

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

---

Honors Theses, 1963-2015

Honors Program

---

1997

## A Look at Kabbalah

Scott M. Wellman

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the [Computer Sciences Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wellman, Scott M., "A Look at Kabbalah" (1997). *Honors Theses, 1963-2015*. 788.

[https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors\\_theses/788](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_theses/788)

Available by permission of the author. Reproduction or retransmission of this material in any form is prohibited without expressed written permission of the author.

A LOOK AT KABBALAH (AND GEMATRIA)

The Honors Program

College of St. Benedict/ St. John's University

In Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Attempted Distinction

and the Degree Bachelor of Arts

in the Departments of

Philosophy and Computer Science

by

Scott M. Wellman

May, 1997

APPROVAL PAGE

PROJECT TITLE: A Look at Kabbalah

Project Advisor:

Noreen Herzfeld  
Noreen Herzfeld, Associate Professor of Computer Science

Academic Advisor:

Susan Wood, SCL  
Sr. Susan Wood, Associate Professor of Theology

Other Department Readers:

1. J. Andrew Holey  
J. Andrew Holey, Associate Professor of Computer Science

2. Steve Wagner  
Steve Wagner, Associate Professor of Philosophy

3. Karin Levine  
Karin Levine, Associate Professor of Education (Creighton University)

Chairs:

1. Noreen Herzfeld  
Noreen Herzfeld, Computer Science

2. Steve Wagner  
~~Joe Desjardins~~, Philosophy

Megat Hood  
Director, Honors Thesis Program

Chris Lynn  
Director, Honors Program

## Table of Contents

- I. *Kabbalah* (and *Gematria*)
  - A. Overview and Thesis
  - B. Definition of *Kabbalah* - The Sefar Zohar
  - C. Examples of *Kabbalistic* Thought
    - 1. Ten Sefirot
    - 2. Philosophical Questions
    - 3. Tools: *Gematria*
  - D. Analysis of *Kabbalah*
    - 1. *Kabbalah* and Judaism
    - 2. Why be a *Kabbalist*
    - 3. *Kabbalah* and Christians
  - E. Conclusion

## INTRODUCTION

When asked if he would teach a course on *Kabbalah*, the late Professor Saul Liebermann, a great Talmud scholar of the Jewish Theological Seminary, replied, "it is forbidden to have a course in nonsense." (Telushkin, 202).

Lieberman's stance was not new; he reflected the standard, if the extreme side, of the contemporary rabbinical approach to Kabbalism. In fact, his stance reflected the traditional rabbinical approach; a famous story of the Talmud, "Entering the Garden," reveals succinctly what the early Rabbis thought of mysticism. In the story, four famous rabbis-- Rabbi Ben Azzai, Rabbi Zoma, Rabbi Akiva, and the Acher (meaning "other")-- entered the Garden (identified either as *Shekinah* or the mystical realm). Rabbi Azzai fell over dead. Rabbi Zoma went insane. Rabbi Elisha ben Avuyah (the Acher), "cut the plants," (usually taken to mean he left Judaism and converted to Gnosticism). Rabbi Akiva alone left unscathed (Frankel, 148, Gersh, 5-6).

Ignoring this sage warning, and the *halakah* that one should not study *Kabbalah* until over 30 and married with kids, I did look at *Kabbalah*. In this study, I will show what medieval *Kabbalah* was<sup>1</sup> and how this world view varied significantly from traditional and contemporary Jewish and Christian philosophies. I wish first, however, to take an opportunity to thank all who guided me during the

development of this paper: Noreen Herzfeld, Andy Holey,  
Steve Wagner, and Karin Levine. Without their support, this  
paper would not be.

## CHAPTER 1

### BEGINNINGS: THE ZOHAR

*Kabbalah* arose primarily in the twelfth and thirteenth century as an intra-Jewish movement (Dan, 1). It started with the *a priori* assumption that what was really true, what really had meaning, was hidden and obscure. This world view also started with the *a priori* assumption that the Torah (the Hebrew Scriptures) and the Sefar Zohar, the first methodological book of the *Kabbalistic* movement was where the truth, in a hidden form, could be found. Together, these two assumptions are the ultimate basis for all of *Kabbalah*.

This second *a priori* assumption makes sense of the connection between the rise of Jewish mysticism, once a rather esoteric branch of belief, and the invention of the printing press. Before this invention, the widespread dissemination of an organized *Kabbalism* was simply not possible. Without access to the "keys" to the hidden Truth, pursuing *Kabbalah* and the Truth was difficult. In addition, not many Jews even knew what Jewish mystics believed, and the mystics themselves had a wide range of dogmas. The Zohar's greater availability solved all of these problems. (Gersh, 19) This book of *midrash* on much of the Torah could now spread, and did. In fact, it became the foundation of most of late thirteenth century *Kabbalism* (Blumenthal, 106).

Of course, the mere spreading of this text was

insufficient to establish its credibility. To partially alleviate this problem, *Kabbalists* claimed the Zohar as a 13th century compilation of homilies and stories of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, a famous rabbi of the 2nd century. This historical connection lent great credence to the general authenticity of Jewish mysticism, and to the specific authenticity of *Kabbalism*. Any question about the Zohar's origin, then, questions the origin of post-eleventh century *Kabbalah*.

Was the Zohar really written by Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai? Generally, historians and theologians reject its authenticity/ historicity, and the Zohar is viewed as a pseudepigraphy. Historically, the book was first published in the late 13th century (about 1290) by Moses de Leon. Most scholars, particularly Gershom Scholem and Heinrich Graetz, believed de Leon wrote or helped write some to all of the Zohar. In fact, Graetz, "declared all parts of the Zohar without exception to be..." de Leon's work (Blumenthal, 107). Far from recognizing the genius that must have been at work in the Zohar, if it was the production of a single man, Graetz saw in it only, 'deception and charlatanism' (Blumenthal, 107). Graetz's based his stance on both internal and external historical evidence. For example, Gershom claimed the Zohar dealt with subjects that had little meaning in the 2nd century. He also reported that: "[E]very attempt to establish, through



the working out of exact criteria, that certain layers and parts of the Zohar go back to a time before the middle of the thirteenth century turns out to be new evidence of the contrary" (Blumenthal, 108).

Whether it was written by de Leon or Yohai, the Zohar was special from a philosophical point of view. It was striking in part, especially in retrospect, because it was radically different from similar books of its time. Other books of the Middle Ages that dealt with Elohim (a generic word for the Endless One in Hebrew) tended to be theological treatises. They attempted to explain Elohim's actions, not Elohim's self. In addition, the more normative books usually moved away from anthropomorphizing Elohim. The Zohar does the opposite of both. In contrast, the Zohar described Elohim as Elohim's self. In one sense, the Zohar was a psychological analysis of Elohim. It told of Elohim's thoughts, feelings, structure, and tensions. Also, the Zohar used this analysis to establish a very anthropomorphic view of Elohim. Because of these two elements of the Zohar, some properly label it as a, "theosophy" or "theosophical gnosis" (Blumenthal, 113).

#### PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Using the Zohar as a starting point, *Kabbalah* experienced what previous Jewish mysticism had not-- (an ever increasing) codification. This systematization, coupled with the aforementioned *a priori* starting points,

led to the development of some new theological beliefs. These beliefs differ somewhat considerably at times than those found in past or contemporary Jewish and Christian theology.

For example, *Kabbalists* had a different belief regarding how Elohim and people interacted than traditional Judaism. *Kabbalistic* theology tended to describe an upward rather than downward direction-- i.e., instead of Elohim coming to people such as Abraham (Gen 28)<sup>2</sup>, people had to strive upward to reach Elohim (Matt, 27). It was not completely contrasting as while the direction of the relationship between the human and the Divine was different, the type was the same, e.g., personal. *Kabbalah* differed from traditional Judaism in that *Kabbalists* didn't leave this subject-- Divine/human interaction-- at that. They were very, very interested in figuring out why people's personal experiences of Elohim were sometimes so different. This pursuit led to the development of the doctrine of the *Ten Sefirot*.

This doctrine (the *Ten Sefirot*) stated that we never experience all of Elohim. Instead, we experience aspects of Elohim. These aspects were labeled *Sefirot* and described Elohim as a personal Deity. This description differed much from the standard *Kabbalistic* Name *Ein Sof* (Endless) which sounded impersonal. In fact, *Kabbalists* claimed that *Ein Sof* was utterly unknowable (Telushkin, 202). As this turn

around seems quite odd, a thought might arise that the *Ten Sefirot* was not a universal doctrine. However, the doctrine of the *Ten Sefirot* may be the only universal *Kabbalistic* belief; it may be the defining belief-- that which set *Kabbalists* apart from other Jews (Gersh, 34).

The *Ten Sefirot* (sing., *sefirah*), also called the Ten Perfections, were named: Keter (Crown), Hokhmah (Wisdom), Binah (Understanding), Hesed (Love), Gevurah (Power), Tif'eret (Beauty), Netsah (Eternity), Hod (Splendor), Yesod (Foundation), and Shekhinah or Malchut (Presence). Each was either feminine or masculine to keep consistent with the Zohar: "When the Holy One gave definite form to everything that exists, He made things in either masculine or feminine form.". Four were explicitly feminine, four were explicitly masculine, and two were a combination of masculinity and femininity. (Gersh 20, 36)

Were the *Sefirot* viewed as separate from Elohim (established as utterly unknowable) or aspects of Elohim? One attempted answer went thus, "The *Sefirot* are like a single flame reflected in ten mirrors, each of a different color. The light is seen as ten lights, yet the ten are one" (Kabbalah, 36). This metaphor indicated that the *Sefirot* were reflections of One Elohim. However, this immediately shows its limitation for the *Sefirot* were not reflections of parts of Elohim but aspects of Elohim's self. Regardless, as the metaphor says, *Sefirot* were a whole--

though they were commonly talked about as separate entities (Matt, 38). In fact, it was held to be blasphemous to claim that *Ein Sof* and the *Ten Sefirot* were separate (38). In order to communicate and explain the *Ten Sefirot* (and other new doctrines), the *Kabbalists* developed a story about the creation of the Universe. (Gersh, 35). It can be called, "The Story of the *tsimtsum*."

*Kabbalists* believed that at the *tsimtsum* (the withdrawing), Elohim withdrew from a perfect sphere of nothingness (the *tehiru*) and created the Universe there. This can be analogously understood by holding one's breath; the area inside one is a "bubble" of air not really part of one. *Kabbalists* chose the sphere as the shape of the *tehiru* based on the geometrical principle that all points on the surface of a sphere are equidistant from the center. This meant that even though Elohim "withdrew," Elohim's whole presence remains equidistant from all parts of creation. (Gersh, 30)

After the *tsimtsum*, the *Ten Sefirot* flowed from *Ein Sof* and poured into ten forming containers. As these "vessels of light" formed, they filled quickly. Two of them, the second (the holder of the *Hokhmah*) and the third (the holder of the *Binah*) made, shattered. This event, the *Shevirah* (the Shattering), had far, far reaching consequences because the fragments of the 2 containers went "all over Creation" (quite literally). (Gersh, 20)

These fragments, called *Klipot*, were defined as the mediums by which evil entered the Universe. Up to this point, the Universe had been a source of positive construction. The *Shevirah* was not an act of construction. Hence, destruction was introduced to the Universe; chaos replaced careful order in Creation. *Kabbalists* essentially defined evil in terms of destruction and chaos (Gersh, 20) rather than "sin" of some sort, or, to speak traditionally Christian, the result of the "Fall."

At this point, the story became problematic because of the *Kabbalistic* view of Elohim-- an Endless source of goodness. E.g., "If Elohim was good and omnipotent, how could Elohim allow evil?" This question was even more difficult to answer in *Kabbalah* than in other philosophies because of the accepted source of evil; evil seemed to have entered the world due to bad engineering by *Ein Sof*. *Ein Sof*, however, does not do bad engineering accidentally. Therefore, the *Shevirah* was not only a case of bad engineering, but of planned bad engineering (planned obsolescence?). However, this means that Elohim was directly responsible for evil. How could this have been some asked?

Some *Mekubbalim* accepted that *Ein Sof* did indeed arrange the *Shevirah* deliberately. However, they claimed it was for a good reason:

The supernal vacuum is like a field, in which are sown ten points of light. Just as each grain of seed grows

according to its fertile power, so does each of these points. And just as a seed cannot grow to perfection as long as it maintains its original form-- growth coming only through decomposition-- so these points could not become perfect configurations as long as they maintained their original form but only by shattering (Matt, 96).

In other words, *Ein Sof* allowed the *Shevirah* to occur to allow Creation a chance to mature by not choosing evil.

Other *Mekubblim* answered this question by finishing the *tsimtsum* Creation story with an explanation of why humans exist and have free will. No creature could repair the shattered Universe, so *Ein Sof* created us. We, as the only created creatures with free will, were the only creatures capable of repairing the world. We, with the rest of Creation since the *Shevirah*, have awaited, the *tikkun*, the final healing, and according to *Kabbalists*, every charitable act, every prayer, every *mitzvah* completed as guided by the Torah, was a *tikkun* and brought creation closer to the final Redemption (Gersh, 38)<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, the story continues, humans who have free will were capable of evil. If the *klipot*, or fragments of the shattered *Sefirot*, can only be healed with love and mercy, they could be fed through the opposite of each.

In summary, some *Kabbalists*, in order to answer what they thought important, i.e., the nature of the Divine-human

relationship, made an fascinating insertion into Genesis 1, 2, and 3, the Biblical beginnings of existence. Elohim created humans, but not because humans were in the original plan. Instead, humans were Elohim's answer to the *Shevirah*. This, while providing human with a great purpose, radically shifts away from the Genesis focus of the theme of the creation of humankind as the "very good" epitome of Creation (Gen 1, 1-30) to the creation of humankind as being an afterthought "fix" (Gersh, 38). Humankind may still be good, but not good in and of itself.

#### GEMATRIA: SUPPORTING THE PHILOSOPHY

To ground their new philosophy, *Kabbalists* adopted several philosophical tools. This was done so as to allow them to find the hidden truths in the Torah, held as the authority by contemporary Judaism. One such aggadic hermeneutical tool that was accepted and categorized, according to Gershom Scholem, the acknowledged expert on twelfth and thirteenth century *Kabbalah*, was *Gematria* (Scholem, 337). *Gematria*, also called *Mizpar Katan*, was a numerological tool. It was probably popular because it made what the *Kabbalists* claimed to be Biblical truths accessible to the everyday person. Characteristically, when the *Kabbalists* used *Gematria*, they took a passage of the Torah, applied a set series of rules to the passage, translating Hebrew words to numbers and back. They then claimed to have "found" a hidden truth. Scholem identified seven different

types or forms of *Gematria* that became the most used (Scholem, 340 and Encyclopedia Judaica, 374).

In the first system, a *Kabbalist* would calculate the numerical sum of at least two words and then compare the sums. This system is fairly easy to understand; there are 22 letters in the Hebrew language and each was assigned a value corresponding to its position in the "aleph-bet" (a Hebrew/English word-play on the first two Hebrew letters, aleph (א) and bet (ב)). If two words had identical sums, they were considered equal, e.g. since *gevurah* (strength)=216=*aryeh* (lion), lions and anyone/thing identified with lions were clearly strong (Scholem, 340 and Encyclopedia Judaica, 374)

In the second system, a 'small number' was used at times. For example, *taw* (ט) was considered 4 and *kap* (כ) was considered 2. This system clearly does not take into account tens or hundreds (Scholem, 340 and Encyclopedia Judaica, 374). This meant that when the number value of a letter became greater than nine, only the last integer was used (22=2) (Gersh, 57).

The third commonly applied form of *Gematria* was practically identical to the first. The only real difference was that the *Mekubbalim* squared the value of each letter before adding them. An example of this system-- the Tetragrammaton translated as  $10^2 + 5^2 + 6^2 + 5^2 = 186 =$  *mqwm* ('Place'). 'Place' became another name for Elohim



(Scholem, 340 and Encyclopedia Judaica, 374).

The most complicated method of *Gematria* used was the "filling" (*millui*) method. The numerical value of each letter was not used. Rather, the numerical value of each of the letters in the word designating each letter was used. For example, if a word started with the aleph, the first system was applied to the word 'aleph' and that sum was added to the sums of the other words for the letters of the original word. This method was extremely important to the *Kabbalists* in regards to the Name of Elohim. 4 Names were "found" with 4 *milluim*, a 45-letter, a 52-letter, a 63-letter, and a 72-letter one (Scholem, 340 and Encyclopedia Judaica, 374).

There were 2 other major systems (the sixth and the seventh). The first of these could be called the "great number" system. This system counted the final letters in the aleph-bet as a continuation of the alphabet. Basically, the *Kabbalists* started counting over at a certain point in the middle of the aleph-bet. The second of these systems was actually two systems-- a *Kabbalist* could either choose to add the letters of the original word to the "translated" value of the original word, or add 1 (one) to the total numerical sum of the word (Scholem, 340 and Encyclopedia Judaica, 374).

*Gematria* is labeled an adopted tool because it is not a Jewish invention. It has either a Babylonian or a Greek

origin. The use of *Gematria* seems to date to Sargon I (727-707 B.C.E.) and therefore is of Babylonian origin. It was reported that the king built the wall of Khorsabad 16,283 cubits long to correspond with the numerical value of his name (Scholem, 337). Its Jewish introduction occurred no later than sometime between 340 B.C.E. and 70 C.E. during the time of the Second Temple. This is provable because Greek letters were used to indicate numbers on the Temple walls (337).

Primitive forms of *Gematria* appeared in other places in the Jewish world around the same time. It first appeared in Jewish literature in second century. Rabbi Nathan, of the *tannaim*, in this first appearance of *Gematria*, used it as both supporting evidence in theological debates and a mnemonic. For example, he used *Elleh ha-devarim* ("These are the words") as found in Exodus 35:1 to indicate that there are 39 categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath. (Presumably he is referring to Exodus 34:21: "Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.") His argument went as follows:

- devarim*: a plural verb R. Nathan took to mean 2.
- ha-*: the article 'the.' R. Nathan used it to raise the count to 3.
- elleh*: the numerical equivalent of this word is 34, bringing the total to 39 (Scholem, 337).

This kind of use of *Gematria* never vanished from Judaism. So, it was not quite as if *Gematria* was completely unheard of in standard Jewish theology. However, it never was used as a source of new theologies/ philosophies until *Kabbalistic* use.

## CHAPTER 2

### KABBALAH AND JUDAISM

Thirteenth century *Kabbalah* arose primarily based on searches for the hidden and mysterious, i.e., the stuff of dreams (Kabbalah, 44). I believe its success was ironically in part due to the seeming failure of a different dream. It was then almost 13 centuries past the Diaspora (70 C.E.); the hope of a coming of a saving Messiah seemed increasingly fanciful to some. If this view is true, then the interest in *Kabbalah* in those centuries could easily be seen as an interest in the very saving of Judaism. It could be argued that the followers were trying to develop a way to hold on to what they could in Judaism. What other way could they save many things seemingly lost due to the lack of Messianic fulfillment? Whatever the motives, the *Mekubbalim* developed a highly mystical philosophy within Judaism that was quite different from the norm of general pragmatism. On one hand, it gave people something to hope for-- a way to reach Elohim and find the truths they had been waiting for the Messiah to bring. On the other hand, this gave rise to many traits that deviated from traditional Judaism and deviates from Contemporary Judaism (Telushkin, 202).

Some important deviations have already been mentioned. For example, the Zohar gave Elohim characteristics; the Name Elohim gave Elohim's self in Exodus 3 (the Tetragrammaton) served, among other things, to show that Elohim was beyond

labels. This is in part confusing as *Kabbalists* (as mentioned) simultaneously claimed that *Ein Sof* was utterly unknowable. This is only understandable at all when one remembers the Zohar's descriptions were meant to be symbolic. Another example of a deviation is the contrast between the traditional Exodus human-Divine relationship (one where Elohim descends offering covenant) and *Kabbalah's*. *Kabbalism* focused instead on humans ascending through mystical study (Dan, 2 and Matt, 27).

Even with these doctrinal differences, *Kabbalism* was not at first a significant challenge to orthodox Judaism. In fact, according to Scholem, *Kabbalism* eventually became Judaic orthodoxy and stayed as it between fifteen hundred and eighteen hundred (Telushkin, 44). This could seem strange with the normal expectation that such a radical deviation from the accepted norm of a theology would create intense friction and cause schism. However, several factors minimized even the possible friction.

One factor was the very nature of Judaism itself. Judaism always has been, and always will be, a pluralistic religion. Though there were common ideas held by all Jews, like the belief in Monotheism, they were quite rare. The development of new way of looking at older things, including and especially the Torah, has been a quite common occurrence throughout Judaic history. *Kabbalists* indeed rediscovered new meanings in older texts, but many did not reject the

original, more literal, meanings (Scholem, 15). Some even meant the new interpretations to be extensions of old interpretations as opposed to a completely different one (13). In other cases, the *Mekubbalim* extended orthodoxy by offering different reasons for keeping historical practices, such as providing the belief in *tikkun* to rationalize following the *mitzvot* (Gersh 21). Some were also very careful about meshing new beliefs, such as the *Ten Sefirot*, with the older beliefs, such as the Monotheism.

Another reason *Kabbalism* was never a cause of schism in Judaism was *Kabbalism's* flexibility. As established, *Kabbalism* rejected the surface of things as the Truth (Scholem, 13), and its followers spoke often in metaphors and similes. This meant much of what any *Kabbalist* said could never be taken literally. Therefore, it was hard to pin down a counter argument to a solid doctrine. With this kind of approach to dogma, *Kabbalistic* philosophy becomes virtually invulnerable from any normal philosophical attack. If someone questioned some aspect of a mystical writing as self-contradictory, heretical, blasphemous, etc., *Kabbalists* merely had to reply that the writing was symbolic and/or was a vision. This reply avoided many major confrontations with normative Judaism, especially concerning the seeming clash between "Ten" *Sefirah* and the Oneness of Elohim. A typical philosophical counter might have been, "If there seems an espousal of polytheism in *Kabbalah*, it is because you are

looking only at the surface of the hidden mystical truth that is not comprehensible by humans."<sup>4</sup>

This very strength of *Kabbalah* was also one of its very weaknesses. It is questionable whether a system so abstract can truly offer any concrete answers. When every answer is only a possible interpretation, then every question must be continually re-asked. One wonders whether any progress is possible. Traditional Christianity had and has fixed answers from Augustinian (and later) Thomistic (and other) philosophies. Traditional Judaism had and has fixed answers from the Torah and the Talmud, and therefore something to fall back on. Once one questions the very ability of humans to comprehend truth, and questions the level of the truth of the Torah (surface or hidden), one loses a great deal of stability and possible grounding.

It makes sense then that, like Christians, *Kabbalists* were very concerned with the concept of 'mystery.' Their mystical view of human knowledge of Elohim illustrates this. The name of Elohim-- *Ein Sof* (Endless)-- referred to Elohim's divine transcendence. The difference lay in what was said about Elohim. Unlike (later) typical Christian Thomistic theology and philosophy that tried to define Elohim in positive terms (Ultimate Mover, Savior, etc.), little to nothing positive was said about *Ein Sof*. The general approach was to follow Moses Maimonides' (a renowned Medieval Jewish thinker) lead and say not what

Elohim was, but only what Elohim was not. (Telushkin, 201)

As mentioned before, this negative approach to describing Elohim seemed to contrast with the fact that many *Kabbalists* used extreme anthropomorphism to facilitate understanding of *Ein Sof* and the *Ten Sefirot*. For example, the Shi'ur Qomah (The Measurement of Divine Height), is a book based upon the description of the Divine found in the Song of Songs. However, this contrast only serves to reiterate *Kabbalah's* basic nature of non-literalism; the Shi'ur Qomah itself reminded the reader to not take the imagery contained within literally (Dan, 3). Nothing was immune in *Kabbalah* to the doctrine that the Truth was not on the surface-- even the Torah was not to be read literally. It was supposed to be approached as a book of hidden meanings; the Truth was buried in it. Again, the *Kabbalists* were left on very, very shaky philosophical ground. Why was *Kabbalism* so popular then?

From the perspective of those who believed in *Kabbalah*, *Kabbalah* was the source of true wisdom. True wisdom was *nistar*, something hidden, and so could not be found in any other way but mysticism. Daniel Matt, in his collection of *Kabbalistic* works, related a passage that explained what the *Kabbalists* thought they were receiving:

Something you cannot explain to another person... like the taste of food, which is impossible to describe to one who has never tasted it. You cannot express in



words exactly what it is... Similarly with the love and awe of Elohim: It is impossible to explain to another what the love in your heart feels like... (Matt, 162)

*Kabbalah* was hidden similarly to a good recipe which was widely known. Without first hand experience of its preparation and taste, one really could not know what a dish really was. (In this way, *Kabbalists* could still talk about *Kabbalah* as hidden even with the various books readily available, the rabbis' awareness of it, etc.) From their perspective, it was impossible to understand truth that one has not found, and it was impossible to find truth without the direct experience of searching for it. The only way to directly experience what was necessary, according to Matt further on, was to "cleave to" Elohim-- to culture a faith in *Kabbalah*. Without this "lens" of faith, reading the Zohar and the writings of the *Ari* (an important figure in thirteenth century *Kabbalah*), was useless. With this "lens" of faith, there simply was no other way to find the truth.

(162)

Even with the necessary faith, *Kabbalah* was still something not easily grasped and understood. According to the *Mekubbalim*: "[W]hoever delves into mysticism cannot help but stumble..." (Matt, 163). On the other hand, if one were to study with the correct motivations, there was a guarantee in *Kabbalah* that one would always gain in knowledge (161). This provided yet another reason to stick with something

that was less than pragmatic-- a guarantee of results is a powerful motivator.

Promised joy was another incentive to be a *Kabbalist* and another deviation from Judaism. For example, from the *Kabbalistic* perspective, anyone reading only the literal words of the Torah missed a great deal of meaning that led to happiness. To paraphrase a parable, one who raised wheat and ate it (as wheat) may indeed know the basic source of pastry items. However, she would have utterly missed the joys diverging from that source (such as cake!). In the same way, *Kabbalists* believed that one who read the Torah for the words but missed the meanings behind it, missed the joys of the Torah (Matt, 134). Traditional Judaism rarely, if ever, promises joy, per se.

One example of someone who did follow *Kabbalah* for perhaps some of the above reasons was High Rabbi Löw. He was born Jehudah ben Bezalel, or Judah, son of Bezalel and lived from 1512 to 1609 (Golem, 13). During most of this time, he was the head rabbi of a synagogue in Prague. He is a classic example of a good leader granted, over years, fantastic powers--- magic, necromancy, and incredible political influence. He was even said to own an amulet that made him invisible due to secret signs he had written (61). It was also said that, like Rabbi Akiva, he walked through the Garden and lived (see the introduction).

The most famous story about Rabbi Löw involved a

creature he supposedly invented. The rabbi constructed this *golem* out of sticks and mud and gave life to protect the Jews of Prague. Christians in Prague occasionally attacked, in one way or another, his congregation. This *golem* was incredibly strong, but mute. Among other reported things, this *golem* was supposed to have found a hidden Christian maid. At the time, the Jews in Prague had been accused, in a fit of anti-Judaism, of killing her for blood for Passover Seder. (Golem)

In reality, Rabbi Löw was probably an ordinary person without mystical powers. He is mentioned here because the choice of who becomes legends in a movement tells a great deal about the movement. The choice of Rabbi Löw leads to the speculation that *Kabbalah* was a movement that was clearly different from modern Judaism which is generally concerned with how to live life practically and daily in this world, not magically.

#### CHRISTIANS AND KABBALAH

The flexibility of *Kabbalah* had its real, physical dangers beyond the philosophical ones. As said, *Gematria* was an adopted tool of *Kabbalists*. They were not the first ones to use it, nor the last. For example, Bond and Lea, two Christian philosophers in the early twentieth century, used *Gematria* for their own, anti-Judaic purposes. In 1920, they published a book called, The Apostolic Gnosis. It began with an explanation of what Christian *Gematria* is and

provides various examples of Christian *Gematria*. It continued with a very sad discussion on *Gematria*.

They (Bond and Lea) were crying out against the belief that *Gematria* was childish and a useless remnant from the Middle Ages. To show how it was useful, they used the unfortunate, sad example of, "Thus when, for example, the famous Rhabanus Maurus, Archbishop and Christian controversialist, set out to confute the arguments of the Rabbis, he was able, largely through the use of *Gematria*, to beat them on their own ground and so add to the prestige of the Christian faith" (35, italics mine).

Their (Lea and Bond's) major thesis in this chapter was that not only *Gematria* was to be used, but that it was used a lot in the early centuries of the Church. On pages 42-44, Bond and Lea suggested the following logical argument:

- a) because there is nothing controversial directly evident in the Christian message (the writings),
- b) but that the Romans persecuted Christians anyway,
- c) there must be something hidden in the writings.

Once again, one of *Kabbalah's* strengths-- its flexibility-- became one of its weaknesses. A philosophy more down to earth, with a belief in a Truth more objectively defensible, would have been harder to twist.

## CONCLUSION

The word "*Kabbalah*" was derived from the root 'to receive, to accept', and often has been used synonymously with 'tradition' (Shand). Clearly, however, the study of *Kabbalah* was not the study of orthodox or contemporary Jewish or Christian tradition. Both find Elohim as clearly seen in many places, including the Torah and nature. Neither tradition holds the truth to be either hidden and/or obscured.

However, it is undeniable that mysticism and *Gematria* are part of both the traditions, and so I think Jews and Christians should at least be aware of them. In addition, looked at carefully, *Kabbalah* is not really that different from either tradition in some respects. All three traditions have mysteries, use various philosophical tools, and come up with various philosophical beliefs that are not necessarily logical. All three pursue the Truth, wherever and whatever that may be.

Perhaps there is something all can learn from one of the basic *a priori Kabbalistic* assumptions. True truth is indeed not necessarily always on the surface.

## Glossary

"Aggadah refers to non-legal discussions & is found in the Talmud (ca. 1/3 of Talmud, interspersed between the legal discussions of the rabbis & including history, philosophy, theology, ethics, & folklore) & the midrashim (most midrashic material is aggadic)"

(<http://www.pitts.emory.edu/jewish.html>, bold added).

"cu.bit \'kyu:-b\*t\ n [ME, fr. L cubitus elbow, cubit - more at HIP] : any of various ancient units of length based on the length of the forearm from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger and usu. equal to about 18 inches"

(<http://gs213.sp.cs.cmu.edu/prog/webster?cub.it>, bold added)

"Halakhah designates all legal discussions"

(<http://www.pitts.emory.edu/jewish.html>, bold added).

"her.me.neu.tics \-iks\ n pl but sing or pl in constr : the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (as of the Bible)"

(<http://gs213.sp.cs.cmu.edu/prog/webster?hermeneutics>, bold added).

"Midrash (exposition) is a rabbinic commentary on the Bible that explains legal points (primarily, midrash halakah) or brings out lessons by story, parable, or legend (primarily, midrash aggadah). The midrashim were written from the Mishnaic period to the 13th c....Mishnah is the oral law that was codified ca. 200 CE, which tradition maintains was given to Moses on Sinai. It is organized into six "orders": agriculture, holidays, women, torts, the sanctuary, & purity" (<http://www.pitts.emory.edu/jewish.html>, bold added).

The Second Temple: "With its destruction 410 years after having been built, the greatest period in our history closed"

(<http://www.shemayisrael.co.il/hmikdash/history.html>, bold added). The Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. So, the time of the Second Temple is 340 B.C.E.- 70 C.E. Fr. David Cotter, OSB, has this take on the question, "When was the Second Temple?", "The First of the Second Temples was completed in 515 BC. Herod built the Second Temple Jesus know beginning in, I think, about 40 BC. The point is that there were several Second Temples. The phrase refers more to an era than to a building."

"Talmud is that authoritative body of Jewish law & tradition from about 200 BCE to 500 CE. There is the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. The talmudic period divides into that of the Mishnah & that of the

Gemara. Rabbis of the former period are called 'tannaim' and those of the latter, 'amoraim'"  
(<http://www.pitts.emory.edu/jewish.htm>, bold added).

#### Endnotes

1. Throughout this paper, I use the past tense in referring to *Kabbalah*. This is not to imply that there is not a modern, living *Kabbalah*. It is only done because this paper looks at early *Kabbalah*, not later developments.

2. It is interesting that we do not, in *Kabbalism*, affect just this world with our actions. Positive or negative, our responses to life affect the world above. This world was held to be a mere reflection of the world above. Obviously, *Kabbalism* was heavily influenced by neo-Platonism (*Kabbalah*, 44)

3. *All Biblical Quotes:*

The New Revised Standard Version. Nashville : Catholic Bible Press, 1990.

4. A general form of that answer was, "You have taken literally what is meant to be symbolic!" In any case, this answer rings similarly hollow to how the traditional Christian answer to some really tough questions-- "It's a Mystery"-- rings hollow.

## Works Cited/ Bibliography

- Blumenthal, David R. Understanding Jewish Mysticism. New York : Ktav, 1978.
- Bond, F.B. and Lea, T.S. The Apostolic Gnosis. Boston : Marshall Jones, 1920.
- Dan, Joseph. Ed. The early Kabbalah. Trans. Ronald C. Kiender. New York : Paulist Press, 1986.
- ibn Daud, Abraham. Sefer Ha-Qabbalah. Philadelphia : The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967.
- No author provided. "Gematria." Encyclopedia Judaica. 1978 ed.
- Frankel, Ellen. The Classic Tales, 4000 Years of Jewish Lore. Northvale, New Jersey : Jason Aronson, 1989.
- Matt, Daniel. The Essential Kabbalah. San Francisco : Harper, 1995.
- Neusner, Jacom. Torah: from Scroll to Symbol in Formative Judaism. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1985.
- Petiška, Eduard. Golem. Prague : Martin, 1991.
- Shand, Richard
- <http://marlowe.wimsey.com/~rshand/streams/scripts/kabbalah.html>
- Scholem, Gershom. Kabbalah. N.Y. : The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974.
- Scholem, Gershom G. On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism. New York : Schocken Books, 1965. (Kabbalah)
- Simon, Stahl, Motzkin, Anderson. The First Hebrew Primer for Adults Second Edition. Oakland, California : EKS, 1983.
- Telushkin, R. Joseph. Jewish Literacy. New York : William Morrow, 1991.