of Sufism. Although he came along a spare few centuries after the life of the Prophet, al-Hallaj witnessed the overbearing power of Islamic officialdom, which was sucking the life out of the living religion, and demanding of its practitioners not joy in the worship of God, but allegiance to a growing list of rules and edicts.

For wild-eyed Jewish mystics, who could find no such inspiration in recent Jewish mysticism, al-Hallaj offered a powerful and seductive example of complete dedication to the spiritual path.

His ecstatic utterances, or *shaths*, affected later Jewish Kabbalists who, like al-Hallaj, worked towards a complete union and even ego-identification with God. The 13th century Jewish mystic Abraham Abulafia even seemed to quote directly the very same utterance that ultimately got al-Hallaj crucified, when Abulafia asserted: “I am the Truth.” Additionally, medieval Jewish mystics, so often the target of the more legalistic orthodox Jewish community, found in his manner of martyrdom an extreme and poetic tale that provided hope and meaning to their lonely

quest. Jewish libraries of the time were replete with poems by al-Hallaj, both in the original Arabic (which any educated Jew could read) and translated into Hebrew.