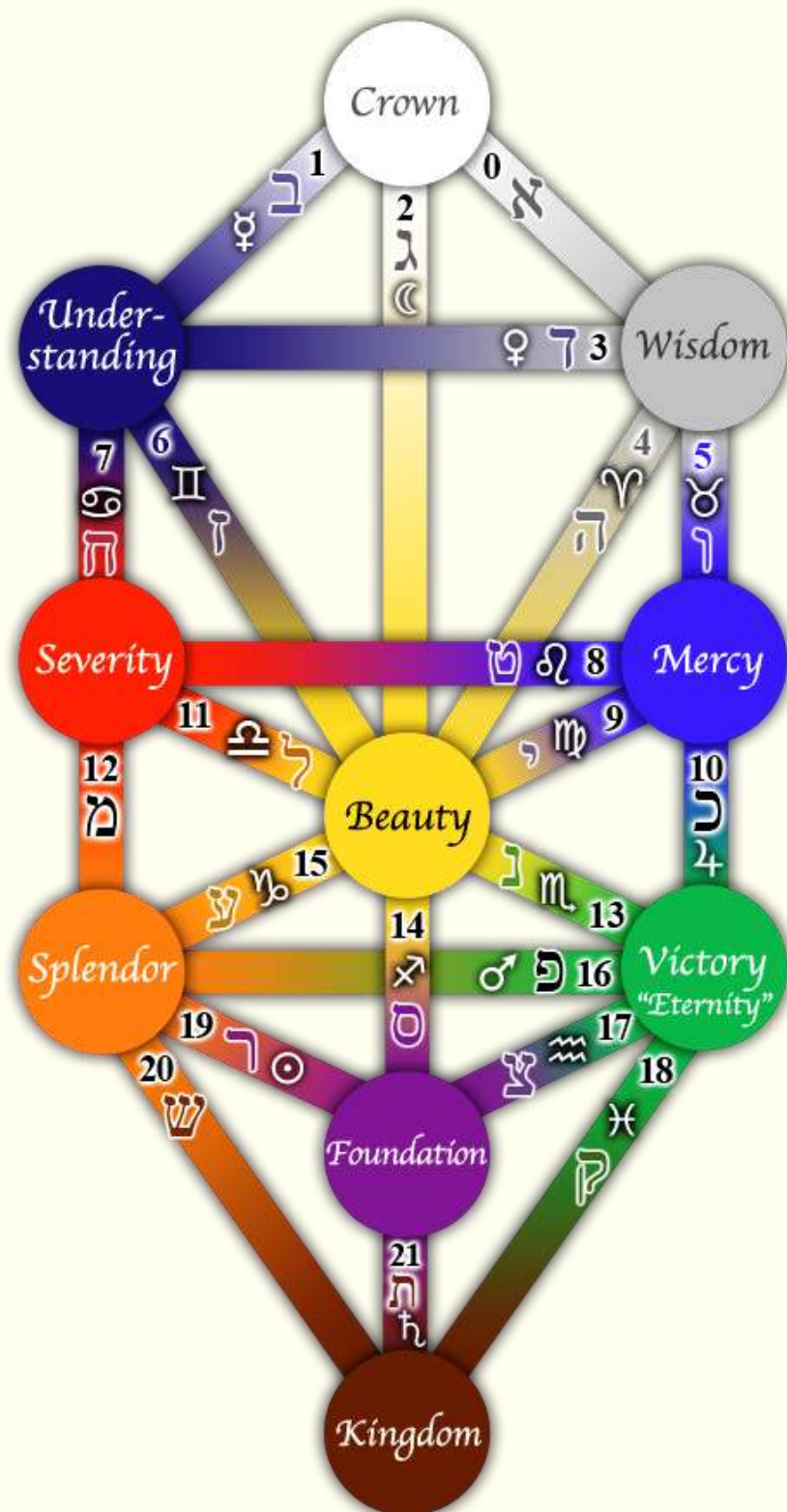


Boris de Zirkoff

On the Kabbalist Literature.



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AS many students are unfamiliar with Kabbalistic literature, it has been deemed advisable to append the following succinct information for their benefit. As the subject is a very vast one, only essential data have been included.

The *Zohar*, known also as the *Midrash ha-Zohar* and *Sēpher ha-Zohar*, meaning “Splendour,” is the great storehouse of ancient Hebrew Theosophy, supplemented by the philosophical doctrines of mediæval Jewish Rabbis. Together with the *Sēpher Yetzīrāh*, or “Book of Formation,” one of the most ancient Kabbalistic works, the collection of the *Zohar* represents the oldest extant treatises on the Hebrew esoteric doctrines. It consists of several distinct but interrelated tracts, each discussing some special branch of the subject; each of these tracts consists again of several portions, and contains a kernel of ancient teachings, around which are clustered comments and explanations written by several hands, and at very different epochs. There is considerable evidence to show that the kernel of these doctrines is of very remote antiquity, and embodies the remnants of one of the oldest systems of philosophy that have come down to us. Sufficient proof exists to connect some of these tenets with the period of the return from the Babylonian captivity, as they bear the impress of the still more ancient Chaldæan secret lore.

The *Zohar* is largely a mystical and allegorical commentary on the *Pentateuch*. Together with various Appendices that must have been added to the collection at some later time, it deals with a large number of subjects, such as Ain Soph, the Emanations, the Sēphīrōth, Adam Kadmon, the Revolution of Souls (*Gilgulim*), the use of numbers and letters, the casting of lots, good and evil, etc. The largest portion of this collection is written in one of the Aramaic dialects; other portions are in Hebrew; the presence of still other dialects adds greatly to the difficulties of an accurate translation.

Tradition current among mediæval Rabbis assigned the authorship of the *Zohar* to Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, who lived in the reign of the Roman Emperor Titus, A.D. 70-80, and was one of the most important Tannaïm in the post-Hadrianic period. He was born in Galilee, and died at Meron, near Safid, in Palestine, where his traditional tomb is shown. His principal teacher was Akiba, whose Academy at Bene-Berak he attended for a good many years. Ordained after Akiba’s death by Judah ben Baba, he escaped from Jerusalem during the violent struggle of the Jews with the Romans, and hid himself in a cave for thirteen years. It is here that Shimon ben Yohai, a profound Kabbalist already, was instructed, according to tradition, by the prophet Elias himself. In his turn, he taught his disciples, Rabbi Eleāzār and Rabbi Abba, who

¹ From his *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (KABALAH AND KABBALISTS) VII pp. 269-273.

committed to writing those traditional teachings of the earlier Tannaïm which in [270] later ages became known as the *Zohar*. After his seclusion, Shimon ben Yohai settled in Galilee and founded a school of his own, gaining the reputation of a wonder-worker. He was sent to Rome with Eleāzār ben Jose, to obtain the repeal of imperial orders which had forbidden certain Jewish ceremonial observances, and returned after a successful mission.

While the name of Shimon ben Yohai is associated with the history of the *Zohar*, it is nevertheless certain that a very large portion of this compilation is not older than approximately 1280, when it was edited in manuscript form by Moses ben Shem-Tob de Leon. The latter was a famous Kabbalistic writer born at Leon, Spain, about 1250, and who lived in Guadalajara, Valladolid, and Avila, and died at Arevalo in 1305. Familiar with the mediæval mystical literature, he was especially conversant with the writings of Solomon ben Judah ibn Gabirol (Avicbron), Judah ha-Levi, and Maimonides. Apart from his work on the *Zohar*, he is known for other dissertations, among them the *Ha-Nephesh ha-'hokhmāh* (Basel 1608), which deals with the human soul as a likeness of its heavenly prototype, and with the transmigration of souls. He led a wandering life, and was a man of brilliant intellect and lofty religious idealism.

It is most likely that Moses de Leon was the first one to produce the *Zohar* as a whole, but many of its constituent portions date from the time of Shimon ben YotJ.ai and the Second Temple, even though historical evidence is not forthcoming of the many steps in the course of transmission of these doctrines from ante-Roman times.

The *Zohar* in its present Hebrew form was first printed at Mantua (1558-60) and Cremona (1558); only one MSS. of it is in existence prior to the first edition; another edition appeared at Lublin, in 1623. Baron Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636-89), a very able and searching Hebrew scholar, translated several treatises of the *Zohar* into Latin, and published them, together with the Hebrew text under the title of *Kabbalah Denudata* (Vol. I, Sulzbach, 1677-78; Vol. II, Frankfurt 1684). C. Liddell MacGregor Mathers published under the title of *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (London: George Redway, 1887. 8vo., viii, 359pp.) an English translation of three of these treatises: the *Siphrā di-Zeni'uta*, or "Book of the Concealed Mystery," the *Idra Rabbah*, or "Greater Holy Assembly," and the *Idra Zuta*, or "Lesser Holy Assembly," together with an original introduction on the subject.

Other important treatises making part of the *Zohar* are : "The Hidden Midrash," "The Mysteries of the Pentateuch," "The Faithful Shepherd," "The Secret of Secrets," "Discourses of the Aged in Mishpatim," "Yanuka, or the Child," and the "Aesh Metzareph," the latter dealing with alchemical ideas.

Selected portions of the *Zohar* have been translated into French by Jean de Pauly, and published by Éliphas Levi as *Le Livre des [271] Splendeurs* (Paris 1894); and into English by Harry Sperling and M. Simon (5-vols., London 1931-34). Translations of selected passages can also be found in the most valuable and rare work of Isaac Myer, *Qabbalah. The Philosophical Writings of Solomon Ben Yehudah Ibn Gebirol or Avicbron* (Philadelphia 1888, xxiv, 499pp.), important especially on account of its extensive historical Introductory. H.P. Blavatsky herself reviewed it at considerable

length (*Lucifer*, Vol. III, February 1889, pp. 505-512; *vide* later volumes of the present Series).

In connection with the above general subject, the student may be referred to the following works: Adolf Jellinek, *Moses ben Schemtob de Leon und seine Verhältniss zum Sohar*, Leipzig, 1851; E. Müller, *Der Sohar und seine Lehre*, 2nd ed., 1923; C.D. Ginsburg, *The Kabbalah: Its doctrines, development, and literature*, London and Liverpool, 1866; Adolphe Franck, *La Kabbale*, Paris 1843 (English tr., Leipzig 1844); and A.E. Waite, *The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabbalah*, London, 1902; and *Secret Doctrine in Israel*, London 1913.

As to the *Sēpher Yetzīrāh*, or “Book of Formation,” it is reputed to be the oldest known Kabbalistic work, attributed by tradition to Abraham himself, as also to Aki-ba. It deals with permutations of numbers and letters, and is our first source for the doctrine of emanations and the Sephīrōth. It is written in the Neo-Hebraic of the *Mishnah*, and is unquestionably of very ancient origin. The *editio princeps* is that of Mantua 1562, with several subsequent ones. The text and commentary by Dunash ben Tamim have been published by M. Grossberg, London 1902, and parts of it have been translated by W. Wynn Westcott, London, 1893. See also the translation of P. Davidson, Loudsville, Georgia, U.S.A., and Glasgow, Scotland, 1896.



The earlier issues of several Theosophical periodicals contain valuable essays on the subject of the Kabala in general, as well as various particular aspects of this profound study. In H.P. Blavatsky's days, several renowned Kabbalists wrote for Theosophical publications. Among these essays, the following deserve special mention, and are listed here for the benefit of the earnest student:

Buck, Dr. J.D.: “The Cabbalah,” *The Theosophist*, Vol. V, November 1883, pp. 44-45; seems to imply that J. Ralston Skinner had one or more unpublished MSS. in his possession.

Lazarus, Montague R.: “The Kabbala and the Microcosm,” *The Theosophist*, Vol. VIII, September 1887, pp. 767-774; Vol. IX, October, November, December, 1887, pp. 45-52, 119-124, 167-171, respectively. Copious excerpts from rare Kabbalistic works; valuable as a correlation between Hebrew, Hindu. and Greek views of the constitution of man.

Pratt, Dr. Henry: “About the Kabbalah,” *The Theosophist*, Vol. X, August 1889, pp. 649-661; “Eloistic Mysteries,” *ibid.*, Vol. XII, July 1891, pp. 591-99; Vol. XIII, November 1891, January, February, April, 1892, pp. 77-86, 244-251, 293-296, 418-25, respectively.

Chamier, D.: “The Kabbalah and its Doctrine,” *The Theosophist*, Vol. XXIV, November 1902, pp. 90-97.

Pancoast, Dr. Seth: “Kabbalah,” *The Path*, Vol. I, April 1886, pp. 8-14; “The Mystery of Numbers,” *ibid.*, May 1886, pp. 37-41.

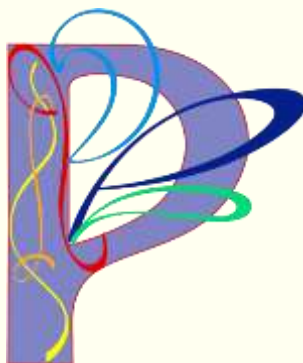
Skinner, J. Ralston: "Notes on the Cabbalah of the Old Testament," *The Path*, Vol. I, July and August 1886, pp. 103-108 and 134-139, respectively.

Westcott, W. Wynn: "The Kabalah," *Lucifer*, Vol. VIII, August 1891, pp. 465-69; Vol. IX, September 1891, pp. 27-32; "A Further Glance at the Kabalah," *ibid.*, Vol. XII, April and May, 1893, pp. 147-53 and 202-208, respectively.

Leiningen, C. de: "The Soul according to the Quabalah." Translated from the German by Thomas Williams; originally published in the *Sphinx*. Issued in London, 1890, as *Theosophical Siftings*, Vol. II, No. 18.

Saper Aude: "Some Anomalies in the Biblical Views of the Constitution of Man," issued in 1893 as *Theosophical Siftings*, Vol V, No. 16.

Wirth, Oswald: "Qabbalah," *Le Lotus*, Vol. III, January 1889, pp. 625-32; text in French.



Suggested reading for students.



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- MYSTERIES ARE SACRED TRUTHS
- MYSTERY IS NOT UNREVEALED KNOWLEDGE
- NO THEOSOPHICAL JOURNAL CAN SATISFY ALL CREEDS AND BELIEFS
- OCCULT TRUTH IS NATURE WITHOUT THE ILLUSORY VEIL OF THE SENSES
- OUR GOD IS HUMANITY AND OUR CULT THE LOVE OF OUR FELLOW-MAN
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