

## KABBALAH Nick Campion Notes

### Alternative spellings: Cabala, Qabalah

*These notes also touch on medieval Jewish attitudes to astrology*

#### Definition

The 'received' or traditional lore.

While this may be generally contrasted with the written texts of Judaism, the **Talmud\*** and the **Torah#**, it can also include the prophetic books of the Bible which were 'revealed' by God.

(\***Talmud**: the commentaries on the Jewish Bible as summarised in the **Mishnah** around 200 CE composed in the first few centuries CE. There are two collections, the Palestinian, completed around 450 CE, and the much longer Babylonian, composed around 550 CE

#**Torah**: strictly translated as 'Law', usually refers the first five books of the Old Testament (Greek Pentateuch), which contain the laws for the regulation of Jewish religion and practice.)

#### Principle features

- Secret teaching, although over the centuries various texts have been published.
- Allegorical, symbolic, metaphorical attitude to scripture.
- Purpose is to come closer to God.
- Emphasises use of reason as well as faith.
- Requires spiritual purity on the part of the practitioner

#### Three categories of Kabbalistic literature according to Kaplan p. ix-x

- **Theoretical (theosophic according to Jewish Encyclopaedia - JE)**: Concerned with the dynamics of the spiritual domain, especially the worlds of the Sefirot, souls and angels. Reached its height in the 16th century.
- **Meditative (cosmogonic according to JE)**: Deals with the use of divine names, letter permutations and similar methods to reach higher states of consciousness. Enjoyed a brief renaissance in the mid 1700s with the rise of the devout Hasidic movement (which itself has ancient roots), but declined by 1800. Most of the texts have never been published, but are scattered throughout various manuscripts
- **Magical (theurgic according to JE)**: Closely related to the meditative. Uses signs, incantations and rituals to influence or alter the natural world.

We might also add to this the *heikhalot* literature, which deals with the soul's ascent.

### Origins

- The origins of Kabbalah must necessarily date back to the origins of Judaism: tradition holds that its secrets were revealed by Moses to Joshua.
- The essence of Kabbalistic teachings is their secrecy. Their origins are therefore necessarily difficult to trace, although may have been developed in the last few centuries BCE.
- Features of Kabbalah are found in non-scriptural Jewish works such as
  1. 'Slavonic Enoch' (1st c BCE) which set out the structure of the cosmos,
  2. The Book of Jubilees (1st c BCE) which sets out a cosmogony based upon the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
  3. Non-Jewish works, such as the writings of Plato (4th c BCE), which argued for the emanation\* and the pre-existence of the soul.  
\*Emanation: the universe emanates out of God, as opposed to being created by him.
  4. Persian Zoroastrianism and Pythagoreanism may have provided the notion of the importance of pairs of opposites.
  5. There may also be influences from Gnostic texts and Hermetic teachings.

Also: Aristotelian teaching (as argued by Thomas Aquinas): what God reveals of himself is not himself - therefore can only be known by analogy.

The literary origins of Kabbalah as an organised system are coincident with its appearance in Germany, although its ideas are very much older.

### German Kabbalah

The first direct transition to Europe was probably about 917, when the Babylonian scholar, Aaron bin Samuel, took the teaching from Mesopotamia to Germany, giving rise to the of whom the main exponents were Judah the Pious (d. 1217) and his pupil Eleazar of Worms. The last major figure was Abraham Abulafia,, before 1300. From then until the immigration of Polish Jews in the 18th c (study in Poland started in the 1600s), there does not seem to have been any Jewish Kabbalah in Germany.

**Main teachings:**

- God is too exalted for mortals, and even for angels, to comprehend.
- In order to be visible God created a 'majesty' r representative, out of the divine fire, which is visible to the angels, and is the anthropomorphic God of scriptural imagery (e.g., 'heaven is his footstool').
- There are four (sometimes five) worlds: the worlds of the glory (the visible God); angels; the animal soul; the intellectual soul.

**Spanish Kabbalah**

- Supposedly revealed by the prophet Elijah to Jacob ha-Nazir in the 1000s, but the main exponent was Isaac the Blind in the 1100s.
- Flourished in Provence, France as well as Spain.
- The doctrines were explained to philosophers by Azriel (1160-1238), a Spaniard and probably student of Isaac the Blind.
- Isaac ibn Latif (mid 13th c) introduced Aristotelian concepts.
- The **Zohar**, one of the major Kabbalistic texts, originates from this period. It's provenance is disputed: it may have developed over centuries.

**Sefir Yetzirah**

Very short: the short version is 1300 words, the long 2500 words. The original source may have been only 240 words.

Sefir = book = same root as sefirot

The core text of meditative Kabbalism.

The earliest manuscript is probably 10th c CE. It may, though date back to the early years of the Second Temple (after 520-515 BCE), the time when books such as Ezekiel were written, but may have been transmitted orally rather than written down (Kaplan p. xv).

**Chapters**

1. Introduces the sephirot.
2. discuss the alphabet
- 3-5 discusses the 3 divisions of letters.
6. commentary.

**Basic teachings:**

The fundamentals of all existence are the ten **sephirot**, the principles that mediate between God and the universe. They are the substance of things.

The forms of things are represented by the **twenty-two letters of the alphabet**. They hover on the boundary line between the physical and spiritual worlds: the real existence of things can only be understood through language.

This distinction is heavily influenced by the Platonic contrast between Being and Becoming.

### **Modern Kabbalah**

- Isaac Luria (1533-72)
- Emphasised magical techniques, the use of amulets, number and letter magic.
- Later worked into a coherent system by the Hasidim, c. 1700.

### **Christian Kabbalah**

Kabbalah had a huge influence in the Christian world. It was regarded as huge source of divine wisdom not found in scripture.

The first Christian scholar known to have been aware of it was Raymond Lull (c.1225-1315), who used it as a unifying principle for all knowledge.

Introduced into the Christian world by Pico della Mirandola (1463-94).

Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1487-1535), *De Occulta Philosophia*, Paris 1528.

Theophrastus Paracelsus (1493-1541) (German)

Jerome Cardan (1501-76) (Italian)

Johann Baptist von Helmont (1577-1644) (Dutch)

Robert Fludd (1574-1637) (English)

Valentin Weigel (1533-88) (German)

Jacob Boehme (1575-1624)

Joseph de Voisin (1610-85)

Athanasius Kircher (1602-84)

### **Kabbalah in Modern Astrology**

Attempts have been made to adapt Kabbalah to modern astrology.

Sepharial, *Kabbalistic Astrology* (1920s?) is one example, though seems to be mainly Sepharial's invention and is more astrological than Kabbalistic.

Warren Kenton's (Zev ben Shimon Halevi), *The Anatomy of Fate*, (is a more convincing attempt. Kenton's Kabbalah is meditative and he has run small Kabbalah study group in London and taught for the Centre for Psychological Astrology.

### **Medieval Judaism.**

**The Talmud: Translations by Meira Epstein**

### **The greatest question of all: Is Life Ruled By The Stars? - *Ein Mazal le'Israel***

The general attitude is that the heavens do rule people's lives, with some notable exceptions. The most famous one is the saying '*Ein mazal le'Israel*' – "The nation of Israel is not ruled by the stars" - a statement that was made by Rabbi Yohanan and has been quoted throughout the centuries. This extra protection exists as long as the Jews observe the laws of the Torah.

#### **Talmud Bavli, Shabat Tractate, 156.1:**

'Rabbi Yohanan said: How do we know that Israel has no *mazal*? For it was said (Jeremiah 10:2) "Thus said the Lord, Learn not the way of the [other] nations and do not fear the signs of the heavens, for the [other] nations will fear them but not Israel".'

One step further is taken in stating that the laws of the Torah, as given by God, provide powerful protection and are above the ordinary laws of nature, which are synonymous with the indications of the heavens.

#### **Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, in his commentary on Exodus 33:21:**

'And this is why our sages said that Israel is not ruled by the stars; [that is so] as long as they keep the [laws of the] Torah, but if they don't keep the Torah the stars will rule them, as has been experienced.'

#### **HaGRA (Haga'on Rabbi Eliyahu, 1720-1797, Vilna) said:**

'Everything depends on the *mazal*, even the book of the Torah in the temple, but the Torah itself (i.e. its teachings) has no *mazal*, for Israel has no *mazal* and it (the Torah) is the *mazal*.'

The book ***Sefer HaZohar*** (The Book of Splendor, 13<sup>th</sup> century), which is the main text of the Kabbalah, goes further and gives it a more personal spiritual and mystical interpretation, by saying that the act itself of studying the Torah provides divine protection from the heavenly laws of nature, and is summed up as follows. Before the Torah was given to the Jews all the people in the world were dependent on *mazal*, but after the Torah was given the Jews came out from under the rule of the stars and the signs, but this is so for the one who studies the Torah, while the one who doesn't is still ruled by them. The study of the Torah for its own sake and truth is elevated above the worldly affairs, and is protected by the divine providence above the indications of the natural forces and the signs. In doing so one is united with God and is spiritually in the realm of supreme holiness of the Torah, which is above all the worlds and gives life and existence to all natural powers. Therefore, the person who studies the Torah provides and sustains all and is above all.

Back in the earlier Talmudic era, we hear a contrary opinion, based on sober observation:

**Talmud Bavli, Shabat Tractate, 156.1:**

'**Rabbi Hanina** said: *Mazal* makes one intelligent and *mazal* make one rich, and Israel IS ruled by the stars (*Yesh mazal le'Israel*), and it is [a] difficult [question].'

**Talmud Bavli, Mo'ed Katan Tractate, 28.1:**

'**Rabba** said: Life, children and subsistence do not depend on virtue but on *mazal*, for Rabbah and Rav Hesda were both wise and righteous, yet, when one prayed it rained and when the other prayed it did not rain; Rav Hesda lived ninety two years and Rabbah lived forty years; In the house of Rav Hesda there were sixty festivities and in the house of Rabbah sixty deaths; In the house of Rav Hesda fine food is given to dogs and in the house of Rabbah people cannot find a piece of barley bread.'

**Other Medieval Jewish Astrology**

'The "Star of the Messiah" Reconsidered' by Roy Rosenberg (Biblica, Volume 53, 1972, Pages 105-109 contains a very detailed account of Abrabanel's ideas regarding periodic Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions. The author discusses Abrabanel giving 1396 BCE as the year of the "mighty conjunction" (meaning conjunctions occurring every 2860 years) portending the birth of Moses.

**Modern Kabbalah**

The Kabbalah was adopted by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in the 1880s as a principle tool of magical exploration. The Golden Dawn were interested in Kabbalah's abstract geometry, wanted to drop its religious connections and tried to distinguish their new Kabbalah by using the spelling Qabala.

**General works on Jewish mysticism, cosmology, and Kabbalah:**

Boustani, Ra'anan S. and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

Dan, Joseph, *The Revelation of the Secret of the World: The Beginning of Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity* (Providence, RI: Brown University Judaic Studies Series No. 2, 1992)

Dan, Joseph, 'The Name of God, the Name of the Rose, and the Concept of Language in Jewish Mysticism', *Medieval Encounters*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1996), pp. 228-248

Epstein, Perle, *Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic*, London: Shambhala, 2001.

Kaplan, Aryeh, *Sefer Yetzirah: the Book of Creation in Theory and Practice*, York beach, Maine: Weiser Books 1997.

Laenes, J.H., *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction*, London: Westminster John Knox Press 2001.

McGinn, Bernard, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1991) [excellent for cross-referencing Jewish and Christian cosmologies]

Scholem, Gershom, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1961) [essential reading]

Scholem, Gershom, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. Allan Arkush, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987.

Unterman, Alan, *The Jews: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press 1999, esp. chapter 6.

*The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, [www.jewishencyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com), articles on Cabala, The Ten Sefirot, Zohar.

### **Jewish Writers**

Epstein, Meira B., *The Correspondence between the Rabbis of Southern France and Maimonides about Astrology*, Reston VA: ARHAT Publications 1998.

Ibn-Ezra, Avraham, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, trans. Meira B. Epstein, Reston VA: ARHAT Publications 1998.

Pingree, David, and Goldstein, Bernard R., *Levi Ben Gerson's prognostication for the conjunction of 1345*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 80, pt. 6, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society 1990.

### **On heikhalot literature:**

Arbel, Vita Daphna, *Beholders of Divine Secrets: Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003)

Boustan, Ra'anana S., 'The Study of Heikhalot Literature: Between Mystical Experience and Textual Artifact', *Currents in Biblical Research*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2007), pp. 130-160

Elior, Rachel, 'Mysticism, Magic, and Angelology: The Perception of Angels in Hekhalot Literature', *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 1 (1993), pp. 3-53

Schäfer, Peter, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*, trans. Aubrey Pomerance (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) [essential introduction to this subject]

Lesses, Rebecca Macy, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power: Angels, Incantations, and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Harvard Theological Studies, Vol.

44 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998) [also excellent examination of the subject]

### **Analyses of specific Jewish texts**

These are only if you are going to be truly specialise; you can get general information and quotations from these and other important Hebrew texts in the books listed below under 'general', particularly Moshe Idel and Gershom Scholem]:

Kaplan, Aryeh, ed. and trans., *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation, in Theory and Practice* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1997) [for the linguo-theosophy]

Hayman, A. Peter, ed. and trans., *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) [the most academic translation with commentary]

Morgan, Michael A., trans., *Sepher ha-Razim: The Book of the Mysteries*, Society of Biblical Literature Texts and Translations Vol. 25, Pseudepigrapha Series Vol. 11, ed. Harold W.

Attridge (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983) [for angel magic in late antiquity]  
Tishby, Isaiah, ed. and David Goldstein, trans., *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, 3 volumes (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization/Oxford University Press, 1989; originally published as *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1949-61)

### **On Kabbalistic cosmology:**

Fine, Lawrence, ed., *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1995)

Idel, Moshe, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988) [excellent introduction to the subject]

Idel, Moshe, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995)

Magid, Shaul, 'From Theosophy to Midrash: Lurianic Exegesis and the Garden of Eden', *AJS Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1997), pp. 37-75  
JSTOR

Scholem, Gershom, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, ed. Jonathan Chipman (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1991) [this might be very useful for cosmological speculations]

Wolfson, Elliot R., *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) [essential reading]

### **Christian Kabbalah**

Godwin, Joscelyn, *Robert Fludd: Hermetic philosopher and surveyor of two worlds*, London: Thames and Hudson 1979a.

Godwin, Joscelyn, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge*, London: Thames and Hudson 1979b.

Greene, Liz, *Magi and Maggidim: The Kabbalah in British Occultism 1860-1940*, (Lampeter: Sophia Centre Press, 2012).