

Introduction to Qabbalistic Literature

QABBĀLĀH IS NOT A BOOK OR BOOKS. It is an ancient mystical tradition. H. P. Blavatsky (HPB) comments:

Kabalah is no special volume, nor is it even a system. It consists of seven different systems applied to seven different interpretations of any given Esoteric work or subject. These systems were always *transmitted orally* by one generation of Initiates to another, under the pledge of the Sodalian oath, and *they have never been recorded in writing* by any one. . . . It is not allied to “tradition” but to the seven veils or the seven truths orally *revealed at Initiation*. . . . Thus, if Kabalah as a word is Hebrew, the system itself is no more Jewish than is sunlight; it is universal.

— *H. P. Blavatsky: Collected Writings* 7:268

The word *qabbālāh* means “to receive, to admit a precept,” hence admission or reception by heart and mind of esoteric knowledge. It is secret wisdom not sought by the many, but revealed “only in darkness and with mouth to ear.” Thus, the Tōrāh or Pentateuch is called the Law; the Talmūd, the soul of the Law; and Qabbālāh, the soul of the soul of the Law.

Qabbālāh is the stream of esoteric wisdom, and only the initiated were entrusted with its *Sōd* or Mysteries. Legend

has it that its secret wisdom is traceable back to the Deity, who communicated the doctrine to a “select company of angels.” These formed a “theosophic school in Paradise,” where Qabbālāh was taught to them in order that, after the fall, they might teach Adam and Eve (early humanity), thus enabling mankind to exercise free will and acquire self-conscious nobility and wisdom. But *nothing esoteric was ever written down*: it was considered a desecration to commit esoteric truth to writing, for the written word cannot contain the inner truth, being but a symbol, the rind or bark. The secret wisdom was held to be incommunicable except by master to pupil.

The Jews have preserved among their mystical works two important books on Qabbālāh. The first, *Sēfer Yētsīrāh*, “The Book of Formation (or Creation),” treats of cosmogony in particular, i.e., the genesis of worlds through numbers and letters. The interrelations of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet with the 10 numbers form the 32 marvelous paths of wisdom. The human being is regarded as the synthesis of the 22 letters which, with the addition of the ten sēfirōth or “numbers,” make the complete synthesis of creation. Just as alphabetic characters form the structure of speech and its communication of intelligence, so the characters of the Hebrew alphabet symbolize the elements of the universe: in, above, and around the elements of the universe there is the divine hierarchy, of which the elements are the outward expressions. The 22 letters are sometimes divided into Three Mothers — a triad, a heptad, and a dodecad — corresponding to the three primal letters A M S (א מ ש), the seven planets, and the twelve signs of the

zodiac. The author of *Sēfer Yētsīrāh* is not known. It was formerly attributed to the patriarch Abraham, but is generally reputed to be by Rabbi ‘Aqībā’, the teacher of Rabbi Shim‘ōn ben Yoḥai.

The second and best known book on Qabbālāh is *Sēfer-hā-Zohar*, the “Book of Brightness, Splendor, or Light.” The bulk of the Zoharic writings, outside of commentary on the Pentateuch itself, comprises eleven treatises.* Three principal books of the *Zohar* are *Hā-’Idrā’ Rabbā’ Qaddīshā’* (The Great Holy Assembly), *Hā-’Idrā’ Zūtā’ Qaddīshā’* (The Small Holy Assembly), and *Sifrā’ di-Tsēnī’ūthā’* (Book of Concealment).† Of this last and its relation to the Stanzas of Dzyan, upon which *The Secret Doctrine* is based, HPB writes:

There exists somewhere in this wide world an old Book — so very old that our modern antiquarians might ponder over its pages an indefinite time, and still not quite agree as to the nature of the fabric upon which it is written. It is the only original copy now in existence. The most ancient Hebrew document on occult learning — the *Siphra Dzeniouta* — was compiled from it, and that at a time when the former was already considered in the light of a literary relic.

— *Isis Unveiled* 1:1

This viewpoint is not accepted by the majority of scholars. Gershom G. Scholem, for example, held the reverse: that the Stanzas of Dzyan were derived from the *Sifrā’ di-*

*See Appendix, “Zoharic Writings.”

†Translated into English from the Latin rendition of Knorr von Rosenroth by S. Liddell MacGregor Mathers.

Tṣēnī‘ūthā’. Whatever the case, there is a striking similarity between the *Zohar* and the Stanzas of Dzyan insofar as they relate to the emanation or coming forth of worlds from the Boundless.

In the thirteenth century the *Zohar* was published by Rabbi Moses de Leon of Guadalajara, Spain, and he attributed it to Rabbi Shim‘ōn ben Yoḥai. That Moses de Leon is the author or editor of the *Zohar* is most likely.* That he had recourse to ancient manuscripts dating from the days of Shim‘ōn ben Yoḥai is almost certain.

On this point HPB says:

The author [Isaac Myer] of the “Qabbalah” makes several attempts to prove conclusively the antiquity of the Zohar. Thus he shows that Moses de Leon could not be the author or the forger of the Zoharic works in the XIIIth century, as he is accused of being, since Ibn Gebirol gave out the same philosophical teaching 225 years before the day of Moses de Leon. No true Kabbalist or scholar will ever deny the fact. It is certain that Ibn Gebirol based his doctrines upon the oldest Kabbalistic sources, namely, the “Chaldean Book of Numbers,” as well as some no longer extant Midrashim, the same, no doubt, as those used by Moses de Leon. But it is just the difference between the two ways of treating the same esoteric subjects, which, while proving the enormous antiquity of the esoteric system, points to a decided ring of Talmudistic and even Christian sectarianism in the compilation and glossaries of the Zoharic system by Rabbi Moses. Ibn Gebirol *never quoted from the Scriptures* to enforce the teachings. Moses de Leon has made of the *Zohar*

*Cf. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 153-201.

that which it has remained to this day, “a running commentary on the . . . Books of the Pentateuch,” with a few later additions made by Christian hands. One follows the archaic esoteric philosophy; the other, only that portion which was adapted to the *lost* Books of Moses restored by Ezra. Thus, while the system, or the trunk on which the primitive original *Zohar* was engrafted, is of an immense antiquity many of the (later) *Zoharic* offshoots are strongly coloured by the peculiar views held by Christian Gnostics (Syrian and Chaldean), the friends and co-workers of Moses de Leon who, as shown by Munk, accepted their interpretations.

— *The Secret Doctrine* 2:461n

This production appeared at the end of the thirteenth century, a century noted for its brilliant spiritual and intellectual lights. It created a sensation and ushered in what is known as the period of Spanish Qabbalism. Here we have two centuries of splendor in Spain, when the Moors likewise were in full flower.

It was not until the middle and last quarter of the fifteenth century that a number of significant events occurred: the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 under Ferdinand and Isabella; the shipping trade with India had begun; the Reformation of Luther was soon to occur; and, also in 1492, the New World opened up. During this period and following two centuries the Gentiles — through Pico della Mirandola, Cardinal Nicolao Cusani, John Trithemius, Henry Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, the Van Helmonts, John Reuchlin, Henry Khunrath, Jerome Cardan, Guillaume Postel, Christian Knorr (Baron) von Rosenroth, Athanasius Kircher, and, not least, Jacob Boehme — became

captivated with the Qabbalistic interpretation of Christianity. This had a far-reaching influence on the whole of Europe, liberating spiritual thinking as well as higher learning. Several English mystics show the influence of Qabbalistic thought, such as Henry More, Philip Bailey, John Colet, Robert Fludd, Raymond Lully, Thomas Vaughan (Eugenius Philalethes), and the poet Thomas Traherne. Isaac Myer points to Qabbalistic influence on European literature:

Upon the Practical Qabbalah, Abbe de Villars (nephew of De Montfaucon) in 1670, published his celebrated satirical novel, *The Count de Gabalis*, upon which Pope based his *Rape of the Lock*. Qabbalism runs through the Medieval poem, the *Romance of the Rose*, and permeates the writings of Dante.

— *Qabbalah*, p. 171

It is not our intent to trace the spiritual and intellectual expansion that began during the middle of the fifteenth century. Suffice to note that Qabbalistic thought had a continuing and lasting influence upon such thinkers as Spinoza, Leibniz, Newton, Kepler, and Francis Bacon.

Today we can find expressions of the original esoteric Qabbalistic knowledge in modern theosophical works. We now turn our attention to a consideration of some of the basic concepts of Qabbalistic philosophy.