

# Kabbalah

by Phillip Arnn

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**Founder:** French Jewish aristocrats

**Place:** Provence, France

**Date:** cir. 1175 AD

**Publications:** *Hekhaloth*; *Sefer Yetzirah* (book of Creation); *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Clear Light); *Zohar* (Book Of Splendour).

**Unique Terms:** Sefiroth (tree of Life); Gematria; *abracadabra* (“I create as I speak”); Tikkun Olam (being a partner with God in mending the world).

## HISTORY

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As King Solomon once remarked, “There is nothing new under the sun.” This is certainly true of man’s search for spiritual fulfillment. One esoteric path with deep roots is the Jewish practice of Kabbalah. It has recently gained new popularity as a trendy, boutique spirituality in part because of its celebrity adherents. Many Hollywood notables are or have been students. The roster includes; Roseanne, Madonna, Barbra Streisand, Elizabeth Taylor, Sandra Bernhard, Diane Ladd and Laura Dern to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest form of Jewish shamanic practice was “Merkabah mysticism.” It was a meditative system that aspired to bring the devotee before the throne of God. It aspired to emulate the experience of Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot of the Lord. The primary source for research of these early beliefs and practices are preserved in the Hekhalot (Divine Palaces/Heavens) literature. This literature developed from the second to about the eleventh centuries. Davila explains:

The documents... describe the self-induced spiritual experiences of the “descenders to the chariot” that permitted these men to view Ezekiel’s chariot vision (the Merkevah) for themselves, as well as to gain control of angels and a perfect mastery of Torah through theurgy.... Hekhalot documents claim to detail actual practices used to reach trance states, gain revelations, and interact with divine mediators.<sup>2</sup>

The next development helping to lay the foundation of the Kabbalah was a second or third century document called the *Sefer (Sepher) Yetzirah* (book of Formation or Creation). This writing presents the creation of the universe as being the going forth from God of his ten attributes in the form of ten emanations or lights. These emanations are called the *sefiroth* or *sephirot* and represent the attributes of God that can be known. God, Himself, is the *En Sof*, the infinite and unknowable. The *Sefiroth* are also the archetypal numbers 1 through 10 which are joined with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet to form the “thirty-two paths of wisdom.” Gershom Scholem, the preeminent Kabbalist scholar says:

These together represent the mysterious forces whose convergence has produced the various combinations observable throughout the whole creation... through which God has created all that exists.<sup>3</sup>

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This early literature owes much of its content to the ideas of the Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras and his school at Croton, Italy. J. A. West writes, "... a much quoted Pythagorean principle was 'Number is All.' Creation was described... as the division of the primordial unit into multiplicity and diversity."<sup>4</sup>

Other Pythagorean concepts of the soul of man and the problem of sin were adopted:

...a fallen, polluted divinity incarcerated within the body, as in a tomb...from which it can gain release through ritual purgation, accompanied by ascetic abstinence. Pythagoras... adopted the idea...of Orphism of a process of bilocation, according to which the soul could be detached from the body.<sup>5</sup>

Add to this the belief in reincarnation that Pythagoras brought from his time in Persia. The Jewish mystics also at this time added to the belief in the divine nature of numbers, the idea of the archetypal nature of the letters (also practiced by the Pythagoreans) of the Hebrew alphabet. The 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet were assigned numeric values. This is called *gematria*. The Babylonians used this practice by the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E and it was later practiced by the Greeks. It was based on a 27-letter alphabet that corresponded to three numeric enneads (1-9, 10-90 and 100-900). By the 2nd century C.E. the Jews had developed 22 letters and five dual use letters. The names of God were computed. Words in the Torah with equal values were placed together to find the deeper meaning of God's Word.<sup>6</sup>

The Merkavah mysticism, incorporating the ideas and practices of the *Hekhalot* and the *Sefer Yetzirah*, was always a small peripheral stream within mainline Judaism residents in groups like the Essenes, best exemplified by the Qumran community. It continued as the main expression of Jewish mysticism until the next major building block came forth in the twelfth century, the *Sefer ha-Bahir*.

The *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Brilliance or Illumination) is considered the first truly Kabbalistic work. It was written or compiled in Provence, France in 1176. Its form was as a set of dialogues among fictional rabbis and students written as questions and answered by parables. It revised the *sephirot* as being dualistic oppositions; light and darkness, mercy and justice, male and female, etc., that were temporal copies of divine realities. These dualities representing divine archetypes replaced the Hellenist concept of numbers as the primordial emanations. It was a *Midrash* or commentary on the opening verses of the creation story in Genesis as well as other scriptures. It also taught reincarnation.<sup>7</sup> It was extensively used in the next significant text of mystic importance, the *Zohar*.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Moses de Leon, a Jew in Spain, revealed the *Zohar*. The *Zohar* reveals that the Unknowable God, *Ein Sof*, can be known only through the emanations called *sefirot*. The first of the *sefirah* is known as *Kether* and is Nothingness. Nothingness takes on potential as the second *sefirah*, *Hokhmah*, or Wisdom. The Pythagorean concept of the number one represented by a single point is de Leon's *Hokhmah*. The next *sefirah* is *Binah*, Intelligence. Scholem interprets, "In the following Sefirah the point develops into a 'palace' or 'building' – an allusion to the idea that from this Sefirah, if it is externalized, the 'building' of the cosmos proceeds. In it all forms are already preformed, but still preserved in the unity of the divine intellect which contemplates them in itself."<sup>8</sup>

*Binah* gives birth to all of creation as a mother gives birth to her children. Scholem goes on to explain that the remaining seven *sefirot* are equated with the seven days of creation that spring forth from the womb of *Binah*. All of the *sefirah* unite in the ninth *sefirah*, *Yesod* from whence they flow into the last that is *Malkuth* or *Shekhinah*. The *Zohar* taught that the literal community of Israel was in correspondence to the mystical Kingdom that is *Shekhinah*.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there are two planes of emanation; the upper plane of the *sefirot* and the lower one of temporal creation.

In 1492 all Jews were forced to leave Spain. They migrated eastward into Europe, southward to northern Africa and many returned to Israel. A small village north of the Sea

of Galilee called Safed became the new center of mystical thought. Its leading light was a man named Isaac Luria. His contributions to Kabbalism were historic and lasting. First, he elaborated on the creation myth of the *Zohar*. Ein Sof was the All in All. In order for a creation to come forth there would have to be a place for it. Ein Sof would have to go inward or contract within Himself. Luria called this *Tsimtsum*. The first act of creation was the act of *Tsimtsum*. But, the nothingness created retained a residue of the Divine Light called *Reshimu*. This idea was found as early as the second century in the doctrines of the Gnostic, Basilides.<sup>10</sup>

The first emanation or self-revelation from Ein Sof was a ray of light that brought forth the form of a man called Adam Kadmon. From all of the orifices of the head of Adam Kadmon came forth rays of light. Out of Ein Sof came a second emanation of vessels into which the lights would differentiate into the first three *sefirot*. The remaining seven *sefirot* came forth as one explosive beam and shattered the vessels that were to contain them. The seeming tragedy is called the “breaking of the vessels.” But, Luria saw this as the birth process to separate out the dross. The light contained a latent property called *Kelipot*, or evil. The shards of the vessels, with the remaining spark of divine light and the *Kelipot*, were mixed and fell into the lower regions. The *Kelipot* became the demonic forces that disfigure the creation.<sup>11</sup>

For Luria, the purpose of existence is to restore the creation to its original purity absent the *Kelipot*. This salvation process is called *Tikkun*. The final manifestation of Ein Sof and His Kingdom as the perfect Adam Kadmon throughout all of the created dimensions is dependant upon his creation undertaking the ministry of *Tikkun*. To Luria, the Jews, with the light of the Torah and the power of their prayers, and the purity of their lives were as important to God’s plan as the original act of *Tsimtsum*. Israel was to engage in the Messianic ministry of restoration. The coming of the Messiah would see the restoration of Israel and the culmination of *Tikkun*.<sup>12</sup>

Kabbalah mysticism also had its effect upon the Christian community. In 1486 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) in Italy produced a set of propositions to show how the Cabala (note the different spelling commonly used for the “Christian” Cabala) supported the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ. His rough ideas were expanded by his protégé, John Reuchlin (1455-1522) and finally Paul Ricci (1470-1541) a converted Jew.<sup>13</sup> Together, their work presented the first three *sefirot* as The Father (*Kether*), The Son (*Chokmah*), and the Holy Spirit (*Binah*). Out of *Kether* came the light (Jesus/*Chokmah*), “He was the light of the world.” In the material world He is *Tiferet*, the center of all creation. He is the King of *Malkhut*, the Kingdom of the redeemed. Reuchlin interpreted Jesus as saying, “I am *Tiferet*, *Hokhma*, and *Malkhut*. No one comes to *Kether* except through me” (John 14:8ff).<sup>14</sup>

By the mid 1800s a major departure from Judaic Kabbalah was taking place. In France, the occult author of *The Dogma and Ritual of High Magic*, Eliphas Levi, had merged the *Sephiroth* from the Qabalah (note the spelling which is indicative of occult interpretations) with the Tarot to produce a new foundation for occult study and practice.<sup>15</sup> Levi’s work was taken up by Dr. William Wescott, Dr. William Woodman and S. MacGregor Mathers, the founders of the Esoteric (later, Hermetic) Order of the Golden Dawn in England in 1888. Jan Swanson describes the Order as being “a magikal organisation which incorporated Judaic Kabbalah, Egyptology, Resicrucianism, ritual magic, astrology, tarot, and the Indian tattwa system (as interpreted through Theosophy). According to the teachings... the cosmos is divided into ten fundamental archetypal essences; the ten sefirot.... The Sefirot as understood in the Golden Dawn system are not so much attributes... of God... as occult or psychic powers or archetypes, which were secondarily located within the human body.”<sup>16</sup>

The renaissance of public interest in Kabbalah at the present has been generated by its celebrity adherents. Their teachers, the Berg family (father, Rabbi ‘Rav’ Philip Berg and sons Rabbis Michael and Yehuda) run the Kabbalah Centrex. What does the Kabbalah

Center offer? Michael Berg unveils the good news in his 2004 book, “Kabbalah teaches that just as rocks are hewn from mountains, humans emerge from God. At the Level of the soul, humans have exactly the same essence as God. In essence humans are like God.”<sup>17</sup> The Bergs have accentuated the New Age aspects of Kabbalah. They teach astrology, astral projection, dream analysis, karma and reincarnation, energy balancing, and the power of meditating on Hebrew letters and words. They also promote the wearing of the red string for protection from the evil eye.<sup>18</sup>

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The deepest yearning of every Kabbalist is union with God. Evangelicals may be able to find some common ground as they also see humans, in their natural state, as being separate from God. But, unlike the evangelical solution to separation, Kabbalists often focus on human effort and personal responsibility for the restoration of “the fallen sparks.” Scholem puts it this way:

According to its recognized, orthodox interpretation, Israel has been dispersed among the nations in order that it may gather in from everywhere the sparks of souls and divine light which are themselves dispersed and diffused throughout the world, and through pious acts and prayers “lift them up”.... There are stages of the great process of *Tikkum*, the Messiah himself must descend into the realm of evil. Just as the Shekhinah had to descend to Egypt-the symbol of everything dark and demonic – to gather in the fallen sparks, so the Messiah too... on his most difficult journey to the empire of darkness, in order to complete his mission.<sup>19</sup>

To free the slave of sin from endless self-effort, the biblical Christianity offers the simple gospel (I Corinthians 15:1-4). Many scriptures set forth who the Messiah is and what He has accomplished (John 1:1-5, 8-14.18; Ephesians 2:8-10). The atoning work of the Messiah on the cross, rather than “pious acts and prayers” bring union with God by grace through faith alone (Titus 3:5). Jesus, the Messiah said “It is finished” (John 19:20). The Christian must make it known that the Messiah has already come. This is the Good News for the Kabbalist and for all people.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Rabbi James Rudin, “Commentary: Kabbalah Comes to Hollywood,” *Religious News Service (AP)*, 13 August 1999; David Van Biema, “Pop Goes the Kabbalah,” *Time Magazine*, 24 November 1997, 92-94; Sue Facter, “Celebs embrace Jewish mysticism,” *USA Today*, 20 September 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> James R. Davila, “The Hekhalot Literature and Shamanism,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1994 Seminar Papers*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994) 767-89.
- <sup>3</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1995 ed.) 76.
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Canendish, editor. *Man, Myth & Magic An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural*, (Italy: BPC Publishing Ltd., 1970) 2315-16.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Grant, *The Classical Greek*, (New York: Scribner’s, 1989) in excerpt on internet at [www.mystae.com/restricted/streams/gnosis/pythagoras.htm](http://www.mystae.com/restricted/streams/gnosis/pythagoras.htm) (accessed 2004).
- <sup>6</sup> John Opsoqaus, “Some Notes on the History of Isopsephia (Gematria), on the internet – [www.cs.utk.edu/~mclennan/BA/SNHIG.html](http://www.cs.utk.edu/~mclennan/BA/SNHIG.html) (accessed 2004).
- <sup>7</sup> Attributed to Rabbi Nehunia ben haKana, “Sefer ha-Bahir – The Book of Illumination,” [www.darkwing.uoregon.edu/~sshoeak/102/texts/bahir.htm](http://www.darkwing.uoregon.edu/~sshoeak/102/texts/bahir.htm) (accessed 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> Gershom, *Major Trends*, 219.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 264
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 267
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 273-274
- <sup>13</sup> William Varner, “The Christian Use of Jewish Numerology” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 8/1 (Spring 1997) 47-59.
- <sup>14</sup> Cindy Smith, “The Christian Cabala,” *Essay, Jewish Mysticism*, Professor Dr. David Blumenthal (Atlanta, Georgia: Emory University). On internet: [www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/chriscab.txt](http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/chriscab.txt) (accessed 2004).
- <sup>15</sup> Eliphas Levi, *Elements of the Qabalah in Ten Lessons*, on the internet: [http://home.comcast.net/~qblh/Levi/Qabalah\\_elements\\_Letters\\_of\\_Levi.pdf](http://home.comcast.net/~qblh/Levi/Qabalah_elements_Letters_of_Levi.pdf) (accessed 2004).
- <sup>16</sup> Jan Swanson, *Hermetic Qabalah The Qabalistic Tree*, on the net, [www.kheper.net/topics/Hermeticism/Qabalah.htm](http://www.kheper.net/topics/Hermeticism/Qabalah.htm) (accessed 2004).
- <sup>17</sup> Michael Berg, *BECOMING LIKE GOD KABBALAH AND OUR ULTIMATE DESTINY* (New York: Kabbalah Publishing, 2004) 11.
- <sup>18</sup> See website on internet, [www.kabbalah.com/k/index.php](http://www.kabbalah.com/k/index.php) (accessed 2004).
- <sup>19</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 310-311.



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