

Jewish Cosmologies

Ancient Jewish cosmological concepts

- The word used for ‘heaven’ in the Hebrew Bible is *shamayim*, which is plural: ‘the heavens’
- The word used for ‘heaven’ in the Septuagint (the Greek Bible) is *ouranoi*, likewise used in the plural
- There are sometimes three and sometimes seven heavens described in later Jewish apocalyptic and *heikhalot* literature (c. 300 BCE to 300 CE), which reflects Babylonian influences
- *Sheol* is the underworld, the place of the dead (e.g. Job 17:13-15) but it is not a place of punishment; it is equivalent to the Greek Hades
- Persian and Gnostic systems enter Jewish apocalyptic literature in the first centuries CE – the seven heavens are related to the Gnostic planetary ‘archons’, who are now angelic entities or archangels with hosts of angels serving them in each of the heavens

Jewish apocalyptic literature, 300 BCE-200 CE

‘Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, describing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world’

– John J. Collins, *Apocalypse: Morphology of a Genre* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), p. 9

The Books of Enoch

The apocalypse called *2 Enoch* (*Slavonic Book of Enoch*) dates from the 1st century CE. Enoch makes a heavenly ascent through seven heavens, conducted by two angels. He sees various supernal phenomena such as the seven archangels who rule the planets, a celestial hell in which the souls of the wicked are tortured, a vast heavenly sea, a camp of imprisoned rebellious angels, the angels who control the movements of the Sun and Moon, and God on his throne surrounded by angelic hosts. He is taught about the precession of the equinoxes, the movements of the fixed stars, and the astronomical basis for the equinoxes and solstices. Some of this material is derived from an earlier *Book of Enoch*, known as *1 Enoch* or *The Book of the Watchers*, dating to the 3rd century BCE.

The *heikhalot* texts, c. 200 CE - 800 CE

- The *heikhalot* (‘palaces’) literature is a body of magico-mystical texts arising from earlier apocalyptic literature, with influences from Greco-Egyptian (Hermetic), Neoplatonic and Gnostic currents in the first centuries CE
- These texts describe the ascent of the soul through seven heavenly ‘palaces’ to achieve a vision of God seated on his chariot-throne
- *Heikhalot* literature also includes magical adjurations of angels; the angels have altered in late antiquity from the messengers of God to independent celestial powers who govern the planets and can be invoked and commanded through the appropriate magical rituals
- The angels of *heikhalot* and related literature (e.g. *Sefer ha-Razim* or *Book of Secrets*, 3rd century CE) are astrological; they are associated with zodiacal signs as well as planets

The *Sefer Yetsirah* (‘Book of Formation’), c. 300 CE

- This influential work marks the first appearance of what later develops as Kabbalistic cosmology
- It also marks the flowering of Jewish linguo-theosophy – the idea that the basic substance behind all creation is the letters of the alphabet, which are both numbers, letters, and emanations of deity
- The ten *sefirot* first appear in the *Sefer Yetsirah* as middot, ‘qualities’ or attributes of deity, equated with the first ten letters
- The twenty-two Hebrew letters are also equated with the four elements, the planets, the zodiacal signs, the four directions, colours, days of the week, planetary hours, and the parts of the human body, reflecting the Stoic idea of sympathies or correspondences

‘The twenty-two letters are the foundation: three primary letters, seven double (letters), and twelve simple (letters)...Twenty-two letters: he [God] carved them out, he hewed them, he weighed them, he exchanged them, he combined them and formed with them the life of all creation and the life of all that would be formed. How did he weigh and exchange them? – Aleph with them all, and them all with Aleph; Bet with them all, and them all with Bet. And they all rotate in turn. The result is that [they go out] by two hundred and twenty-one [gates]. The result is that all creation and all speech go out by one name’.

– *Sefer Yetzirah*, 9 and 19a-b, trans. A. Peter Hayman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004)

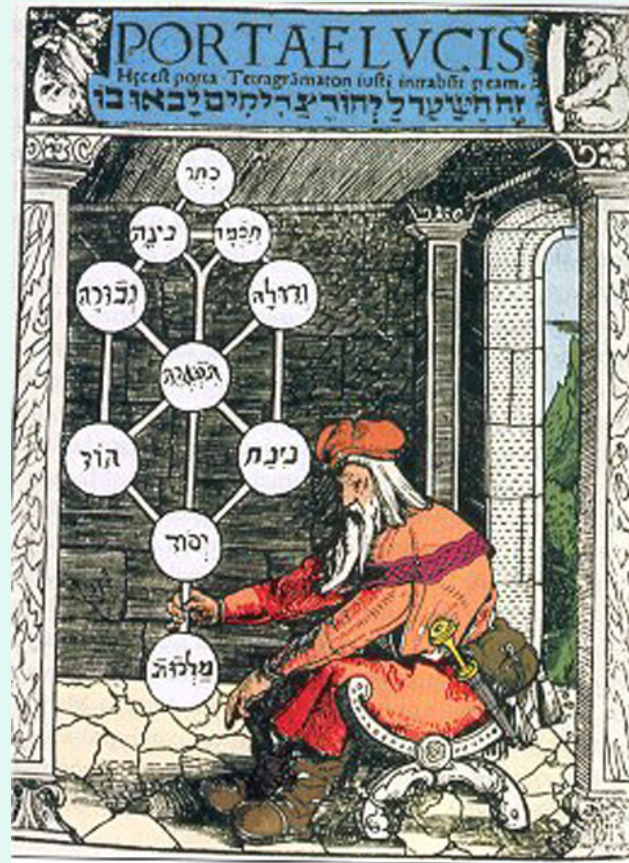
Kabbalistic cosmologies (1)

- The earliest known Kabbalistic text (*Sefer ha-Bahir* or ‘Book of Brilliance’, 12th century) presents the first example of the Tree of Life, comprised of ten *sefirot* or divine emanations
- The cosmos is envisaged as a series of emanations from the unknown and unknowable godhead (*en soph*), called *sefirot*; each emerges from the previous one, and each represents a particular aspect of the godhead and an agency of a particular aspect of creation
- The *Sefer ha-Bahir* also presents for the first time the idea of an androgynous godhead, comprised of male and female polarities; the female aspect is called *Shekhinah* (presence or glory) and is synonymous with the left pillar of the Tree of Life, understood as female

Kabbalistic cosmologies (2)

- The *Sefer ha-Zohar* (‘Book of Splendour’) (late 13th century) develops the cosmology of the *Sefer ha-Bahir* and adds three important elements:
- The idea of an original primal light (*aur*) which permeates the entire cosmos and serves as the medium of connection between all the levels
- The idea of a parallel series of ten dark or evil *sefirot*, governing the demonic realm and known as the realm of the *Qlipot*; these emanations, which are also generated from the godhead, represent the Kabbalistic conception of evil as a necessary dimension of creation rather than the product of human sin
- The idea of the divine union or *hieros gamos*, the mating of the male and female aspects of the godhead, an intermittent and ongoing dynamic which can be facilitated by the human conjugal act if it is performed in the correct theurgic fashion

The Tree of Life: the frontispiece of a 16th-century Latin translation of Joseph Gikatilla's late-13th-century work, *Sha'areh Orah* ('Gates of Light')



Kabbalistic cosmologies in the early modern period

The most important Kabbalists of the 16th century are Moshe Cordovero and Isaac Luria. These Kabbalists describe what is now known as panentheism (the idea that everything exists within deity).

‘The essence of divinity is found in every single thing – nothing but it exists. Since it causes every thing to be, no thing can live by anything else. It enlivens them; its existence exists in each existent. Do not attribute duality to God. Let God be solely God. If you suppose that Ein Sof emanates until a certain point, and that from that point on is outside of it, you have dualized. God forbid! Realize, rather, that Ein Sof exists in each existent. Do not say “This is a stone and not God.” God forbid!

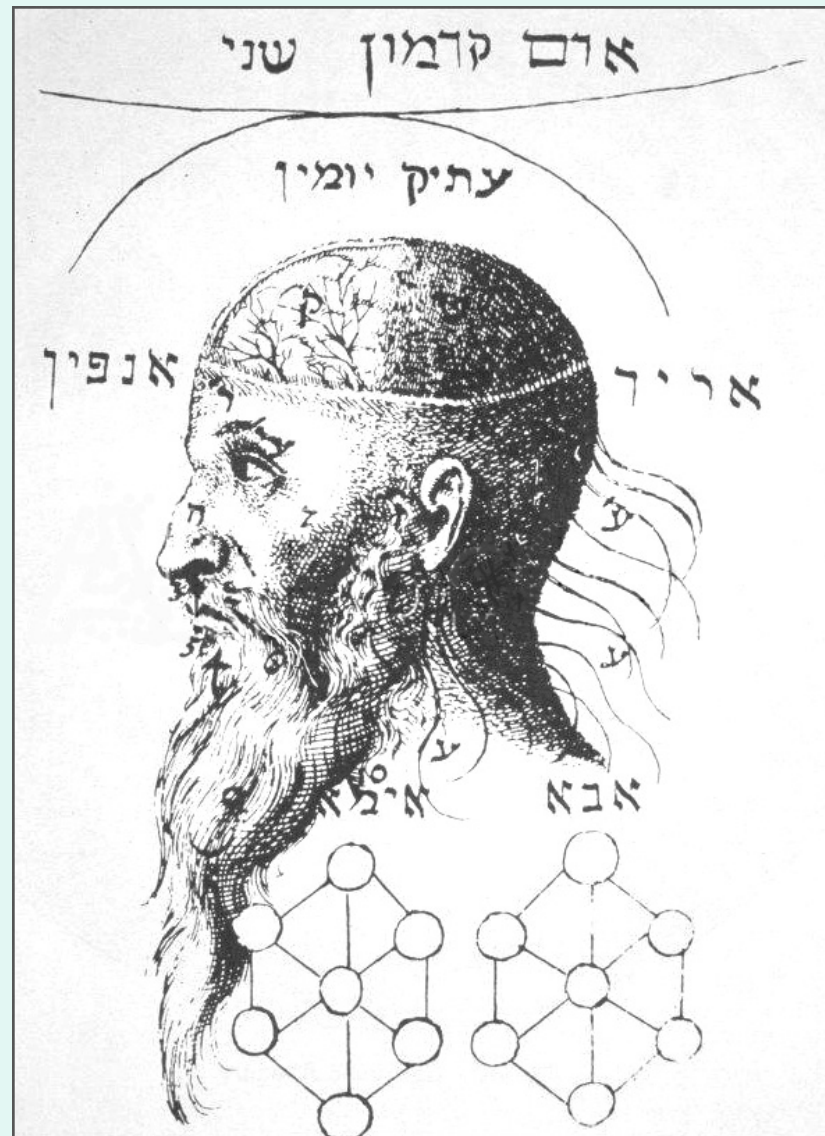
Rather, all existence is God,
and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity’.

– Moshe Cordovero, *Shi ’ur Qomah* (late 16th century)

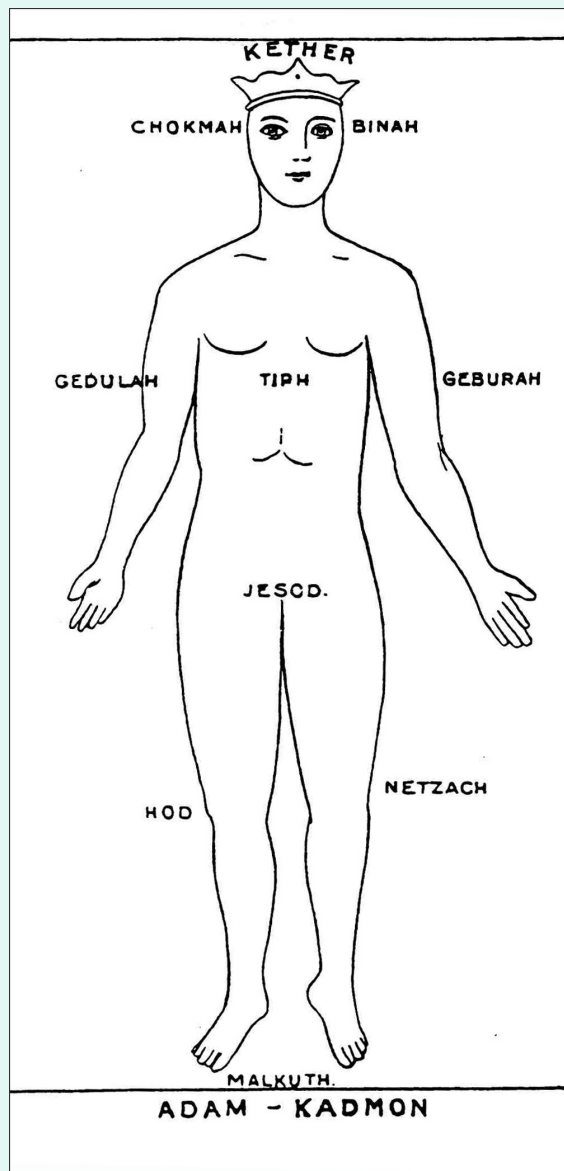
The Lurianic Kabbalah

- Isaac Luria developed several ideas which have found their way into esoteric currents in the modern and post-modern periods.
- *Adam Kadmon* (‘primal earth’ or ‘primal Adam’ represents the ten *sefirot* in a configuration which represents the model on which all things, including the human body and the human soul, are based; therefore what is within humans is also within the godhead, and the journey ‘upward’ is also the journey ‘inward’.
- The cosmos, and the godhead itself, are damaged or fragmented not because of human sin but because of a cosmic ‘accident’ during the process of emanation. This damage includes the separation and alienation of the male and female aspects of deity. However, it lies within human capability to restore or reintegrate the godhead through ritual practice.

The head of Adam Kadmon, from Christian Knorr von Rosenroth's Latin translation of Lurianic texts, *Kabbala denudata* (late 17th century)



Adam Kadmon as an anthropos representing the ten *sefirot*, illustrated by the late-19th-century British occultist William Wynn Westcott



Modern Hasidism

- The modern Hasidic movement, emerging in the 18th century and still a dynamic element in contemporary Judaism, utilises elements of both Lurianic Kabbalah and earlier 13th-century Kabbalistic ideas
- Many currents in Hasidism express a markedly panentheistic perspective: the ‘holy sparks’ of divinity, scattered when the cosmic ‘accident’ occurred during the process of creation, exist not only in humans, animals, and plants, but in every object that can be found in the earthly world. ‘Contemplative prayer’ or ‘prayer with intent’ (*kavvanah*, a form of ritual meditation) can be utilised to ‘free’ the sparks and help to facilitate the great cosmic process of reintegration
- In Hasidism, spiritual and material are of equal value and represent different aspects of a unified divinity. This incorporates ideas from Stoic cosmology and physics as well as from Neoplatonism. The imagination, as in Neoplatonism, is the organ of reception for the divine.

The Kabbalah and the ‘New Age’

Largely due to the extensive use of Kabbalistic literature by occultists such as H. P. Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley, and Dion Fortune in the Victorian and Edwardian occult revival, the Kabbalah has been appropriated by many ‘New Age’ currents as a universal theosophy and path of magico-mystical self-transformation. It also provided Jung with cosmological models which were then interiorised and ‘psychologised’, offering a ‘scientific’ validation for certain New Age ideas. Although ‘New Age’ versions of the Kabbalah remain rooted in Jewish traditions, some modern practitioners have attempted to dissociate themselves from this source by calling their ‘new’ Kabbalah ‘Hermetic’ or ‘occult’. However, there are virtually no elements in these ‘new’ Kabbalahs which cannot be found in Jewish Kabbalistic texts from the 12th century onward, including syncretic parallels with other esoteric systems. Jewish Kabbalists began discussing and integrating elements from other esoteric systems – Neoplatonic, Pythagorean, Orphic, Hermetic, Aristotelian, Sufi, Hindu – from the early medieval period.

A 'New Age' Tree of Life, with the Major Arcana of A. E. Waite's Tarot deck marking the 22 paths between the *sefirot* described in the *Sefer Yetsirah*

