

“Kabbalah in English” Revisited

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In 1997, Jeffrey Smith posted his bibliographic essay, “Kabbalah in English: A Guide to English Language Resources for the Student of Traditional Rabbinic Kabbalah,” at <http://www.smoe.org/arcana/kabbalah.html> within the ARCANA network. The essay subsequently appeared at Colin Low’s HERMETIC KABBALAH at <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/biblio.htm>, where it can still be viewed.¹

True to its subtitle, Smith’s essay is a brief survey of English sources for Rabbinic Kabbalah which commences with a list of publishers specializing in Judaica. Smith then notes primary literature, ostensibly kabbalistic and Hasidic texts, though Smith sweeps broadly beyond his immediate subject, expanding its range from *Tanakh* to Abraham Isaac Kook. Finally, Smith treats secondary literature where he hastens to establish a “works-to-avoid” category. Leading this list are the books of Philip Berg, founder of the famous—or, some might say, infamous—Kabbalah Centre. Also, while stating that the Golden Dawn tradition of “[Aleister] Crowley, [Dion] Fortune, [Israel] Regardie, [Gareth] Knight, and all the rest” is not “bad” or “wrong,” Smith warns that they “will seriously mislead ... the student concerned with traditional Rabbinic teaching.”

When written, “Kabbalah in English” was a rapid and incomplete survey, which, in so many words, Smith acknowledges. If his essay was braced for expansion in 1997, it is sorely in need of both expansion and correction these many years later. Here are some key points:

Two of the links to significant publishers have changed:

- Feldheim is now at <http://www.feldheim.com/>
- Jason Aronson is now part of Rowman & Littlefield at <http://www.rowmanlittlefield.com/aronsonj/>

Smith did not list several major publishers of Judaica which were active when—and well before—“Kabbalah in English” was written:

- Behrman House - <http://www.behrmanhouse.com>
- Hebrew Union College (HUC) Press - <http://huc.edu/newspubs/press>
- Kehot Publication Society - <http://store.kehotonline.com>
- KTAV Publishing Company - <http://www.ktav.com>
- State University of New York (SUNY) Press - <http://www.sunypress.edu>

Note in particular the SUNY Press series JUDAICA: HERMENEUTICS, MYSTICISM AND RELIGION, which includes some of the most significant works in the field: Moshe Idel’s important trilogy on Abraham Abulafia (1988-1989); Mark Verman’s book on the *Iyyun* circle, *The Books of Contemplation* (1992); Rachel Elior’s study of HaBaD, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God* (1993); Pinchas Giller’s analysis of the *Zohar*’s later strata, *The Enlightened Will Shine* (1993); and Yehuda Liebes’ *Studies in the Zohar* (1993).

¹ Also find “Kabbalah in English” at http://crys kernan.tripod.com/kabbalah_in_english.htm

Smith's opening paragraphs hold up as the best part of his "Guide." The "bellyful of Talmud" is often neglected, and Smith justifiably takes up a third of his article with discussions on *Tanach*, *Talmud*, *Midrash*, *Siddur* and RaShI. However, the Babylonian *Talmud*, no longer requires a "budget about \$500 and six feet of shelf space"; "all 20 volumes in one file," can be purchased as an eBook for 99¢ and paperback editions of each tractate go for as little as \$6.90.

Aryeh Kaplan's edition of *Sefer Yetzirah* has been superseded—at least in the opinion of scholars—by A. Peter Hayman's *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation, and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004). David Blumenthal's "more academic treatment" of *Sefer Yetzirah*, which Smith recommends, is highly problematic.² Smith notes Leonard Glotzer's *Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism* but says that Glotzer's approach is closer to Blumenthal's than to Kaplan's. This is incorrect, for, like Kaplan, Glotzer draws on the full range of authorities from Saadia to the GRA to form a doctrinal commentary to *Sefer Yetzirah* rather than an academic study.

Smith also mentions "Heikalot Rabbati" and the "Merkavah school." Major texts of the *hekhlot* corpus have been gathered in James R. Davila's *Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2013), which includes English translations of *Hekhalot Rabbati*, *Sar Torah* material, *Hekhalot Zutarti*, *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, *Merkavah Rabba*, *The Chapter of R. Nehuniah ben haQanah*, *The Great Seal/Fearsome Crown*, *Sar Panim* material, *The Ascent of Elijah ben Avuyah*, *The Youth*, and the *hekhlot* fragments from the Cairo Geniza, "based mainly on the seven manuscripts published in a synoptic edition by Schäfer in the *Synopse*" (INTRODUCTION, page 19). Texts which Davila's does not include can be found elsewhere:

- *3 Enoch* in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, edited by James Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1983).
- the *Shi'ur Qomah* corpus in Martin Samuel Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah. Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983).

The fullest translation of the *Zohar* is no longer the Soncino edition, *i.e.*, the five-volume set of translations by Simon, Sperling and Levertoff (London: Soncino Press, 1931-4; reprinted subsequently). The Kabbalah Centre's English version of *Ha-Sulam*, 22 volumes, plus index (Tel Aviv – New York – Los Angeles: Yeshivat Kol Yehudah, 1993-2003), which follows a full printed edition, is far more complete than the Soncino. Daniel Matt's translation (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004—), now at the eighth volume of a proposed twelve, will most certainly displace all previous English editions.

Joseph Karo's *Maggid Mesharim* is now available in English: Yechiel Bar Lev's edition, titled *A Maggid (Preacher) of Righteousness*, translated by K. Skaist, was published in 2009 (Petach Tikva: Rabbi Yechiel Bar Lev).

Moses Cordevero's *Pardes Rimmonim* is gradually becoming available in English *via* Providence University's translation project. *Pardes* is currently (May 2011, and still Jan 2014) at volume four of twelve, or, according to the divisions of the book, at Part 12 of 32. (For

² On the difficulties with Blumenthal's version and presentation of *Sefer Yetzirah*, refer to my paper, "Notes on Editions of *Sefer Yetzirah* in English" at <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/contributed/Karr/Biblios/syie.pdf>, pages 9 and 11-12

information, go to the EVERBURNING LIGHT site at <http://www.everburninglight.org>.) Further, the first major study on Cordovero in English was published in 2008: Zohar Raviv, *Decoding the Dogma within the Enigma* (Saarbrücken: Verlag Dr. Müller).

There is now a fair amount of Hayim Vital's Lurianic *kabbalah* in translation, most significantly Yitzak Bar Chaim's translation of *Shaar ba-Gilgulim* (Malibu: Thirty Seven Books, 2003), Menzi and Padeh's translation of *Tree of Life*, volume 1 (Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999), and Providence University's *Shaarei Kedusha* (Belize City: 2006) and other writings.

Isaiah Tishby's *Messianic Mysticism*, now in English (Oxford – Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), fills a significant gap in Smith's references on Moses Hayim Luzzatto.

“Kabbalah in English” does not mention Ezekiel Landau³. More importantly, Smith refers to Elijah ben Solomon, Gaon of Vilna (known as the GRA)⁴ only in passing, noting that Hayim of Volozhin was a student of his. Rather, Smith leaps right into Hasidism, where significant works of the last decade are, of course, not included. The most important of these are

- Magid, Shaul. *God's Voice from the Void* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) and *Hasidism at the Margins* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).
- Elijior, Rachel. *Mystical Origins of Hasidism* (Oxford – Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006)
- Wolfson, Elliot R. *Open Secret* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)

While Smith devotes several paragraphs to major Hasidic rabbis, “Kabbalah in English” does not mention significant studies on Hasidism which preceded his paper. Along with Rachel Elijior's book on HaBaD listed above among the SUNY Press books, Smith missed

- Weiss, Joseph. *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Littman Library, 1985)
- Schatz Uffenheimer, Rivka. *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press/Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1993)
- Rapaport-Albert, Ada (ed.) *Hasidism Reappraised* (London – Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996).

If users of the Internet chance upon “Kabbalah in English” without knowing its date, or even knowing its date and not being aware of how vibrant and active the field of Jewish mysticism is, it is likely that “they will be seriously misled” with a severely limited idea of the texts and scholarship available.

³ See Sharon Flatto, *The Kabbalistic Culture of Eighteenth-Century Prague* (Oxford – Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010).

⁴ See Immanuel Etkes, *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).