

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE KABBALAH

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The subject of my paper is that aspect of Jewish mysticism that is known as the Kabbalah. I have spent about 20 years studying the Kabbalah in one form or another. But even after that length of time, I still don't feel comfortable saying I know anything about it. So it is beyond me how I can distill this information down to a twenty-minute talk!

What does the word Kabbalah mean and what, if anything, does it have to do with Freemasonry? Kabbalah is a Hebrew word that literally means tradition. In one respect it means "mouth to ear" as in reference to an oral tradition handed down from generation to generation. It could also refer to an initiated and mystical interpretation of the Scriptures that is communicated only in an appropriate setting and in discreet ways. But more generally, Kabbalah refers to a type of religious discourse and literature that surfaced around 1175 in Provence. Towards the end of that century a document began to be circulated called Sepher ha-Bahir (The Book of Clear Light). This manuscript is regarded as the first written expression of what was to be later called the Kabbalah. It signified a milestone in the history of Jewish mysticism as well as a departure from the traditional perspective it had adhered to in its earlier expressions.

The general structure of this paper will be to provide a crash course in the history of Jewish mysticism focusing on the emergence of what we call Kabbalistic material, its spread though Europe, the Christian response to it and finally its significance to us as Freemasons.

Jewish Mysticism

The earliest expressions of Jewish mysticism have their origins in the stories of Elijah and Ezekiel. The rabbis have always been very humble in their approach to God and their earliest forms of mysticism sought visions rather than unitive experiences in regard to God. Ezekiel with his visionary experience of the Throne of God was the prototype. This type of mysticism – where one is taken up and shown the sacred world rather than being absorbed or becoming “one” with it – is known as “palace” (Heikhalot) or “chariot” (Merkavah) mysticism.

The Jewish mystics attempted to achieve the same type of religious and mystical experiences of these prophets through a series of practices and disciplines. One great mystic of this type was Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef (50 –135CE). In the book *The Mystic Quest*, David Ariel explains some of the old practices:

“They practiced an ecstatic and visionary form of mystical experience in which each rabbi prepared himself for his ascent to the celestial world through asceticism and rituals of purification. He visualized himself ascending through seven heavens and through the seven palaces in the highest heaven, the aravot. Along the way, he gained admission to each heaven and palace by representing the correct password to the angelic gatekeeper. These passwords consisted of magical formulae and secret names of God or His angels. (Ariel: p, 19)”

From the seventh century until about the thirteenth century, Jewish mysticism, although under Islamic political rulership, developed and flourished. Areas of special importance included: Baghdad, Basra, and Damascus. Then, as David Ariel informs us, the focus shifted: “In the latter half of the twelfth century, the center of Jewish mystical activity shifted from the area around Baghdad to Germany and Provence in southern France.” (Ariel: p. 25) From there it moved into Spain. “The beginning of the thirteenth century marked the beginning of the most fertile period in the history of Jewish mysticism.” (Ariel: p. 25) About this time we see the emergence of the Hasidim in Germany. Without going into lengthy explanation of this important development, suffice it to say that the emphasis shifted from the ascent to the palace of the inaccessible God to one of His accessibility and immanence. We find here the idea of a dual aspect of God – that on the one hand God is unique and remote – the Hidden God – and on the other hand there is the revealed aspect which humans can experience. For the Hasidim “It is not the mystic who ascends through the palaces, but the relational aspect of God that descends to man.” (Ariel: p. 26)

At the same time we find the most important movement of medieval Jewish mysticism coming into view in Provence, which was the intellectual center of European Jewish culture.

Ariel explains that: "Under Arab rule, the Jews in Spain had produced an intellectual and literary renaissance that lasted from the tenth to the twelfth century." (Ariel: p. 27) And this is when and where the Kabbalah emerged. As I mentioned earlier, near the end of the twelfth century, we see the Sepher ha-Bahir (The Book of the Clear Light). When the Christian reconquest of Spain was well under way by 1225, the centers moved to Spain. The town of Gerona became home to the Kabbalists. Then in 1290 we find the appearance of the book Sepher ha-Zohar (The Book of Splendor). It soon became the primary Kabbalistic work. For the next two centuries Kabbalah flourished in Spain. But it was not a public forum, it remained low key. David Ariel explains that:

"In Spain, the Kabbalah was the spiritual avocation of a small number of rabbinically literate and religiously conservative Jews. Teachings, theories, and devotions were transmitted from father to son, from teacher to disciple. The Kabbalah was an elite spiritual movement nurtured by the circulation of mystical manuscripts and private oral teachings." (Ariel: p. 35)

Around 1391 the problems for Jews in Spain erupted into harassment and violence. About one third of the Jews were killed, there were forced baptisms and other types of religious persecution. In 1474, the Catholic Ferdinand and Isabella ascended to the throne; then in 1481 the Royal Inquisition was established in Spain; and finally, in 1492 the remaining Jews were expelled from the country. Fortunately, the Kabbalistic doctrines went with them and spread to many towns in Europe and the Mediterranean. The next great learning center was centered at Safed in Palestine. Because of this dispersion, it wasn't long before the kabbalistic doctrines caught the attention of some very important Christian scholars.

Christian Kabbalah

In regards to the Christian interest in the Kabbalah I only wish to point out a few items of note. The history is rich and I don't think it has been completely worked out to date. We can begin by pointing to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463 – 94). About his short but brilliant life, the historian Frances Yates explains:

"Mirandola belonged to the brilliant circle around the Medici court on Florence which included another famous philosopher, Marsilio Ficino. Ficino and Pico were founders and propagators of the movement loosely known as Renaissance Neoplatonism. This movement was stimulated by the works of Plato and the Neoplatonists newly revealed to the West through the Greek manuscripts brought to Florence from Byzantium after the fall of Constantinople. ...Prominent among the texts of this type which attracted Pico and Ficino was the Corpus Hermeticum, ... Ficino does not use Cabala or Cabalistic methods in his Neoplatonic theology, philosophy, or magic. It was Pico who introduced Cabala into the Renaissance synthesis. And, like Ramon Lull, it was as a Christian that Pico valued Cabala.

He believed that the Hebrew texts and teachings could enlarge understanding of Christianity through their revelation of a current of Hebrew mysticism of such great antiquity and sanctity. More that, Pico believed that Cabala could confirm the truth of Christianity. In this belief he was followed by the many schools of Christian Cabalists who were to succeed him, who all looked back to Pico della Mirandola as the founder or first great exponent of Christian Cabala". (The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, Yates, pp. 17-18)

Another great thinker who helped in the spread of the Kabbalah was the German Johannes Reuchlin (1455 – 1522). He was influenced by Pico and wrote *De Verbo Mirifico* just two years after the Jewish expulsion in 1494. And 23 years later he wrote his second major work *De Arte Cabalistica*. According to Frances Yates it was: "... the first full treatise on Cabala by a non-Jew. ... It was the fullest exposition hitherto available to European scholars, outside the actual Jewish tradition, of Cabalist theory and practice, with examination of Hebrew letter-manipulations and other main Cabalist theories and techniques." (Yates: pp. 24-25)

The development of this line of mysticism was further developed by a Franciscan friar by the name of Francesco Giorgi of Venice (1466-1540). We find much of the material coalescing in his work. Yates informs us that: "These influences were completely integrated into Giorgi's Neoplatonism in which was included the whole tradition of Pythagoro-Platonic numerology, of world and human harmony, even of Vitruvian theory of architecture, which, for Giorgi, had a religious significance connected with the Temple of Solomon." (Yates: pp. 29-30) The story continues with the work of Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) and John Dee (1527 – 1608). As an aside, we know that the initial Rosicrucian manifesto was being circulated in manuscript form in Germany about the year 1610. Its first printed edition was issued in 1614. With that in mind, the historian Frances Yates makes the statement and poses a question:

"... the suggestion was raised that Giorgi's philosophy may be closely related to the philosophy of Rosicrucianism. It is certain that Robert Fludd's vast volumes on the universal harmony, the *Utriusque cosmi historia* published at Oppenheim in 1617-19, are heavily influenced by Giorgi and represent, in essence, the Giorgi philosophy in a later form. Fludd, as we know, was associated with the Rosicrucian movement. Was, therefore, the influence of Giorgi which we have traced in the Elizabethan age and called an influence of Christian Cabala really the same as an influence of Rosicrucianism, a movement possibly connected with secret societies and particularly with Freemasonry?" (Yates: p. 169)

Now we can go on and consider the connections of Kabbalah and the Fraternity of Freemasonry.

Masonry and Kabbalah

So I am sure that a few of you may have asked yourself (in a low tone of voice underneath your breath), what does this have to do with Freemasonry? A careful look at many of the rites and rituals of Freemasonry reveals that there is indeed much kabbalistic influence to be found there. Some of our rites have obvious kabbalistic influence, such as the 28th degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish rite which is called: "The Knight of the Sun".

In Henry C. Clausen's (past Sovereign Grand Commander of the Scottish Rite) book: Clausen's Commentaries of Morals & Dogma, he states in regard to this degree: "This is a Kabalistic and Hermetic Degree of the greatest antiquity, dealing with the primal matter of all things. The allegory is man in search of truth. It teaches a philosophic design for a doctrine of natural religion as part of the mystery." (p. 172) And there are other degrees as well. Many of the rites of Freemasonry can be interpreted in a Kabbalistic fashion. Some have very obvious allusions to this esoteric science and others one might need to apply the kabbalistic tools and techniques to extract the hidden light from their structure. There is no need to go into the intricacies of this, to avoid a lengthy expose; enough to say that there are a two major tools that need to be brought to your attention: that of gematria and the Tree of Life.

Gematria is basically exploring the inner meaning of mystical writings and scriptures by use of numerology. The way it is used is by interchanging letters of special names, phrases, and passages with their numerical equivalent. This is only done with the ancient languages of Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Arabic. It is thought that the ancient writers were adept at hiding the initiatic wisdom in this fashion. Paul Foster Case (1884 – 1954), a writer, occultist, and Freemason, explains it thus:

Gematria is based on the idea that words having the same value, have correspondences in meaning. (The Magical Language: p. 1) The Magical Language is a mode of cryptic writing used to preserve and transmit the practical secrets of the Western Tradition of Ageless Wisdom. It is an artificial language, combining Hebrew, Greek and Latin elements. Its outstanding characteristic is that the letters of the three alphabets it employs serve also as numbers. Consequently, every word, phrase, or sentence is also a number, the sum of the values of the letters. (Ibid. p. 7)

Examples for Masonic students would include the fact that the Hebrew spelling of Hiram Abiff is 273. Another Hebrew word that sums to 273 is Aur Ganuz or hidden light. Another example given by Paul Case: "And we have already spoken of the number of this name, 273, which is the total value of the phrase, ABN MASV HBVNIM, Ehbén masó ha-bonim (the stone refused by the builders), as written in Hebrew in Psalm 118:22." (Case, The True & Invisible Rosicrucian Order, p. 58.) These examples should have meaning to both Blue Lodge and Royal Arch masons. There are several other examples and I refer you to his book for further study.

Other ways of discovering hidden meanings in the words is to find their numerical equivalents to the images of the Tarot. In some decks, there are 22 Major Trumps in addition to the numbered cards and court cards. These 22 Trumps have been associated with the 22 Hebrew letters. Obviously, one would have to "reduce" the sum of most words down to the Trump numbers. This is done very easily by just adding the numbers of the sum (e.g. 333 would be 3 plus 3 plus 3 which equals 9).

In Albert Pike's *Morals and Dogma*, a book with commentary on the 32 degrees of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, states that:

"He who desires to attain to the understanding of the Grand Word and the possession of the Great Secret, ought carefully to read the Hermetic philosophers, and will undoubtedly attain initiation, as others have done; but he must take, for the key of their allegories, the single dogma of Hermes, contained in his table of Emerald, and follow, to class his acquisitions of knowledge and direct the operation, the order indicated in the Kabalistic alphabet of the Tarot." (p. 777)

The "Tree of Life" is a diagram made up of 10 circles and 22 lines. The ten circles are connected by these 22 lines normally referred to as "paths". The circles or spheres are ascribed the numbers 1 to 10. The number 1 referring to the highest unity of God and the number 10 referring to the everyday world. Each line or path is ascribed to one of the Hebrew letters. Therefore also to one of the 22 Tarot Trumps. This glyph has come to represent many varied and profound aspects of the spiritual. It provides a centralized focus for everything from states of consciousness, mystical visions, stages upon the spiritual path, philosophy and psychology to a way of organizing a vast array of correspondences to link the outer with the inner worlds. Obviously, something like this calls for a lengthy and detailed further study.

Finally, in regards to the Tree, remember that it was the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that is spoken of as strictly important to God in the first book of the Bible: Genesis 2:9. After Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, he drove them out of the Garden lest they attain immortal life (Genesis 3:22). But in the last book of the Christian Bible, The Revelation of St. John the Divine, it is written: "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the Tree of Life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." (Revelation 2:7) We are here given a direct statement to the importance of this spiritual symbol.

It should be stated that this Tree is seen differently by the different traditions: Jewish mysticism, Christian mysticism, and mystics of other traditions. Much depends upon their traditional interpretation of the scriptures. But there are others who remove the Tree from its cultural setting and use it in a broader fashion. For example, one of the greatest occult minds of the last century wrote:

"The Qabalah, that is, the Jewish Tradition concerning the initiated interpretation of their Scriptures, ... contains as its ground-plan the most precious jewel of human thought, that geometrical arrangement of names and numbers which is called the Tree of Life. I call it most precious, because I have found it the most convenient method hitherto discovered of classifying the phenomena of the Universe, and recording their relations. Whereof the proof is the amazing fertility of thought which has followed my adoption of this scheme." (Aleister Crowley, Little Essays Towards Truth, p. 10)

And that is where I will leave this talk. As Masons, we are given various tools in our Craft and it is up to each to use what he can to build that edifice we symbolically call the Temple of Solomon. And for that Mason whose interests go to the deepest aspects of our Craft, we are provided with esoteric tools as well.

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