“Kabbalah in English” Revisited

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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
- Kehot Publication Society - http://store.kehotonline.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://cryskernan.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 Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash, Siddur and Rashī. 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. 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 be’kbalot 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 Rabbah, The Chapter of R. Nehuniah ben haQanah, The Great Seal/Fearsome Crown, Sar Panim material, The Ascent of Elijah ben Azayyahu, The Youth, and the be’kbalot 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:


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 Cordovero’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 ha-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


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 Elior’s book on HaBaD listed above among the SUNY Press books, Smith missed


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 mislead” with a severely limited idea of the texts and scholarship available.

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