Notes on the Study of Early Kabbalah in English

to which is appended

KABBALAH STUDY: JEWISH MYSTICISM IN ENGLISH

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Reviewers may quote brief passages.

THE PHASE OF JEWISH MYSTICISM conventionally referred to as “early Kabbalah” begins with Sefer ha-Bahir (ca. 1180) and ends with the Zohar (1270-1300). The major features and figures of this span can be outlined thus:*

A. Early Kabbalah
   1. Formative Period
      a. Sefer ha-Bahir (1180)
      b. Provence (ca. 1200)
         i. Isaac the Blind (d. 1235)
         ii. The Iyyun School (early to mid-1200s)
      c. Gerona (ca 1200-1250)
         i. Ezra ben Solomon
         ii. Azriel
         iii. Nahmanides
         iv. Jacob ben Sheshet
         v. Sefer ha-Temunah
         vi. Sefer ha-Yashar
      d. Castile (active 1260-80)
         i. Jacob ha-Cohen
         ii. Isaac ha-Cohen
   2. Developmental Period
      a. Abraham Abulafia (1240-ca 1292)
      b. Moses de Leon (1240-1305)
      c. Joseph Gikatilla (1248-1325)
      d. Menahem Recanati (1250-1310)
      e. Isaac of Acre, or Acco (1250-1340)

* This outline is offered with full awareness that it gives an oversimplified picture of the development of early Kabbalah.
The outline on page 15 below is similarly convenient.
Three books cover the FORMATIVE PERIOD; they can serve as the basis of any study of early Kabbalah in English.

  
  OK is a translation of *Ursprung und Anfange der Kabbala* (1962), translated by Allan Arkush, edited by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky; *Ursprung…* is an expansion of the Hebrew work, *Reshit ha-Qabbalah* (1948).

  
  EK is an anthology of texts which serves as an excellent complement to OK.

  
  JMII is a collection of Dan’s articles covering early Kabbalah (concentrating on *Sefer ha-Bahir*) and the Ashkenazi Hasidim (see below, Pre-Kabbalistic Streams of Jewish Mysticism, § 5).

To the above books, add the following dissertations:

  
  “Current discussion of Kabbalistic spirituality, originating with Gershom Scholem, tends to differentiate between the ‘theurgic’ and ‘transformative’ sides of Kabbalistic practice and to present them as constituting divergent goals for mystical intentionality and life. Our analysis of thirteenth-century sources dealing with contemplative prayer and the priestly cult indicate that on the contrary, the Theurgic efficacy of a Kabbalist’s worship is a product of his experiential adhesion and absorption into Divinity.” (from the ABSTRACT, p. vii)

  
  Chapters include “The Opening to Myth in the Thought of Abraham bar Hiyya,” “Myth and Philosophy in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” “Ascent and Decent” (in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, R. Jacob ben Sheshet, and R. Azriel of Gerona), and “Myth and Discursive Thinking in R. Asher b. David.”

  
  Focusing on the earliest Kabbalists (e.g., Isaac the Blind, Ezra ben Solomon, and particularly Azriel of Gerona), Goldberg considers the role of individuality in mystical phenomena, i.e., mystical union and the ritual actions which precipitate it. See below, page 4 § 1.b.

  
  See especially CHAPTER FOUR, “Suckling as Spiritual Transmission in Early Kabbalistic Literature.”

  “The texts presented in this chapter, Isaac the Blind’s *Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah*, the early kabbalistic volume *Sefer ha-Bahir* and Ezra of Gerona’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, will be examined in order to reveal the exegetical dynamics and theological concerns that prefigure the powerful imagery of *Sefer ha-Zohar*, in which the image of God as a suckling mother expresses an emotionally rich and textured form of spiritual communication.” (p. 167)
Formative Period

1. a. **Sefer ha-Bahir (BOOK OF BRIGHTNESS):**
The earliest work considered “kabbalistic” is *Sefer ha-Bahir*. There are substantial discussions of this text in OK (pp. 35-48, 49-198) and Dan’s JMII (xiv-lvii, 1-18—see below in “Other references”); translated excerpts are given in EK (pp. 57-69).

Using Scholem's observations as a starting point, Ronit Meroz has presented her conclusions regarding the three distinct strata of *Sefer ha-Bahir* in several lectures (including “A Bright Light in the East—The Babylonian Stratum in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” Session: HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTIONS ON EARLY KABBALAH at the Association for Jewish Studies Thirty-fourth Annual Conference, Los Angeles: December 17, 2002) and in her Hebrew article, “A Bright Light in the East: On the Time and Place of Part of *Sefer ha-Bahir*” in *Da'at: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 49 (2002):

- about half was written in Provence in the 12th or 13th century
- most of the rest was written in the Jewish Babylonian congregation which lived in the 9th and 10th centuries; this strata has several layers within it and includes *Raza Rabba*
- a few paragraphs were written earlier in the land of Israel, some time before the Babylonian strata

Regarding all this, refer to Meroz’ articles in English:


There are three English translations of *Sefer ha-Bahir*:

  The English version is from the Latin of Mithridates.

Other references:

- Dauber, Jonathan Victor. STANDING ON THE HEADS OF PHILOSOPHERS (noted above, page 2):
  - Chapter 2. MYTH AND PHILOSOPHY IN *SEFER HA-BAHIR*
  - Chapter 3: A. *SEFER HA-BAHIR*: § 30
  - Appendix 2. § 32 OF *SEFER HA-BAHIR* IN LIGHT OF EARLY KABBALISTIC SOURCES
1. b. Provence: The fragments of what was to become Sefer ha-Bahir made their way to Provence where they fed the development of a mystical school, ca. 1200. This school’s second generation was headed by R. Isaac the Blind (d. 1235), “…the first Jewish scholar whom we know by name that dedicated all his creative powers to the field of Kabbalah” (Dan’s introduction to EK, p. 31). On Isaac the Blind, see EK (pp. 31-4, translations on pp. 71-86), and OK (pp. 248-309).

R. Isaac’s major work, Commentary on SEFER YEZIRA, “the first systematic treatise of Kabbalah,” is fully analyzed and translated by Mark Brian Sendor in THE EMERGENCE OF PROVENÇAL KABBALAH: RABBI ISAAC THE BLIND’S COMMENTARY ON SEFER YEZIRA, Volumes I & II (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994). Further, in MYSTICAL UNION, INDIVIDUALITY, AND INDIVIDUATION IN PROVENÇAL AND CATALONIAN KABBALAH (noted above, page 2), Yechiel Shalom Goldberg analyzes key passages from R. Isaac the Blind’s Commentary on SEFER YEZIRA as well as from the works of R. Isaac’s nephew, R. Asher ben David, and R. Azriel of Gerona (see below).

Further references:

2007, CHAPTER 9, “From Transmission to Writing: Hinting, Leaking, and Orthodoxy in Early Kabbalah.”


Also circulating in Provence in the early-to-mid 1200s were the writings of the Iyyun (CONTEMPLATION) school. The Kabbalah of these strange texts is quite different from the doctrines which developed into classical Kabbalah. See EK (p. 26, translations on pp. 43-56) and OK (pp. 309-363), and especially Mark Verman’s study, The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), which includes translations of several major texts of this group.

On the Iyyun school, see

- Dan, Joseph. The ‘Unique Cherub’ Circle: A School of Mystics and Esoterics in Medieval Germany [TEXTS AND STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN JUDAISM, 15], Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999: comments regarding the Iyyun school, or “circle,” throughout.


1. c. Gerona (Catalonia):

The most prolific circle of Kabbalists from the period before the Zohar was that of Gerona, which followed up on the teachings of R. Isaac the Blind. The primary figures of this group were (1) R. Ezra ben Solomon and (2) R. Azriel, who established a school which included (3) R. Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides) and (4) R. Jacob ben Sheshet.


Other references:

1. R. Ezra ben Solomon:

  
Includes excerpts from R. Ezra ben Solomon’s Perush ‘al Shir ha-Shirim and a letter to R. Abraham on God’s garments—in English.

  
Along with R. Ezra’s commentary are the “Hidden Midrash to the Book of Lamentations” from the Zohar Hadash and R. Bahya ben Asher of Sargossa’s commentary on Genesis 1:1-2 (composed 1291).


  A passage attributed to R. Ezra, on pp. 65-8.


  R. Ezra’s detailed kabbalistic commentary on the meanings of the mitzvot.

2. R. Azriel:

- **EK** pp. 87-108.


- Goldberg, Joel R. (= Yechiel Shalom Goldberg) “Azriel of Gerona: A Phenomenology of Individuality” = CHAPTER 6 OF *MYSTICAL UNION, INDIVIDUALITY, AND INDIVIDUATION IN PROVENÇAL AND CATALONIAN*.


3. Nahmanides:


4. R. Jacob ben Sheshet

- Dauber, Jonathan Victor. STANDING ON THE HEADS OF PHILOSOPHERS (noted above, page 2)

5. Sefer ha-Temunah [ShT]

A treatise often cited by the Gerona circle, ShT expounds upon the doctrine of the shemittot (COSMIC CYCLES). References: OK pp. 460-75; and G. Scholem, On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism, pp. 77-86. Refer also to

6. **Sefer ha-Yashar [ShY]**  
Scholem placed this tract “in the circle of the Kabbalists of Gerona in approximately 1260.” Indeed, it is generally believed that ShY was written by a Kabbalist who attempted to render his kabbalistic ideas more acceptable—and accessible—by using the language of ethics and philosophy. Shimon Shokek argues for Rabbi Jonah Gerondi (13th century) as the possible, if not probable, author. Some traditions attribute ShY to Rabbenu Tam from the end of the 14th century.

**References:**  

1.d. **Castile:**  
In the second half of the 13th century, a circle of Kabbalists grew around the brothers R. Jacob and R. Isaac ha-Cohen (or Kohen). Scholem refers to their developments as “the Gnostic reaction”—reaction, that is, to the philosophic leanings of the Gerona mystics (ref. Scholem, *Kabbalah* [1974], pp. 55-6). References to the Cohens:  
- EK pp. 36-7; translations 151-182; OK pp. 355-64  

Further, see  

**Developmental Period**

2.a. **Abraham Abulafia:** Abulafia is the focus of Scholem’s 4th lecture in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Further, refer to the following:  
- __________. *The Path of the Names*. Berkeley: Trigram/Tree, 1976.

“From Sha’eri Zedek,” “The Question of Prophecy,” and selections from *Haye Olam ba-Ba*, and *Sefer ha-Ot*. 
In particular, Rabbi Albotini followed a system advanced by Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia that is generally referred to as ‘ecstatic’ or ‘prophetic’ Kabbalah, as outlined in Abulafia’s Sefer ha-Ot (Book of the Sign).” — Preface, page viii


1. Essays in Life and Thought Presented in Honor of S. W. Baron, edited by J. L. Blau (New York, Columbia University Press, 1959);


Hames, Harvey J. “A Seal within a Seal: The Imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia’s Teachings,” in Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue, volume 12, number 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2006).


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• __________. “Hitbodedut as Concentration in Ecstatic Kabbalah,” in Jewish Spirituality I: From the Bible through the Middle Ages, edited by Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985),
• __________. “Ta’anug: Erotic Delights from Kabbalah to Hasidism,” in Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism [ARIES BOOK SERIES, vol. 7], edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2008); see especially § DELIGHT IN ECSTATIC KABBALAH (pages 123-130).
• Kiener, Ronald. “From Ba’al ha-Zohar to Prophet to Ecstatic: The Vicissitudes of Abulafia in Contemporary Scholarship,” in Gershom Scholem’s MAJOR TRENDS IN JEWISH MYSTICISM 50 Years After (1993).
  “As Moshe Idel demonstrated, this book is incorrectly attributed to Rabbi Shem Tov de Leon. Its apparently true author is a direct disciple of Avraham Abulafia, Natan ben Saadyah Harar.” (Fabrizio Lanza’s PREFACE, page vi).
  For information, go to www.everburninglight.org.

2. b. Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon: Listed here are items which fall distinctly outside the discussion of the Zohar and take up de Leon’s other works.


• ________. “Mystical Realization of the Commandments in Sefer ha-Rimmon,” in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 59 (Cincinnati: 1988).


• Wolfson prepared a critical edition of *Sefer ha Rimmon*: *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de Leon’s SEFER HA-RIMMON* [BROWN JUDAIC STUDIES, no. 144], Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988—a revised version of Wolfson’s Ph.D. dissertation (Waltham: Brandeis University, 1986). The text is given in Hebrew; the 71-page introduction is in English.

2. c. Joseph Gikatilla


• Blickstein’s study focuses on Gikatilla’s *Ginnat Egoz,*


• Scholem, Gershom. *Kabbalah.* pp. 409-11 and other citations.

2. d. Menahem Recanati: “The first kabbalist to quote frequently and at length from the Zohar was Italian, Rabbi Menahem Recanati” (—Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, pages 20-21). Recanati also drew on the Geronese kabbalists.


• In the process of identifying sources for points of Pico della Mirandola’s kabbalah, Wirszburgski quotes—in English—Recanati’s *Commentary on the Torah* dozens of times. These translations, however, are not rendered from the Latin translation of Mithridates (Pico’s translator), which is lost, but rather from Recanati’s Hebrew text.

• A page-and-a-half excerpt from Recanati’s *Commentary on the Torah* (ff. 3r–v) is given in English (pages 217-8) and Hebrew (page 233), and “thematically summarized” (pages 218-9) in *CHAPTER SEVEN, “The Beginning and End: Bereshit and the Sabbath,”* in Crofton Black, *Pico’s HEPTAPLUS and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2006).


• This two-volume set offers the only translation of a complete text by Recanati in English; the introduction contains the only substantial discussion of Recanati in English.

• “This chapter is a transcription of Rabbi Menahem Recanati’s view on the nature of the Sefirot, whether they are co-substantial with God or only vessels”: this begins Part 4, *CHAPTER 1 of*


2. e. **Isaac of Acre (or Acco):**

Isaac of Acre is of particular interest given that he drew from both the Abulafian ecstatic school and the Catalonian/Castilian theosophic school, which included Nahmanides and the Zohar:

- ———. *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia.* Numerous references to Isaac of Acre throughout.
- ———. *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah,* especially **CHAPTER 7, “Hitbodedut as Concentration in Ecstatic Kabbalah.”**

* In Hebrew, there is Moshe Idel’s *R. Menahem Rekanati, ha-mekubal* (Tel Aviv, Schocken, 1998), which is the first of an intended two-volume study.
Other books, chapters, and articles on Early Kabbalah

- __________. “Samael and the Problem of Jewish Gnosticism,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, edited by Alfred L. Ivry, Elliot R. Wolfson, and Allan Arkush (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998); also in Dan’s JMIII.
• __________. “Kabbalah and Elites in Thirteenth-Century Spain,” in Mediterraneana Historical Review, Volume 9, Number 1 (London: Frank Cass [Tel Aviv University], 1994).


Addendum: Pre-Kabbalistic Streams of Jewish Mysticism*

To fill the span between the close of the Old Testament and early Kabbalah, a much-simplified selection of streams representative of—or having influence upon—Jewish mysticism can be outlined thus:

1. Early beginnings
   a. Pseudepigrapha (ca. 200 BCE onward)
   b. Philo (ca. 20 BCE to 50 CE)
   c. Qumran (= Dead Sea Scrolls: 100 BCE onward)
   d. Rabbinic and synagogue traditions (100 CE onward)
   e. Miscellaneous magic texts and other “occult” works

2. Merkabah and hekhalot (200 CE onward)

3. Sefer Yezirah (between 200 and 900 CE)

4. Transition
   a. Geonic period (600-1000)
   b. Early commentaries on Sefer Yezirah
   c. Religious philosophers
      i. Solomon ibn Gebirol (1020-1070)
      ii. Judah Halevi (1075-1141)
      iii. Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164)

5. Hasidei Ashkenaz (German Hasidism: ca 1170-1240)

1. Early beginnings
   Since Jewish mysticism is ultimately based on the Hebrew Bible, the beginning, really, is the Tanakh, parts of which are more “mystical” than others. More important to our line of inquiry is that certain themes were developed more than others for a variety of mystical purposes. By Talmudic times, two branches of the mysteries were well known and defined: the work of creation, i.e. developments of the first chapters of Genesis, and the work of the chariot, developments of Ezekiel and, to a lesser extent, Isaiah.

   a. Apocalyptic, Wisdom Literature, Pseudepigrapha**

   Radicalizations of Bible themes appeared in the intertestamental apocalypses, which, when grouped together with a somewhat irregular splay of wisdom literature, psalms, testaments, prayers, and other material, are referred to as the pseudepigrapha.

   Two fine introductions to apocalyptic are†


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* Refer to my “Kabbalah Study: Jewish Mysticism in English” (1996-8), appended below, where there is a section offering suggestions for a survey of Jewish mysticism, one segment of which parallels the outline presented here. Alternative titles are discussed.

** With his chapters on Ezekiel, Enoch literature and related material, Qumran, Philo, the rabbinic “Cycle of the Seven Stories,” merkabah passages in the Talmud(s), and the merkabah mystics, Peter Schäfer covers our § 1. a, b, c, d and § 2 in The Origins of Jewish Mysticism (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

† We might add Norman Cohen’s Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1993), which is recommended in my “Kabbalah Study…” below.
Another strand begun in the Bible, including Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and certain of the Psalms, is **wisdom literature**, which traces its way through the standard extra-canonical set called The Apocrypha (Ecclesiasticus), through the Pseudepigrapha, and on into the Talmudic Sayings of the Fathers (**Pirqe Aboth**). An enduring treatment of all this is O. S. Rankin’s *Israel’s Wisdom Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1936; rpt 1954 and 1964; rpt New York: Schocken Books, 1969.)


b. **Philo**

Philo, who has a somewhat anticlimactic relationship with Jewish mysticism, was the most important Jewish philosopher of the first century. Thoroughly Hellenized, he begins for us the long, and rather strained, counterpoint between Neoplatonism and Judaism (and, indeed, Jewish mysticism) which simmers right on up to Spinoza and beyond. Of particular use in the present context are the following:

On Philo:


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On Neoplatonism:


c. Qumran

Since so much has been written on the Dead Sea Scrolls, let me suggest just three books to make short work of getting a reliable impression of the Qumran material:


d. Rabbinic and synagogue traditions

Bits and pieces of the “mystery” are scattered throughout the rabbinic writings following the themes mentioned (*creation* and *chariot*), along with others (*angels* and *demons*, mystical exegesis on various topics, etc.) Some material might be cast more into the category of “legend,” but here the allusions can often be suggestive and significant. It is difficult to pin down a few books to represent this phase of development; what with recent publications on *midrashim* and other rabbinic literature, a full list might have dozens of titles. Given our track, however, see the following:

  Chernus presents a series of essays on the relationship between merkabah mysticism and rabbinic midrashim.

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* Three other works on the Qumran materials are of interest in the present context, especially the third:


c. Miscellaneous magic texts and other “occult” works

For a detailed bibliography on Jewish magic, see the one prepared by Alex Jassen and Scott Noegel at [http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/jmbtoc.htm](http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/jmbtoc.htm) (University of Washington) or the appendix to my “Notes on the Study of Merkabah Mysticism and Hekhalot Literature in English.’ For starters, though, refer to the following survey articles:


• ______________. “Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism,” in *Envisioning Magic*.

For a full study, see Gideon Bohak’s *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

2. *Merkabah* and *hekhalot* material, & 3. *Sefer Yezirah*


4. Transition

a. Geonic period

It is generally thought that the Geonic period left little by way of evidence of theosophical development. Apocalyptic, merkabah, and rabbinic writings continued to exercise authority, this material being compiled and redacted with little being added to the existing traditions. In this period, however, magical works circulated and grew. Joseph Dan writes, “The Geonic period, from the sixth to tenth centuries, is a period which seems to be outside the realm of the history of Jewish thought. … [I]t still retains the image of being a half-millennium almost completely devoid of any Hebrew works on theology or ethics. This image is not completely true.”** See Klaus Herrmann, “Jewish Mysticism in the Geonic Period: The Prayer of Rav Hammuna Sava,” in *Jewish Studies between the Disciplines: Papers in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2003). Refer also to Scholem’s *Kabbalah*, pp. 30-5: “Mysticism in the Geonic Period.” An example of a

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*NOT FOUND : January 20, 2010.
** *The ‘Unique Cherub’ Circle* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), page 17.
work from this period is *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (CHAPTERS OF RABBI ELIEZER), which has been translated and annotated by Gerald Friedlander (London: 1916; rpt. New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981 [4th ed]).

b. Commentaries on *Sefer Yezirah*

For a review of English sources on these commentaries, see my “Notes on Editions Sefer Yezirah in English,” PART 3, at http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/karr/index.htm

c. Religious philosophers*


In Spain the Cabbalah assumed a more philosophical form, due to the influence of the religious philosophy which was already fully developed in that country. There are numerous points of contact between it and the work of the three great thinkers Jehudah Halevi, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, and Abraham Ibn Ezra. The first-named devoted some space to the *Sefer Yezirah* in his great work *Cuzari*. Gabirol as a neo-Platonist has many resemblances with the Cabbalah. … Finally Abraham Ibn Ezra made mystical numerical and literal analyses of the Name of God, particularly in his writings *Yesod Mora*…

i. On Ibn Gabirol, refer to

- Raphael Loewe’s *Ibn Gabirol* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), an analysis of ibn Gebirol’s life and writings. Included is a full translation of *Keter Malkut* (ROYAL CROWN), which Müller calls Gabirol’s great “cosmological hymn.”

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* According to Abraham Abulafia, Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* is a profound mystical text. Be that as it may, Maimonides is not generally ranked among those who contributed to the development of the Kabbalah. Nonetheless, he is considered esoteric—a euphemism perhaps for elite or elitist. See James Arthur Diamond’s *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment, Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in THE GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), and Marvin Fox’s excellent *Interpreting Maimonides* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).


In his brief foreword to *Six Treatises Attributed to Maimonides* (translated and annotated from the Hebrew editions by Fred Rosner, M.D. [Northvale – London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991]), Rabbi Moshe Greenes argues that Maimonides was “steeped in Kabbalah.”

Also see

  - Dillon, John M. “Solomon Ibn Gabirol’s Doctrine of Intelligible Matter”
  - Mathis, C. K. “Parallel Structures in the Metaphysics of Iamblichus and Ibn Gabirol”

Judah Halevi’s principal work, Kuzari (or Cuzari), has been put into English a few times, but not all versions include the commentary on Sefer Yezirah. Two that do are


Also see

iii. Some works by Abraham ibn Ezra have been translated into English:

- **RESHITH HOKHMAH**:


Also see


5. Hasidei Ashkenaz

While not considered part of the early Kabbalah in the strictest sense, the German Hasidim must be seen as a bridge between the earlier merkabah/be’khalot mysticism and the Kabbalah which was to follow—or certain aspects of it. A whole paper could be devoted to the German Hasidim; until such time that a full bibliography is developed, the following preliminary list is offered.

- __________. Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History: Chapter 4. “The Ashkenazi Hasidic Movement.”
- __________. Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics: Chapter 3, “Mysticism and Ethics in the Ashkenazi Hasidim.”
- __________. The ‘Unique Cherub’ Circle. A School of Mystics and Esoterics in Medieval Germany [TEXTS AND STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN JUDAISM, 15]. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999.
Dan distinguishes four major mystical circles from this period (12th and 13th centuries): (i) the *Iyyun* circle, (ii) the Kalonymus family (i.e. what we generally think of as the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*), (iii) *Sefer ha-Bahir*, and (iv) the ‘Unique Cherub’ Circle.

  1. THE BOOK OF PROPHECY
  2. THE BOOK OF THE WORD
  3. selections from *Hokhmab ha-Egoz*
  The first eight articles (of twenty) treat the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* among these is Dan’s “The Language of the Mystics in Medieval Germany.” Note also Moshe Idel, “An Anonymous Commentary on Shir ha Yihud.”
  Also in Harris’ *Studies in Jewish Dream Interpretation* (Jason Aronson, 1994).


• ___________. “The ‘Song of Songs’ in German Hasidism and the School of Rashi: A Preliminary Comparison,” in Rashi 1040-1990 (1993)


MYSTICISM IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE], edited by Joseph Dan (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1987).


- ____________. “The Mystical Significance of Torah Study in German Pietism,” in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 84, no. 1 (July 1993).


A.

In an article reviewing the then-current (1970s) state of scholarship on the history of early rabbinic Judaism,1 Jacob Neusner complained, in particular, about E. E. Urbach’s study2 concerning “the sages, their concepts and beliefs” (Neusner’s italics) as revealing “remarkably little variation, development or even movement,” where “[d]ifferentiation among the stages” and “among schools and circles within a given period” was all but neglected.

More recently, similar complaints have been leveled against “establishment” historians of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah: In the last fifteen-or-so years, the neat linear history offered by Gershom Scholem3 and those following his lead has been seriously challenged.

In the proceedings of a conference marking the fiftieth year since the publication of Scholem’s landmark book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941),4 Ithamar Gruenwald argues5 that this work (i.e., *Major Trends...*) “appears to be too limited in its conceptual framework, as well as in its actual treatment of the subject matter.” Scholem saw certain developments in antique Judaism as a mystical *phase* which followed well after the writing of the Hebrew Bible; he also saw expressions of mysticism, once present, as separate and distinct not just from the scriptural phase but from normal (common or popular) expressions of religion. Gruenwald makes a case for tracing “mystical, or quasi-mystical, elements in Scripture itself.” Further, he states that there are mystical elements in rabbinic literature to which Scholem did not give due attention.

Critical analyses focusing on Scholem’s treatment of ancient Jewish mysticism (i.e. *merkabah* mysticism and *hekhalot* literature) have also been offered in recent years.6 For the moment, our concern is with those developments which, by one rationale or another,
claim the title “Kabbalah,” conventionally agreed to be a phenomenon begun in medieval
times (though traditionally thought to be from antiquity). Our approach may at first
appear to be at cross purposes, for, while there is a case supporting a definition for
Kabbalah which is more inclusive (as in Gruenwald’s comments noted above or in the
suggestions in Moshe Idel’s article noted below), there are those of us who would like to
see Kabbalah circumscribed sufficiently to salvage it from the excessive, near-generic use
of the term, primarily in Christian and occult circles, to refer to mysticism and magic of
all sorts. (The term kabbalah is itself a coinage7 with problems not unlike those of such
related words as “mysticism,” “magic,” “myth,” and “gnosis/gnosticism.”)8

The issue of defining—or redefining—Kabbalah has been addressed by Moshe Idel.9 He
critiques the “prevailing assumption in the academic field” that Kabbalah is “a relatively
homogeneous mystical phenomenon, more theoretical than practical.” Idel’s primary
target is, of course, Scholem and his notion that Kabbalah is defined, and thus unified, by
a certain “core question,” namely, the mystery of the Godhead—which question is
“answered” by the doctrine of the sefirot. Idel discusses the various mystical uses of
divine names as an alternative kabbalistic channel.

In the introduction to Essential Papers on Kabbalah, Lawrence Fine attempts to set up a
working definition for kabbalah starting with a rejection of the “popular, noncritical use
of the term” as referring to all “esoteric and occult phenomena, past and present.”10 Fine
prefers to limit Kabbalah to “a discrete body of literature that became clearly identifiable
beginning in Provence in the late twelfth century and northern Spain in the thirteenth.”
However, in a book which has heated up the discussion on the origins of Kabbalah (and
other topics), Moshe Idel has argued that there is not such a definite separation between
rabbinic literature and the conventionally circumscribed Kabbalah. Idel’s view suggests a
more continuous, less neat development which gradually coalesced into a proto-
Kabbalah.11 The medieval Jewish mystics referred to as “Kabbalists” did not abandon the
mysticism—or any other part of the vast rabbinic literature—which came before them.
The hekhalot writings, German hasidic material, Sefer Yezirah and the various
commentaries on it, etc., along with the Talmud, midrashim, and the rest of the rabbinic
writings, were all considered authoritative—all part of the same chain of tradition
(kabbalah) of which the medieval and later Kabbalists considered themselves links.12

Kabbalah did not spring up ex nihilo. It seems prudent to open channels for the origins
and growth of Kabbalah back into the depths of ancient Judaism. Determining a starting
line at Sefer ha-Bahir and the mystic circles at Languedoc does not match the facts. To
begin with, the Bahir is itself a compilation, with sources and references to earlier
material, which immediately begins our search into the time before its appearance.13
B.

To investigate Jewish mysticism, how is one to begin at the beginning? The documentary evidence is sprawling, yet incomplete. We cannot commence with Genesis 1:1 and travel a nice straight line to Kabbalah today. However, to set a broad stage for subsequent mystical endeavor, a fine first book is *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, by Norman Cohn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), the second part of which charts the primal swirlings of the path which eventually leads to Jewish (and Christian) mysticism, beginning with Zoroastrian concepts, tracing their development in Jewish apocalyptic, finally landing in the Book of Revelation. This last turn may seem to veer off track unless one keeps in mind the fundamentally Jewish character of this mystical apocalypse.

For grounding in the theme (i.e., the ascension to heaven) taken up by the ancient Jewish mystics associated with the merkabah and hekhalot, a most informative source is Martha Himmelfarb’s *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). On a somewhat different tack, though holding onto the thread begun with the last two selections, is Markus N.A. Bockmuehl’s *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* [WISSENSCHAFTLICHE UNTERSUCHUNGEN ZUM NEUEN TESTAMENT – 2. Reihe 36] (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1990).14

Assuming that the reader is reasonably familiar with the Hebrew Bible, the next step would be to acquire some knowledge of early rabbinic thought and method. *The Sages* by E. E. Urbach (see note 2) is an excellent start. Three anthologies serve as introductions to their respective texts:


At this juncture, it would be a good idea to read some of the more general books on Jewish mysticism in order to get an impression of its history and concepts. My recommendation is to study the following books—in the order in which they are listed:

1. Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (see note 3), some comments on which have already been noted16

A weakness of *Major Trends* is the absence of a chapter on the early Kabbalah. Two books nicely fill this void:

Paulist Press has provided two more titles which help round out our short list:

The final development of Jewish mysticism covered in Scholem’s *Major Trends* is Hasidism, on which I have not developed an extended bibliography. However, I can suggest three works to provide a foundation:

Three of the books listed above (Dan and Kiener’s *Early Kabbalah*, Matt’s *Zohar*, and Fine’s *Safed Spirituality*) offer texts as well as introductions. There are some other anthologies:

There is a bit of redundancy among these titles; fortunately, all are available in low-cost paperback editions.

There are some collections of articles which can be recommended:

*Haredi* students of the Kabbalah might sneer at many of the works suggested here. For an overview, they would instead urge Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s *Inner Space: Introduction to Kabbalah, Meditation and Prophecy* (Brooklyn: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1990) or Rabbi Yechiel Bar-Lev’s *Song of the Soul* (Petach Tikva, 1994). Both, especially the latter, are serviceable introductions to Lurianic Kabbalah, which is somewhat thinly handled in our entry on Safed Kabbalah, though covered well in Scholem’s *Major Trends*.
For further advice on readings in Judaism, see *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, edited by Barry Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984). There, one is guided by specialists through the issues and literature of the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, medieval commentaries and philosophy, kabbalistic texts, hasidic teachings and prayer books.

Another good overview of the literature of Judaism is *The Sacred Books of the Jews* by Harry Gersh (New York: Stein and Day, 1968).


A very instructive set of anthologies (if you can get past the lame illustrations) is Louis Jacobs’ CHAIN OF TRADITION SERIES published by Behrman House (New York):

1. *Jewish Law* (1968)

To these could be added Jacobs’ *Jewish Mystical Testimonies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).
For full bibliographic information on various stages of Jewish mysticism, refer to my series on sources in English:

- “Notes on the Study of Merkabah Mysticism and Hekhalot Literature in English”— with an appendix on Jewish magic
- “Sefer Yezirah in English”
- “Notes on the Study of Early Kabbalah in English” [the current paper]
- “Notes on the Zohar in English”
- “Notes on the Study of Later Kabbalah in English: The Safed Period and Lurianic Kabbalah”
- “The Study of Christian Cabala in English”

These papers can be accessed on-line at http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/karr/.

“Popular” books on Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism are numerous and quite varied in their quality and purpose. For readable, well-researched accounts, see


Notes (updated 2003):


3. See Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1941; frequently reprinted by Schocken Books, New York). A similar flaw plagues the recent anthology by Daniel C. Matt, The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994). As nicely done as it is, Matt’s book gives the erroneous impression that the Kabbalah can be summarized and distilled into a single, comprehensive volume. This problem of homogenization burdens other areas of Jewish studies; see Barry Holtz’s comments regarding midrashim in Back to the Sources (New York: Summit Books, 1984), pp. 177-9.


In several of Schäfer’s discussions (*Gershom Scholem Reconsidered* for one) and in David Halperin’s *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 1988), questions are raised about the titles and contents of *hekhalot* texts. The notion of fixed bodies of content forming a canon of “books” representing a coherent school of *hekhalot* mysticism appears unsupportable. A similar problem exists with the very term *kabbalah* (see note 7). A partial solution is suggested in such subheadings as the *early* Kabbalah of the Provence and Gerona circles, the *Tyyun* school, *prophetic* Kabbalah (of Abraham Abulafia), or *Lurianic* Kabbalah. However, should the German *Hasidism* be excluded so definitely from Kabbalah?

7. Until the thirteenth century, *kabbalah* referred to the whole body of oral religious teachings: the Talmud, the *midrashim*, etc. Indeed, anyone who picked up a copy of *Sefer ha-Kabbalah* (Book of Tradition) expecting it to expound upon *kabbalistic* mysteries would be sorely disappointed. See *The Book of Tradition*, translated by Gerson D. Cohen (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968).

8. On the terms “mysticism,” “symbol,” and “myth,” see Gil Anidjar’s article, mentioned in note 6. Words causing particular difficulty in the field of Jewish mysticism are “gnostic” and “gnosticism”; examples of discussions on these terms are


10. If one were to pick up any of a number of popular books on Kabbalah, one might come away with the impression that Kabbalah was primarily, if not solely, the doctrine of the *sefirot*, or divine emanations. In fact, Kabbalah involves a rich array of concepts and techniques, not the least of which are various types of letter and name mysticism (though many of the hermeneutic conventions concerning words and letters, such as *gematria*, are more accurately considered rabbinic, not kabbalistic). Topics are diverse: the progression of cosmic cycles, mystical explanations of the *mitzvot*, the interplay of humankind with the ultimate God, the source and reason behind evil, creation and the end, the mystical significance of the holidays, angels and demons, the transmigration of souls—indeed, a ranging literature full of unpredictable interpretations of scripture.


12. On considering the German *Hasidim* an important source for non-*sefirotic* Kabbalah, see Daniel Abrams, “From Germany to Spain: Numerology as a Mystical Technique,” in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. XLVI, no. 1 (Spring 1996).
13. See the various discussions of the *Bahir*:
   - Gershom Scholem. *Origins of the Kabbalah*.


15. The more comprehensive English edition of the *Mishnah* by Herbert Danby (1933) is still available from Oxford University Press.


17. In *Essential Papers*, Arthur Green’s article, “The Zohar: Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Spain,” is a gem; it’s worth getting the book just for this. This fine article also appears in *An Introduction to the Mystics of Medieval Europe*, edited by Paul Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), which also contains David Biale’s article on the Safed Period, “Jewish Mysticism in the Sixteenth Century.”

18. Be careful with the Meltzer. It is full of sloppy mistakes.