

**WHAT IS THE KABBALAH
AND
WHAT IS AN APPROPRIATE
CHRISTIAN RESPONSE?**

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INDEX

| | Page |
|---|-------------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Chapter One HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF JEWISH MYSTICISM PRE-12 th CENTURY CE | 5 |
| Chapter Two DEVELOPMENT OF KABBALAH IN MEDIAEVAL TIMES | 10 |
| Chapter Three KABBALAH INTO MODERN TIMES AND ITS INFLUENCES ON THINKING TODAY | 17 |
| Chapter Four A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO KABBALAH AND KABBALISTIC THINKING | 23 |
| Conclusion | 28 |
| Bibliography | 29 |

INTRODUCTION

To gain insight into its various facets and ideas this dissertation will consider the Kabbalah's Judaic origins, esotericism and elements within this. It will look at different sects and beliefs within early Kabbalistic thought.

Each chapter will focus on a specific aspect, as outlined below:

Chapter 1 will consider pre-12th century CE mystical and kabbalistic thinking

Chapter 2 will examine the Kabbalah's development through the mediaeval period.

Chapter 3 will look at Kabbalah from the Middle Ages to modern times, including its influences on thinking and practice today.

Finally Chapter 4 will offer some thoughts on an appropriate Christian response to the Kabbalah.

I shall start by giving a definition of the Kabbalah:

Kabbalah Defined

The verb "Kbl" according to Joseph Dan, a leading Scholar of Jewish mysticism,

'is present in every other sentence in Hebrew, meaning simply to receive'¹

It can mean 'tradition', that is

'the tradition of things divine and is the 'sum of Jewish mysticism'²

Some would agree that Kabbalah can be a

'profound yearning for direct human communion with God through annihilation of individuality'³

This may be insufficient definition, as few kabbalists seek the goal of communion with God, and rarely formulate it openly as their final aim.

¹ Dan, Kabbalah, A Very Short Introduction, 2006:1

² Scholem, Kabbalah and its Symbolism, 1960:1

³ Encyclopaedia Judaica, Kabbalah, 1972:490

We need to be careful not to take what Kabbalah is too superficially. In modern times, for example, it has become a popular form of culture, but it would be wrong to say that it is just a form of New Age or mysticism as many would assert.

Mysticism and Judaism

‘have been inextricably linked together since antiquity⁴’

It is interesting to note that in the Talmud, the term “Kabbalah” is used for the

‘extra-Pentateuchal parts in the Bible

and in post-Talmudic literature⁵, the oral law is called “Kabbalah”.

For myself, I always saw Kabbalah as a stereotype of Occultism. Having now studied its various forms and teachings, I would suggest that although it has many such attributes, it adheres to many other ideas too.

Coming from a Jewish heritage, I would say that there is a huge desire for searching into the hidden world of mysticism, as spirituality is somewhat non-existent in Judaism.

As we look into this fascinating subject of Kabbalism, we will see it is deeply embedded in Jewish thought and ideas.

⁴ Ariel, *The Jewish Mystic Quest*, 1988:X1

⁵ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 1974:6

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF JEWISH MYSTICISM

PRE-12th CENTURY CE

To discover the background and origins of the Kabbalah and Kabbalistic thinking and practices this Chapter will consider some of the earliest known examples of Jewish mysticism. This will help explain how the Kabbalah itself came about.

Judaic Origins

Kaballah is rooted in Judaism. Within Judaism and its religious context, the core meaning of the word Kabbalah is found in the Talmudic tractate *avot* - the most popular of rabbinic texts, probably formulated in the second century CE. The beginning of this tractate envisages the

‘traditional chain of Jewish law and religious instruction⁶’.

This was known as the oral law transmitted from generation to generation. Moses received Kibel/ Torah on Mount Sinai, then handed it down to Joshua, who handed it down to the Elders of Israel. The text carries on to describe the continued oral transmission to the judges, prophets and ultimately to the early sages of the Talmud. The term Torah meaning law (*halakhah*) meant the rules of ethics, and the explanation of scriptural verses was the *midrash*. It is believed by Kabbalists that what Moses “received” is Kabbalah tradition. Within this context the word acquired a meaning of sacred tradition of divine origin. Part of this is found in ancient writings of scriptures and part transmitted orally through generations. In summary the word Kabbalah is seen as

‘an abbreviation , indicating truth received by Moses from God’⁷

⁶ Dan 2006:2

⁷ ibid

I have demonstrated in part how Kabbalah related to Judaic thought and will now turn to some other areas of study demonstrating that Kabbalah is no single movement.

Common threads of early Kabbalistic thought

Scholastic views see Kabbalah as the

‘most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism⁸’

The term “esotericism” in Kabbalist thought

‘conjures up the idea of something “secret” of a “discipline of the arcane”, of restricted knowledge’⁹

Early development of the Kabbalah embraced esotericism which was similar in character to Gnosticism - a syncretistic religious movement in antiquity with various belief systems, generally teaching that humans are divine souls trapped in an imperfect world created by an imperfect god. This included ideas from cosmology (study of the universe within its totality) from the angelology (the study of angels) and magic. Later when in contact with mediaeval Jewish philosophy, the Kabbalah would become a Jewish “mystical theology”. As I have mentioned there is a connection between Gnosticism and early Kabbalistic thought. Gnosticism is the sum of

‘varying dualistic systems¹⁰’.

Here there is a clear connection between the highest divinity and His world of light and our world of the cosmos, which - according to early kabbalists - reflected the world of darkness. Ancient thought saw that the world was not created by the divinity himself, but by powers of inferior status (the Archons). Late antiquity used some alternatives of Gnosticism using ‘Archons’ to mean a majority of the servants of the Demiurge, a derivative of *dēmiourgos* - an entity, the maker for the Universe and the living aspect of human nature. This seems to reflect the position of the angels and demons of the Old Testament. The earth was seen to

⁸ Scholem, Kabbalah, 1978:3

⁹ Faivre, Access To Western Esotericism, 1994: 5

¹⁰ Laenen, Jewish Mysticism, 2001:40

be surrounded by seven cosmic spheres each of which was ruled by one of the Archons. A human is believed to possess a divine spark (*pneuma*), coming from the divine world of light falling into this world. The Archons' aim is to keep these sparks engulfed on earth, as a way to stop them from ascending to the divinity of which they once were a part. The inner spirit is asleep, but must find liberation by way of knowledge (*gnosis*). This will concern God, humanity and its world. These theories are perhaps somewhat obscure, but nonetheless were part of early kabbalist ideology.

Merkavah mystics

At what point are we able to determine the very first appearance of Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism, as the two coincide with one another? Scholars have tried to show that mysticism already existed in the Hebrew Bible. Visions of prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel, according to Laenen, indicate mystical ideals. I would agree with the writer's view that we should not see such religious phenomena as 'expressions of mysticism¹¹', as lack of evidence prevents us from making of such claims.

Evidence of Jewish mysticism is not found until the 2nd to 6th CE. The first example was "chariot mysticism" or "mysticism of the divine throne". It was within close rabbinic circles that such mysticism functioned. These ideas were kept secret on the whole. The mystics involved would make a visionary journey through the places of the seven heavens. The final destiny was to behold God, seated in the seventh place of the seventh heaven. The image of God is taken from the first chapter of the biblical book of Ezekiel. Here there is a type of apocalyptic imagery and symbolism, and this, I would assert, suggests kabbalistic thought. These core ideas in Merkavah mysticism have their roots in extensive esoteric tradition.

Various literatures in early esoteric traditions, including mystical reports of the journey through the heavenly realms, with analogies of the throne of glory, are known as *Hekhaloth* literature. These derive from a period of a thousand years. We have seen that the

¹¹Ibid:18

connection of this literature to Merkavah mysticism shares strands of Jewish apocalypticism. Apocalypticism was

‘a spiritual current for a very select group¹²’.

They occupied themselves with the end of times. The end was entwined with the Messiah, who would make way for a better world. The apocalypticists were waiting to see how the divine economy and God’s role might be discerned from the course of history; at the same time they would look at the roles of demonic powers, the subjects of God’s throne of glory and heavenly Biblical figures would play their part in the coming events. More could be described here, but what is important is that Apocalyptic literature incorporated many elements which were to be found in later traditions of Ma’ aseh Merkavah, Ma’ash Bereshith and Merkavah mysticism.

Ma’ash Bereshith, for example, was the interpretative story of creation in Genesis 1. What happened was that the esoteric traditions accumulated through cosmogony - the origins of creation and cosmology – the arrangement of creation as a ‘dynamic ordered whole¹³’. These traditions of exegetical analogy which concerned creation were known by the name of Ma’aseh Bereshith meaning literally , “the work of creation” - looking deeper into the Bible for that which is hidden. And within Ma’aseh Bereshith there was a tractate , “*sefer Yetirah*” (Book of Creation), which contains hidden knowledge and a precise treatment of cosmology and cosmogony and sparks of creation. Numerology is used to serve a purpose for divine knowledge. For example the opening paragraph explains that the Almighty created 32 magnificent paths of wisdom and it is these that form the basic structure of the whole creation. These are also the 10 *sefiroth*, a newly created word which can mean “primordial” numbers and when entwined with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet create 32 paths of wisdom, and thus are the building blocks of the whole of creation. It is a way to see how God created the world, to tap into his power. I would suggest that its adherents wanted to become like God.

¹² ibid

¹³ ibid

So far I have delved into various aspects of early Kabbalah, which seems to be very much linked to mysticism. There are many beliefs and ideas and I have only touched on selected points and analogies, giving a brief overview to gain a better understanding of Kabbalah.

Chapter 2 will deal with the development of the Kabbalah, by looking at writings and influences within the mediaeval period.

CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPMENT OF KABBALAH IN MEDIAEVAL TIMES

In the second half of the 12th century there were two currents of Jewish mysticism in mediaeval Europe. Germany, particularly the Rhine area, saw the emergence of Ashkenazi Hasidism, while - although the term “Kabbalah” has not yet been used - the name can be traced back to this period of history in the Jewish centres of Provence and Gerona. This was where the formation of Kabbalah took place. Kabbalah reached its heights in classical development at the end of the 13th century. The kabbalists would now describe the divinity differently from what was described in Chapter 1, i.e. by means of the *sefiroth*. Laenen asserts that we can't arrive at an understanding of Kabbalistic thought without insight into basic principles of the sefiroth. And according to Scholem

‘the mythical character of Kabbalistic ‘theology’ is most clearly manifested in the doctrine of the sefiroth, the potencies and modes of action of the loving God¹⁴,

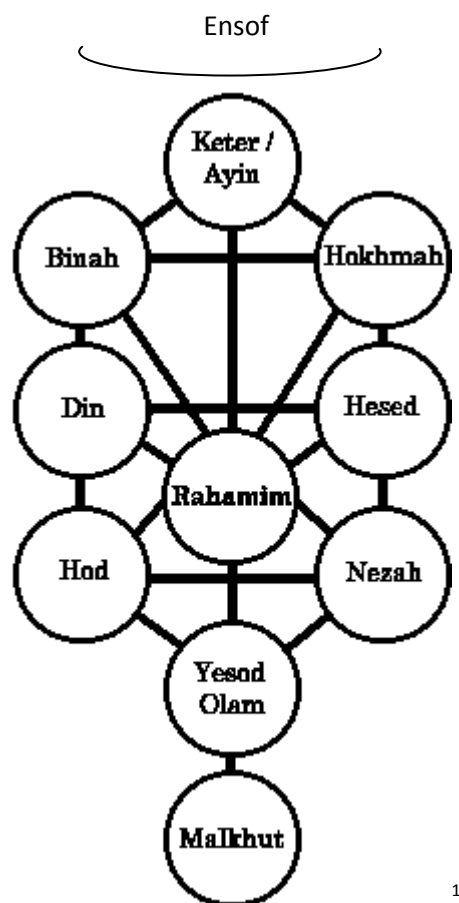
The kabbalists saw that behind reality was a divine world. To understand the divine world they used a system called the ten sefiroth. ‘The first sefirah is *kether* (crown), the 2nd *Hokhmah* (wisdom), the 3rd *Binah* (intelligence), the 4th *Hesed* (love/mercy), the 5th *Din* (stern judgment), the 6th *Tif'ereth* (beauty), the 7th *Netash* (lasting endurance), the 8th *Hod* (majesty), the 9th *Yesod* (foundation) and the 10th and last sefirah is called *Malkhuth* (kingdom). A few of these names are taken from the Bible and others come from traditional literature of Jewish origin. These ten sefiroth are derived from En Sof which is the highest principle. The whole of this process is called ‘emanation’¹⁵, the main ideas of which are that the ten sefiroth represent the hidden and the unknowable God. The hidden meaning of the En Sof, God, through the chart represented below, can reveal certain things of his life. The ten sefiroth are known as the uncovered aspects of lights of the hidden deity and are perceived to be the faces of God which is directed towards the world. With the En Sof, the

¹⁴ Scholem, Kabbalah,1969:100

¹⁵ Laenen, J.H., Jewish Mysticism,2001:46

whole of the ten sefiroth formulated the realm of the Godhead. And it is systems such as these that Kabbalists would develop throughout the centuries. After many generations the kabbalists ' symbolism crystallised into a more or less fixed form.

Diagram of the 10 sefiroth



16

¹⁶ Laenen.J.H, Jewish Mysticism, 2001:47

The Book of Bahir

So far we have shown that Kabbalah is not a single movement but rather a multiplicity of approaches. The Book of Bahir, (*Sefer ha – Bahir*) is the first mystical work which comes into contact with the symbolic structure of the sefiroth, and is very characteristic of later Kabbalah. Its form is of a traditional midrash in Hebrew and Aramaic, originating from Provence, most probably dating back to mid 12th century.

In chapter 1 I mentioned the Hekhaloth literature in relation to the Sefer Yestirah (Book of Creation) which had great influence on mediaeval mystics. It was a great source of study for them. The term sefiroth in the Bahir is borrowed from the Book of Creation and according to scholars the latter work apparently stands for the 10 primordial numbers. The book of Bahir has much to do with ancient Gnosticism. The latter part of the book deals with the idea of *pleroma*, Greek for fullness. It deals with a divine world which is perfect and filled with divine powers. There is the idea of lower worlds which stem from the heavenly worlds. Within this there is a Gnostic mythology in which imagery is used in its presentation of the sefiroth and introduced as a cosmic tree, planted by God. The roots are above and the 10 branches grow in a downward direction, but through a tight structure. The teaching of the Bahir was introduced as *ma'aseh merkabah* – the term Kabbalah had not yet been used at the time of these works. It was the theory of transmigration which was introduced as a mystery, an idea,

' which was self-explanatory and had no need for philosophical justification¹⁷,

even if there was opposition from Jewish philosophers from the time of Saadiah .

Another influential book was the Raza Rabba Sefer, meaning 'the great secret'. This was a work of Merkabah mysticism. Its magical content was engulfed with an exposition on the Merkabah, which was inclusive of speculations on the names of angels and demons. These were known from magical literature from Babylonian Arabs from the 5th century CE on oaths, creation of amulets, and *gematriot*. The latter refers to Cryptographs in the form of a word in which the letters have numerical values. In relation to the visionary Merkabah

¹⁷ Encyclopaedia Judaica, Kabbalah, 1972:519

texts, the no longer extant text, *Raza Rabba*, was a Merkabah Midrash. Many of its elements were connected to *Sefer ha-Bahir*, however they appear in different versions. *The Raza Rabba*, was one of the literary sources that was used for the editing of the *Bahir*. The point here is that works developed through time intertwining and combining Kabbalistic ideas.

Moving to the late 13th century we see the emergence of the doctrine of the Unique Cherub in Kabbalistic works - the works of Rabbi Moses ben Eliezer. This writer, who lived in the last decades of the 13th century, was unknown until Gershom Scholem wrote a detailed study of his works and published a selection of them, found in several manuscripts. According to Joseph Dan:

‘Analysis of these works is very important because Rabbi Moses was thoroughly familiar with many traditions, some of them unknown from another source’¹⁸

Scholem dedicated to the writer an appendix in his first book which was on early Kabbalah. This was after he had discovered in his works

‘extant quotations from an otherwise lost work of Jewish Mystical speculation’¹⁹,

This ‘Great Secret’ (*Sod ha-Gadol* in Hebrew, *Raza Rabba* in Aramaic) is a work of

‘Merkabah mysticism which is no longer extant as a separate entity’.²⁰

It is a presentation of a theosophy which encompasses Ashkenazi Hasidic speculations including Kabbalistic terminology. And so within these periods analytical studies were sought to uncover hidden mysteries of Kabbalistic ideology, which I would suggest was really to seek God through mysticism.

Historical Overview

¹⁸ Dan Joseph, *The Unique Cherub*, 1999:240

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Scholem, *Reshit ha-Kabbalah 2008*: 94–109.

With the establishment of Kabbalah in Provence we see the emergence of 13th century Kabbalistic tradition. The circle of early Kabbalists in Provence worked in a highly motivated religious culture. Their ideas spread to Spain and these, combined with theosophical Gnostic ideas, became dominant in other parts of Europe from 1230 onwards.

These periods produced writers who would contribute to the ongoing development of Kabbalah. One such writer was Issac Ibn, an independent mystic who drew his philosophical inspiration from Aramaic and Hebrew Neoplatonists. His theory of the divine logos, taken from Aramaic Neoplatonic tradition

‘identified with the divine and was identified with the divine word (logos) which brought all things – and into the “first” created thing’²¹

Another exponent of philosophical mystical ideals was Abraham Abulafia from the theosophical Kabbalah of the Gerona school. His prophetic and messianic claims brought strong opposition in Spain and Italy. His books were widely read from the end of the 13th century, especially the ones which took the system of Kabbalah further as:

‘a kind of guide to the upward journey from philosophical preoccupations of the Maimonidean type to prophecy and these mystical experiences which he believed partook of the nature of prophecy’²²

Maimonides (1135-1204) dealt with apophatic theology and dissociated himself from any possibility of prophecy in his time. Conversely Abulafia defended the prospect of finding names for specific mystical techniques which was called “the science of combination” (*hokhmat ha-zeruf*), a means to embody human aspirations towards prophecy.

The final subject I want to discuss is the Zohar. Various developments and the mixing of two trends which came out of the Gerona school and the school of the Gnostics are paralleled by the core product of Spanish Kabbalah, the *Sefer ha Zohar*, written between 1280 and 1286 by Moses b. Shem Tov de Leon in Guadalajara in Madrid. The earliest dating of the Zohar is from about 1281. The Zohar is the most

²¹ Dan, Kabbalah, 2006: 53

²² Encyclopaedia Judaica, Kabbalah 1972:529

‘important evidence of a mythical spirit in mediaeval Judaism²³’.

This is a collection of many books which have short midrashic statements and discussions on many ideas. The main aim of the book was to attack the actual ideas of Judaism and the

‘neglect of the performance of the mizvot²⁴’

referring to the 613 commandments given in the Torah plus seven rabbinic commandments instituted later. This was achieved by putting importance on the value and the secret meaning of every word and commandment of the Torah. The Zohar is a huge work

‘an esoteric and cryptic work, a commentary that requires a commentary²⁵’.

It is arranged in the form of a commentary on the Torah and is a

‘mosaic of the Bible, midrash, mediaeval homily, fiction and fantasy²⁶’.

The influence of the Zohar spread at a slow pace in the 14th and 15th centuries. Its world view eventually came to dominate the various circles of Kabbalists in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

The final generations of the Middle Ages saw the spread of Kabbalah in segregated circles within the Jewish world, and there is only a handful of great Kabbalistic works which have reached us today according to Dan. Some of these are written by Scholars such as Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi.

Finally the messianic ideals in the Kabbalah which were introduced by Rabbi Isaac Ha-Cohen of Castile and developed in the Zohar became a main topic in the writings of kabbalists in Spain and in other places in the middle and the second half of the 15th century.

In 1492 the persecutions of Spanish Jewry caused the exile of Jews from Spain. Because of the exile, messianic speculations grew amongst intellectuals and several Kabbalistic circles developed. And we see in the 16th century the Kabbalah transformed from the esoteric to

²³ Dan 2006: 57

²⁴ Ibid.,58

²⁵ Molt, D.C., ed The Zohar: XV

²⁶ ibid

the dominant spiritual doctrines of the Jewish people. I would suggest that the Zohar is the main work even today amongst leading Kabbalists.

The continued development and strengthening of influence of the Kabbalah in the Middle Ages was largely through scholarly interpretation, the dissemination of a variety of writings, and the growth of a multitude of ideas. In the next chapter I will turn to the Kabbalah in more modern times and its influences on thinking today, with particular consideration of messianism within Orthodoxy, kabbalist thought in Hasidism and Kabbalah in relation to New Ageism.

CHAPTER 3

KABBALAH INTO MODERN TIMES AND ITS INFLUENCES ON THINKING TODAY

Consideration Of Rabbinic Thinking Within Ultra Orthodox Traditions

Jews for thousands of years have longed for messianic deliverance. Even if writers such as Sherbok assert that it doesn't

'seem conceivable that a divinely appointed redeemer will arise to deliver the Jewish nation and bring the transformation of history²⁷'.

nonetheless the belief in a redeemer of the Jewish people

'retains its hold on Jewish consciousness²⁸'.

This chapter will not indicate different concepts of Messiah. However, it is important to be aware that searching for the Messiah is conducive to Kabbalah thought, so I will give some consideration to messianism, Messianic Mystics, Hasidism, and Kabbalism within modernity which broadens into some New Ageism.

Two models of Messianism emerged during the 13th century: the theosophical – theurgical, dealing with different maps of the divine realm, and the ecstatic

'Conceiving of religious activities as fraught with allegorical meanings directing to contemplate the spiritual world rather than influencing through international performance of the commandments'.²⁹

A later third model was the talismanic one and consisted of mysticism. The 14th century did not contribute a great deal to a new version of messianism. There were, however, some

²⁷ Sherbok – Cohn Dan, *The Jewish Messiah*, 1997: XV

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Idel Moshe, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, V111: 1988

new ideas which appeared in Tikkune Zohar Kabbalistic literature. The 100 years that followed saw a gradual increase in messianic expectations and a kind of redemptive idealism, but these were different from what was known as the theurgical project which sought to bring about the restoring of God's powers to a calmer state of consciousness as a means of redemption. With the ecstatic model, the major messianic ideals occurred more on an intellectual level through personal encounter than through prophetic ability.

What is important to note is that messianic expectation was studied by Rabbis through Kabbalistic thought. So we are really looking at Orthodoxy which even today uses Kabbalah as a means of messianic claim. Messianic activity emerged in the 15th century. The magico – Kabbalistic texts referred to a practical view that the Messiah is not to be achieved through fulfilment of biblical prophecy, or through the intellect, but through magical procedures. These texts were the Sefer ha-Meshiv or the Sefer ha-Mal'akh ha-Mershev, meaning the book of responding, or the book of the responding Angel. These texts were thought to have been dictated by God himself. This goes under the heading of apocalyptic ideology discussed in the previous chapter.

In these periods of messianic speculation Lurianic Kabbalah developed in the middle of the 16th century when Jewish mysticism had become a public and widely-accepted theology.

Isaac Luria (1534-1572) - also known as the "Ari Zaal," or "Divine Rabbi Isaac" - based his writings entirely on the Old Testament and Zohar. His works proposed a

‘cosmic myth of exile and redemption...mirroring the actual historical experience of Jews³⁰.

The actual concept of Messiah wasn't so important to Luria, since redemption was perceived to come slowly, a long gradual process extending back to creation, and was against the beliefs of some secular Jews who believed that messianism was passive in the Middle Ages. Gweshom Scholem suggests that

‘if early Kabbalah was “quietistic³¹”

³⁰ Scholem Gershom, Kabbalah and Counter History, 1982:80

³¹ ibid

it ultimately developed into a

‘mystical doctrine³²,

teaching man’s active role in the cosmos. And the probable role of messianism, inherent in the Lurianic Kabbalah, became evidently explicit in Shabbateanism .

Shabbetai Tzevi born in Smyrna in 1626 studied the rabbinic texts to Kabbalah specifically on the Zohar and the Qanah, which was an anonymous, two-volume Byzantine work of the late 14th century. Shabbetai Tzevi attracted a great crowd who perceived him to be the Messiah, Tzevi’s later conversion to Islam caused deep confusion within all religious groups. Many kabbalists who were let down by these events came to the conclusion that mysticism was not appropriate for the masses. However many mystical messianic ideas developed in the various sects of the Shabbateans at the end of the 18th century. They expressed in different ways many directions in which the Kabbalah had progressed and the most important were amongst the Hasidic movement which is

‘the most prominent expression of Kabbalah in contemporary Judaism³³,

It would seem that each view developed a language of Kabbalistic thought, predominantly using strands of mediaeval Kabbalah, which are incorporated into some of today’s thinking.

Hasidism and the Kabbalah

Hasidism is the branch of Orthodoxy which is known as “ultra orthodox”. Its roots lie in 18th century Eastern Europe. It is arguably one of the most vibrant religious movements in modern Jewry.

Its roots are found in the teachings of Rabbi Israel Ba’aal Shem Tov. It emphasises a cleaving to the divine through a *tzaddik* or *rebbe*, a charismatic leader seen as a conduit between the heavenly and the earthly spheres, and who is the voice from God. Some Hasidic groups, like the Chabad Lubavitz, regard the Rabbi **Menachem Mendel Schneerson** (1902 -1991) as

³² *ibid*

³³ Dan, Kabbalah, 2006:92

the Messiah; their scholars follow Kabbalah and practices of mysticism. Schneerson would have been seen to possess spiritual charisma and mystical insights. In their ideas there are very noticeable influences of the Lurianic teaching on reincarnation and the related process of cosmic restoration. We have seen how mysticism and magic is part of Kabbalah. Within Hasidism, magic has a part to play. According to Laenan, it is not easy to determine the extent of the influence of magic in Hasidic doctrine. According to the writer, there is

‘no comprehensive study of the influence of magical aspects on Hasidic mysticism’³⁴.

The only exception, he says, is Moshe Idel, an authority in the field of ecstatic Kabbalah. Apparently, in various studies of the use of magical techniques in some Jewish mystical movements, he ascertains that Hasidic mystical literature, like the Safed, very often has information on the ascent to the heavenly realms. The tsaddik tried, using a “working” deity as a medium, to channel divine energy or light powers to his followers. He was very famous for the use of his magic powers and the miracles that he performed.

The spread of Hasidism in 1772 – 1815, and continuing to today, has seen the kabbalistic tradition prevail in Orthodox Judaism. Since the last decades of the 19th century there has been a literary and also a spiritual phenomenon which has been expressed in the emergence of Hasidic narratives, tales and epigrams written in Hebrew and Yiddish. The term “Hasidic” became a substitute for “Jewish”, which means that Hasidism was considered more spiritual and noble than than ‘ordinary’ Judaism.

I agree with Dan’s view that:

‘the need for a more spiritual and noble synonym for “Judaism” was still present and from the 1990s to the present “Hasidism” was replaced by the term Kabbalah.’³⁵

Today when Hasidics preach their doctrines they usually prefer to use the term Kabbalah. And it is traditional Kabbalah that exists in Hasidic communities today. There is a return to its original esoteric place in Jewish culture. Although the Hasidic literature uses kabbalistic terms, the seriousness of the creativity of Kabbalah is the domain of the Zaddik or religious

³⁴ Laenan, *Jewish Mysticism*, 2001:236

³⁵ Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction*, 2006:102

leader; creative study of the Kabbalah is delegated to the leaders as opposed to the followers.

Kabbalah today

There are many important thinkers of Kabbalah today. Tamar Frankiel asserts that the basic technique of Kabbalah offers

‘truly unique insights that enable us to probe into the realities of the world’³⁶.

These notions, as far as I am concerned, reflect the ridiculousness of all Newageisms, where the writer is looking purely subjectively in hope of re-encountering some kind of spirituality. What is interesting, however, is that she claims Kabbalah, that was once secret, is now attainable. There is even the availability of the Zohar and what was once a secret text is now available to view.

Rabbi Judah Ashlag (1885-1954) a Lurianic kabbalist, worked on the commentary of the Zohar. Other scholars introduced the Kabbalah at the core of their works. Rabbi Dov Baer Soloveitchik of Boston introduced a modern concept of Judaism in the modern world using the texts of Maimonides and other modern philosophers as a start. So there is an overarching awareness of various texts and ideas forming, I would suggest, as new forms of Kabbalah to suit the individual’s need.

Since the 1970s Kabbalah has become an oracle for fast-spreading New Age movements. Many New Age movements use strands of spiritualities, stemming from kabbalist ideas. Since the 1970s, an author who introduced himself as Ze’ev ben Shimon Halevi has published a collection of books which deal with some aspects of the Kabbalah. In London there is the Kabbalah Centre – built to delve more into the realms of the hidden powers. The centre for the study of Kabbalah in America, founded by Phillip S. Berg in California, has achieved high status. The Hollywood centre has attracted, dare I say it, the likes of Madonna and other celebrities, who I feel have no real understanding of the Kabbalah’s antiquity and

³⁶ Frankiel Tamar, Kabbalah, a Brief Introductions for Christians,2006:4

meaning , but are using it as means for gain. The Kabbalah that appeared more than 800 years ago in Mediaeval Europe and accumulated many aspects and meanings , I believe, is still present today. Obviously we are not dealing with an esoteric, but with a religion which calls people to follow its deities.

Having considered ways in which Kabbalah is still present today in many forms, in the next and final chapter I will attempt to come to some conclusion about an appropriate Christian response; in particular I will examine how Christians have incorporated Kabbalah into their thinking in the past, how some messianic Jews have used Kabbalah to show the divinity of the messiah, and consider an acceptable Christian view about what I would perceive as something mystical.

CHAPTER 4

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO KABBALAH AND KABBALISTIC THINKING

Christian Use of Kabbalah in Thinking and Practice

From the late 15th century onwards in some Christian circles, primarily mystical and theosophical, a movement began which blended kabbalistic doctrines with Christianity which,

‘demonstrate that the true teaching of Kabbalah points in a Christian direction’³⁷.

This was met with disagreement. Historically, Christian Kabbalah came from two sources. The first was to do with Christological speculations of Jewish converts from 13th century until the period of the Spanish expulsion. Here were various texts such as the Yizhak Baer and Paul de Haredia’s compositions of Christian Kabbalah called *Iggeret ha-Sodot*. 15th century imitations of *Aggadah* and the *Zohar* circulated in Italy. These compositions had little effect on Christian spiritualists. And using these for missionary gain had little effect either. The Florentine circle thought that they had discovered in the Kabbalah an original divine knowledge that was lost to mankind, but could now be restored. These ideas were mixed with the teachings of Pythagoras, Plato and Orphics. The founder of the Christian Kabbalah was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463 – 94). I would suggest that this was not an actual Christian ideology, but a distortion, as Christian kabbalists used Magic. For example Mirandello’s theses claimed that

‘no science can better convince us of the divinity of Christ than magic and Kabbalah’³⁸.

³⁷ Scholem Gershom, *Kabbalah*, 1974:196

Pico was convinced that he could prove the dogmas of the Trinity and incarnation on the basis of Kabbalah axioms. This caused a stir in the Christian world and helped further interest of Christian Platonists in newly discovered sources particularly in Italy, Germany and France.

How Christians Respond To Kabbalah

Today many Messianic Jewish believers will use Kabbalah as a way to prove the divinity of Christ, which I would say is unnecessary. The search for the Messiah is a vital part of the Jewish faith

‘the coming of the Messiah at the end of Israel’s history to save and redeem Israel’³⁹

Richard Harvey reports a Messianic Christology that:

uses Jewish mystical ideas and exegetical methods to develop an understanding of Yeshua...compatible with the stream of Jewish tradition....express the divinity of Christ in Jewish terms⁴⁰,

I have already indicated that the scholar Pico della Mirandola argued that in the Kabbalah lay the answer to the search for the messiah. Other writers such as Johan Kemper (1670-1716) shared the same beliefs as those held by many Christian kabbalists in the Renaissance era. Kemper was a Polish Jew who converted from Judaism to Lutheran Christianity. According to Richard Harvey there were two aims: to use the esoteric Kabbalist teachings to put forward a Christian truth, and use a Kabbalistic method to build a language to put forward new ideas and symbols. He draws a line between a deceiving oral tradition of Rabbinical understanding and his perception of the truth: the recording of Jesus’ teachings in the gospels. Harvey asserts that Kemper’s approach has been influenced by the Hebrew Christian movement and Messianic Judaism.

Joseph Frey, an initiator of the London Society for the promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews, using material from the Talmud and Kabbalah, shows the divinity of the Messiah, and

³⁸ Cohn & Silberstien, *The Other Jewish Thought and History*,1994:200

³⁹ Neusner, *Messiah in Context*, 1984:X11

⁴⁰ Harvey Richard, *Mapping Jewish Theology*,2008:141

with the inclusion of scripture leads to the 'plurality of God'⁴¹. Shabbateanism incorporated a lot of mysticism and magic and there may not have been a clear understanding of the doctrines of Christianity. It may be a way to show Christ through the Kabbalah. However, there may be other causes for disagreement; Christians would not want to use the Kabbalah since it would be using elements of the occult. Christ needs to be shown through the study of the Scriptures.

Other examples of Christian response can be seen in Rev. C.W.H. Pauli's 'How can God be One?' – whose title derives from the passages of the Zohar which put forward the view of the Trinity.

'When the divine life is poured into the soul through the Holy Spirit, there is an insatiable thirst for the heavenly truth'⁴²

He relates heavenly truth to Kabbalistic ideology, but bringing Christ within this. He also quotes rabbinic literature and asks the reader to see that:

'nothing but the Holy scriptures, are the foundation to which he holds, and upon which he claims that the Holy One blessed be He, is a divine and wonderful Tri – unity'⁴³

He uses Jewish tradition to put forward the view of the trinity. He uses the Memra, Angel of the Covenant, and Metatron as descriptions of the Son of God.

Another writer, Tsvi Sadan, also uses this methodology to show the messiah and suggests

'anything a Jew needs to know about the Messiah can be found within Jewish tradition'⁴⁴

According to Harvey he develops a high Christology, rejecting the Christian associations of the term, including incarnation and the unity of the Godhead. He still keeps within Jewish thought. In his 'hundred names of the messiah', Sadan shows that more evidence is found in

⁴¹ Ibid:143

⁴² Pauli, How can Three be One, 1863:5

⁴³ Harvey:143

⁴⁴ Ibid:144

Jewish sources for Jesus than Moses and the prophets. He believes that if Jewish mystical tradition is used correctly, then it can assist Messianic Jews form their own understanding. However, I wouldn't agree with this, again because dealing with the Kabbalah can mean delving into magic. If a person isn't strong mentally, then this can damage the individual's state of mind. Jewish people have a tremendous task trying to comprehend the Messiah generally, which in my view is best achieved through the Hebrew Bible.

If Christians are concerned to take a portion of Kabbalah and use it for evangelism, then we must consider the spiritual content and have a wide biblical understanding to show how the messiah is revealed through its sources and how it relates to scriptures. Only then can we establish a correct response.

Other sources

Lev Leigh in 'Kabbalah: Fact or Fiction' speaks of the Lubavich groups within Hasidism as having

'popularised a Judaism of experience⁴⁵.'

He mentions Carlebach Kook and others who have applied kabbalistic teachings to the 'modern Jewish situation'. He also has mentions celebrities who have been attracted because it

'seeks direct experience of an ultimate union with God⁴⁶'.

And it teaches knowledge of the mysteries of the 'divine realm' which is important for this union. Another article by Moishe Rosen teaches the core principles of Kabbalah. Kabbalah can be a search for mysticism or spirituality, but Rosen shows that when a person seeks Yeshua

'they don't seek spirituality but allow the Ruah Hakodesh to be operative within them'.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Leigh, Jews For Jesus, Kabbalah Fact or Fiction, 1998:1[website]

⁴⁶ Ibid:2

So here are two forms of teaching with a solid approach. They both teach the fundamental principles, but careful analysis of the Midrash and Torah show how Kabbalah doesn't fit in to Christianity.

One final article I want to touch on is from the Reachout Trust, an organization which seeks to minister to those in the occult. It explains the Kabbalistic principles but the main emphasis is on the Christian response. It suggests that Kabbalah

'is not compatible with the traditional evangelical Christian faith'⁴⁸,

It is a version of Gnosticism, which

'reduces salvation to having an inner knowledge of the mysteries of the Universe, along with the magical occult attributes'⁴⁹.

Referring to John 1:12 it asserts that Kabbalah is pantheistic because it teaches that Ein Soph created everything out of himself and that man retains divinity through the incarnations until he returns to oneness with his creator. This is contrary to the Bible which teaches that God created man out of nothing. Ein Soph is, therefore, not the Christian God. The Christian God makes himself known to man through his son Jesus (John 1:12)

Finally the article suggests that Kabbalah is cultish as it sees itself as the way of salvation.

I would agree with all the former points - through scripture we are able to determine, whether we believe or not and Kabbalah doesn't fit into scriptural analogies.

This chapter has considered different Christian responses and opinions. Perhaps I wouldn't agree with using Kabbalah as a means for showing messianism, since it is mystical and relies on the supernatural. However, Christian groups need to be more sensitive to the Jewish understanding of the Kabbalah. These views will be expanded upon in the concluding section of my dissertation.

⁴⁷ Rosen Moische, Jewish Spirituality, Jews for Jesus, 2000:8[Website]

⁴⁸ Reachout Trust, Building a Bridge of Reason, 2009:2[Website]

⁴⁹ Ibid:

CONCLUSION

After researching and learning about Kabbalah from earliest times until today, I would suggest that there is no single, easy answer to the massive question ‘what is Kabbalah and what is its relevance today?’

As seen in this essay many scholars throughout the centuries have developed kabbalistic study leading to the Zohar. The Kabbalah incorporates many facets, including mysticism and magic. However, if we were to say that it was primarily a form of spirituality this wouldn’t be a correct analysis. Kabbalah is, for some, a way in which to seek God’s power, to understand his power and to gain power through using various forms and insights through the Bible and the Zohar.

In considering the range of Christian responses to Kabbalah and thinking out my own personal response, I conclude that there are many strands within Kabbalah which incorporate mysticism and magic; these are contrary to biblical belief as seen in Leviticus 19:26. As we have seen repeatedly, Kabbalah doesn’t represent biblical teaching. Anything that incorporates magic and deals with gaining insight into the supernatural goes against the fundamental teachings of Christianity (Rev 22:15). Kabbalah branches into New Ageisms, and Metempsychosis or reincarnation which some kabbalists agree is

‘an integral part of Kabbalah⁵⁰’.

Although there are many Christians who are more liberal in their theology and wouldn’t see anything wrong with dabbling in spiritualism, many of the ideas explored in this analysis are abhorrent to biblical Christians like myself, and I would strongly argue that Christians who practise Kabbalah are not following Christian doctrines.

Clearly, though, there isn’t one view of Kabbalah acceptable to all Christians, but there are a number of ideas and analogies which determine their response. Whether or not they are ‘correct’ will depend on the way we interpret the Bible and what we choose to believe.

⁵⁰ ibid

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