

Kabbalah¹

History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity: A form of Jewish mysticism with ancient roots that took shape in the medieval period and that has been revived in contemporary popular forms. “Kabbalah is a body of mystical and esoteric beliefs based on commentaries on the Torah, the first five books of Hebrew Scripture (Genesis to Deuteronomy). The term *kabbalah* comes from a Hebrew root word, *kbl*, which means ‘to receive.’”² Referred to as a “hidden wisdom” kept secret for centuries but now being revealed to achieve unity with God, Kabbalah as practiced today “discusses angels and demons, souls’ journeys after death, reincarnation, resurrection, and the goal of achieving messianic consciousness....”³

Founder: See “History” below. Today the influential Kabbalah Centre in Los Angeles is run by Rabbi Philip Berg (Rav P. S. Berg). His sons Rabbi Yehuda Berg Rabbi and Michael Berg have been instrumental in the promulgation of kabbalist ideas and practices through numerous books available in many bookstores. Other writers such as Rabbi David Cooper (*God is Verb*, a bestseller in late 1990s) and Daniel C. Matt have also contributed to popular interest in Kabbalah.

Statistics: The Kabbalah Centre has 50 locations around the world. Millions of books in 20 languages have been published.

History: Many scholars have traced Kabbalah to a 1st century form of Jewish mysticism called Merkabah, which involved speculations on God’s throne and how to reach it through inner human experience.⁴ This movement produced texts containing two important ideas for later development of Kabbalah: numerical value and significance of the Hebrew alphabet, and the ten *sefirot*—a symbolic system central to “classical” Kabbalah (see below). In the 12th century a Kabbalah text appeared in south France called “Book of Brightness” containing key tenets of the movement. A movement or school followed soon after under “the Father of Kabbalah,” Isaac the Blind, which eventually spread into Spain in the 1200s. The school flourished there, though it was not received well by rabbinic authorities. A kabbalist named Moses de León, over a period of 30 years, produced writings he attributed to a 2nd century rabbi, Simon bar Yochai. The collection came to be known as *Sefer ha-zohar* (*Book of Splendor*), known as *Zohar*—a foundational text and repository of mystical commentary on the first five books of Moses. The most significant pre-modern expression of Kabbalah came from Isaac ben Solomon Luria (1534-72), whose school was centered in Safed (modern Zefat in Israel) and whose ideas were recorded by followers.

In recent years, interest in Kabbalah has revived, due in large part to the work of Gershom Scholem, professor of Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Rabbi Abraham Kook was a prominent kabbalist in his time (1865-1935) and his writings have shaped modern Kabbalah. Today followers of Kabbalah emphasize Gnostic ideas, with stress on the act of knowing to achieve truth and union with divinity. Kabbalah has attracted celebrities such as Roseanne Barr, Naomi Campbell, Jeff Goldblum, Jerry Hall,

¹Alternate spellings are: kabbala, kabala, cabala, cabbala, cabbalah, qabala, qabbala, or qabalah.

²Marcia Montenegro, “Kabbalah: Getting Back to the Garden,” *Christian Research Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 2, p. 14.

³*Ibid.* Quoted by M. Montenegro from Yehuda Berg, *The Power of the Kabbala* (Kabbalah Centre International, 2001): xix, xxv, xxvi.

⁴This summary of the history of Kabbalah is based on a helpful excursus in Christopher Partridge, ed., *New Religions: A Guide—New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 111-15.

Mick Jagger, Madonna, Demi Moore, Elizabeth Taylor and Britney Spears. The Kabbalah Learning Centre was founded in Jerusalem in 1928, and now has centers around the world, including Los Angeles. Those who actively study and follow Kabbalah are called *mekubbalim*.

Texts: Torah
Zohar (*Sefer ha-Zohar*= “the book of Radiance” or “the book of Splendor”)
 Book of Formation (supposed revealed to Abraham about 2000 B.C.)
Sefer ha-bahir (Book of Brightness)

Beliefs and Practices

The teachings of Kabbalah are difficult to summarize briefly due to Kabbalah’s complicated history and the highly complex, and even divergent, interpretations present in it. However, the following represent principal ideas and practices especially in its current, more popular forms:⁵

- Torah (first five books of the Bible) is an encoded message with hidden meanings. Specifically, kabbalists traditionally have taught that Kabbalah is the secret part of the oral law given to Moses on Mt.Sinai. *Gematria* is a method for discovering hidden meanings in Torah.⁶ It is basically a system whereby each Hebrew letter is given a numerical value so that procedures may be used to decode underlying messages of the text.
- In the Torah there is “information about *Ein Sof*, the creator God,⁷ whom we can know only in a limited way through the Tree of Life, which represents 10 emanations of *Ein Sof*. God’s light is flowing downward toward man through this tree and through the *Shekhinah*, the divine feminine aspect of God.”⁸ “Ein Sof pervades all creation, so that even a stone has divinity; all existence is pervaded by Deity.”⁹ The goal of Kabbalah “is to restore the lost garden of Eden by doing good deeds and working our way up the Tree of Life back to the divine source of all.”¹⁰
- Kabbalists have developed various explanations for the origin of the physical creation through emanations of light from Ein Sof.
- Humans are vessels of Light, reconnecting with Light (emanation of Ein Sof) through sharing.¹¹
- “The Tree of Life” symbolizes the divine, representing the 10 concentric emanations (*Sefirot*, “numbers”) or aspects of *Ein Sof* that travel down through interconnected points, through which people spiritually ascend to realize unity with the divine, their origin. The 10 emanations or *sefirot* represent ten areas of God’s activity and existence. They are “mythological facets, mini-embodiments of God’s being, each one acting as a staging post (from top to bottom) in the ascent (or descent) to the One.”¹²

⁵The summary of Kabbalah teaching presented here relies heavily on the excellent article by M. Montenegro referenced in note 2 above.

⁶The 1997 bestseller *The Bible Code* by Michael Drosnin makes use of this kabbalist method and computer technology to “decode” the Hebrew Bible to make predictions about future events.

⁷In the Introduction to Arthur Goldwag’s *Kabbalah* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), Rabbi Lawrence Kushner speaks of *Ein Sof* as follows: “the Oneness in which all being is dissolved and from which being continuously emerges—is called, in Hebrew, literally the One’ without end.’ This is much more than simply the arithmetic concept of infinity. *Ein Sof* is neither numeric nor mathematical. It means, instead, without boundary, without definition, without any characteristics whatsoever. Indeed, to say anything about it at all violates the essential notion of the term. *Ein Sof* is the font, the source, the matrix, the substrate, the mother lode of being. It may also be being itself. It is to being what electricity is to the letters and words on a computer’s video monitor” (xiv).

⁸Montenegro, 15.

⁹*Ibid.*, 17. Montenegro here summarizes statements in: Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco and HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 24; Will Parfitt, *The Elements of the Kabbalah* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1991), 68.

¹⁰Montenegro, 15.

¹¹Montenegro, 17, quoting Rav P. S. Berg, *The Essential Zohar* (New York: Bell Tower, Crown Publishing Group, 2002), 59, 246.

¹²Partridge, *New Religions*, 111.

- “Kabbalah teaches that God’s blessings flow to the world through the Tree of Life when there is ethical behavior among humans; evil actions disrupt the union of the sefrot and empower demonic activity.”¹³ In fact, God needs humans to be complete, so that in effect humans are “co-creators” with “God itself.”¹⁴
- “In Kabbalah, Adam and Eve are viewed as symbols of male and female energy, and as a metaphor for the ‘primordial Vessel’ whose existence came before creation, thus encompassing all the souls of humanity to come. The Presence of the Serpent, considered a fragmenting force, was necessary for creation; otherwise, all would have remained united with God. This gave man the opportunity to earn the Light on his own.”¹⁵ Explanations of hidden meanings in the Bible’s account of the fall vary, but essentially the fall means man has disrupted the downward flow of light, symbolized by the Tree of Life.
- A transformation of the world can take place when wise souls overcome negative behavior, ascend to higher consciousness, and return to Paradise.
- Reincarnation takes place so that people may progress spiritually through “healing” or “correction” (*tikkun*).¹⁶

A Lutheran Response

From a Christian perspective, Kabbalah differs from the Bible’s teaching at numerous critical points. As matters of central importance, however, we may single out the following: the understanding of “God,” the way of a human being’s return to God (salvation), and the role of human works.

In the view of most kabbalists, “God” (*Ein Sof*) is a *concept or idea* that is ultimately unknowable, not the personal transcendent God who Christians believe reveals Himself to humankind in and through the Holy Scriptures and in the person of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. When Moses asks God to identify Himself, He reveals Himself to Moses and to the people of Israel: “‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’.” This God interacts with Moses and the people personally in words and deeds and reveals in history both His judgment and mercy. He declares Himself to be “the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:13-15). By this name, this one and only true God (Deut. 6:4) forever wants to be known (Ex. 3:15). And finally “in these last days,” this same God “has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:2). That is to say, God has made Himself known preeminently through His own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, died for the sins of the world, and was raised from the dead. He ascended into heaven to reign forever over all things in heaven and on earth (John 1:1-14; Acts 2:32-32; 3:12-15; Col. 1:15-20; 3:1). He is present forever personally now with those who believe in Him (Matt. 28:20; Matt. 18:20).

As it has been commonly observed, Kabbalah is a form of Gnosticism.¹⁷ It promises spiritual regeneration and reintegration or return into a divine presence through illumination—the impartation of hidden knowledge through secret techniques acquired by enlightened teachers. Typical of other forms of mysticism, it draws its “revelations” from esoteric [designed for or understood by the specially initiated alone] texts that provide the key to saving knowledge: “Understanding the concealed, inner meaning requires keys present in the form of pictorial symbols, systems of numerical analysis, and the clear statement of the need for the reader to follow specific initiatory processes—accessible within the confines of one or another secret fraternity.”¹⁸ The Bible, however, speaks clearly and forthrightly, without cryptic meanings or hidden codes, about salvation: “...from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings (the Scriptures) which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All

¹³Montenegro, 18.

¹⁴Montenegro, 18, quoting Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, xvi.

¹⁵Montenegro, 18-19.

¹⁶Montenegro, 19, quoting Matt, xi.

¹⁷See, for example, Partridge, *New Religions*, 305; *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, Third Edition), 918..

¹⁸*Ibid.*

Scripture is breathed out by God [inspired] and profitable for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..." (2 Tim. 3:15-16; see also Matt. 11:25-27). The Christian message about Jesus Christ and His salvation is an "*open secret*" able to be understood by all, even children. It is the "mystery" [the Gospel] "kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and now through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen" (Rom. 16:25-27)

Kabbalist teachers often speak, and in various ways, of how righteous deeds in the physical world create "channels that connect us to the Divine."¹⁹ Kabbalists receive "Light" through righteous acts and, in fact, "through acts of goodness, worship, love, healing, and giving—or *mitzvot*—[human beings] are able to influence the divine....By means of awakening below comes awakening on High."²⁰ Central to the New Testament, however, is the good news that we are "connected" to God not by our righteous deeds, but "through our Lord Jesus Christ": "Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1-2). Jesus is the Light of the world" and those who follow him "will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Righteous deeds are an outcome in one who is connected to Jesus Christ. Good works are like fruit growing on branches attached to the Vine (John 15:1-8; see Gal. 5:22-26).

For Further Reading

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Links and Websites

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¹⁹Montenegro, quoting P. Berg, 17.

²⁰Rabbi L. Kushner, in A. Goldwag, *Kabbalah*, xvi.