Kabbalah: A Brief Overview

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There are strong connections with Kabbalah in Rosicrucianism and Martinism, and Kabbalah remains an important aspect of the teachings of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC and the Traditional Martinist Order. In this article, Joshua Maggid, a longtime Rosicrucian and Martinist who has studied Kabbalah for many years, presents a brief overview of Kabbalah, including Jewish, Christian, and Hermetic Kabbalah.

For those beginning to learn about it, Kabbalah can be difficult and confusing. Different books say different things. Any two books on Kabbalah may address completely different topics, or they may provide conflicting definitions and interpretations of the same material. In addition, authors use different English spellings for the same Hebrew terms.

One reason for this is that there are several different systems or traditions that all refer to themselves as "Kabbalah." There is Jewish Kabbalah, Christian Kabbalah, and Hermetic Kabbalah.[1] Christian and Hermetic Kabbalah borrow concepts, terms, and techniques from Jewish Kabbalah, but they may use them differently, and they incorporate elements from other traditions. Even within traditional Jewish Kabbalah, because it has existed over many centuries and in different parts of the world, there have developed a variety of different systems, schools, and methods.[2] In recent years, there has also appeared a kind of "New Age Kabbalah," which takes elements of traditional Jewish Kabbalah out of their religious context and presents them as a collection of practical techniques for finding happiness, fulfillment, prosperity, relationships, etc.

Another common way of classifying different types of Kabbalah is according to the kinds of activities involved.

"Theoretical Kabbalah" or "Theosophical Kabbalah" includes a system of metaphysics, a description of the inner workings of Divinity and how it interacts with the material world, and methods of deriving esoteric interpretations of the Holy Scriptures.[3]

"Meditative Kabbalah" consists of a wide variety of practices aimed at attaining higher states of consciousness, exploring the spiritual realm, encountering the Divine, and receiving new spiritual insights.[4] This is also referred to as "Mystical Kabbalah" and "Prophetic Kabbalah."

"Practical Kabbalah" refers to theurgy and magic, attempting to influence the Divine Realm and produce practical effects in the material world. To some extent, however, these distinctions can be somewhat arbitrary. Some modern authors in the Hermetic or Magical tradition see magic more as a system of spiritual development rather than an exercise of personal power.[5]

Jewish Kabbalah

Some authors apply the word "Kabbalah" to all of Jewish mysticism, going back thousands of years, including

the *Merkavah* tradition and even the Biblical prophets. Others reserve the term "Kabbalah" for the specific form of Jewish mysticism that began around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE in southern France and in Spain. That was when the word "Kabbalah" was first used to refer to these writings and activities.

Merkavah Mysticism (The Work of the Chariot) is sometimes classified as pre-Kabbalistic or as Early Kabbalah. Its dates are usually given as starting around the second century BCE and continuing for about a thousand years. These mystics would meditate and send their souls upward, proceeding through a series of seven holy palaces or chambers. Each chamber provides a different spiritual experience. They hoped to eventually reach the seventh and highest chamber and receive a divine vision like the one described by the prophet Ezekiel [1:1-28].

The *Sefer Yetzirah*[6] (The Book of Formation) is often called the oldest Kabbalistic text.[7] It describes in detail how God used the letters of the Hebrew Alphabet to create everything in the universe. When properly interpreted, it can also be read as a meditation manual that describes a number of meditation techniques using the Hebrew letters. Traditionally attributed to the Biblical patriarch Abraham, the origin of the *Sefer Yetzirah* is unknown, but some date it to around the second or third century CE.

The *Sefer ha Zohar*[8] (The Book of Splendor) is generally acknowledged to be the most important Kabbalistic writing. Not a single book, but a collection of books, the Zohar contains esoteric interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and descriptions of the inner workings of the Divine Realm. Much of it is in the form of stories about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his companions, traveling around the Holy Land and discussing the hidden meanings of the scriptures. Manuscripts of portions of the Zohar were first circulated in Spain by Rabbi Moshe de Leon in the 1290s. He claimed that he found them, and that they were written by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the second century CE. Academic scholars generally believe that the Zohar was actually written by de Leon himself, or possibly by a group with which he was associated. It may have incorporated or expanded upon earlier oral traditions. Mostly written in a form of Aramaic, much of the Zohar is extremely arcane and notoriously difficult to understand.

Statue of Moshe de Leon in Guadalajara, Spain.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moshe_de_leon

In the sixteenth century, the city of Safed (*Tzfat*), in what is now Israel, was a major center of the flourishing of Kabbalah. Many important figures emerged in Safed at that time, but the most influential figure for Kabbalah was Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), often referred to as "the Ari" or "the Arizal." He provided a new approach to understanding and interpreting the Zohar, and he constructed a very detailed description of the creation of the universe, the divine emanations, and the process of reincarnation.[9]

During the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, science and rationality came to the fore, and interest in mysticism diminished. In Judaism, the failure of the messianic Sabbatean movement in the seventeenth century had discredited Kabbalah in the eyes of many, and mysticism generally lost its appeal. While Kabbalah was attacked and suppressed by the dominant forces, a form of Kabbalah was perpetuated by the Hassidic movement starting in the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe. Hassidism conveyed Kabbalah in a somewhat popularized form that allowed for encountering the Divine in nature and everyday life rather than exclusively through scriptural study and complex meditative techniques.

Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) was a Jewish philosopher and historian who founded the modern academic study of Kabbalah. Born and raised in Germany, he later emigrated to what is now Israel, where he became the first Professor of Jewish Mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Scholem, and the students he trained and influenced, helped to make Kabbalah widely available to the lay public.

Christian Kabbalah

In the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, during the European Renaissance, Kabbalistic writings were translated from Hebrew into Latin and became widely available to Christian scholars. Kabbalistic concepts and methods were adopted by some Christian theologians, giving rise to what is called Christian Kabbalah.[10] Christian Kabbalists also assimilated aspects of the Hermetic and Platonic writings, which were also translated into Latin during this period, associating Christian Kabbalah with Hermetic magic and Neoplatonist theurgy.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) had books on Kabbalah translated from Hebrew into Latin, and he also wrote books on Kabbalah. He argued that the Catholic Church should incorporate Kabbalah and magic into Christian theology. Pico believed that, by employing Kabbalistic methods of esoteric interpretation, he could use the Hebrew Scriptures to prove the truth of Christian teachings such as the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity. One of his famous "Nine Hundred Theses" was: "There is no science that assures us more of the divinity of Christ than magic and Cabala."[11]

Statue of Giordano Bruno in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome, where he was burned at the stake in 1600.
http://www.glebedigital.co.uk/blog/?p=999

Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522), a Christian scholar who studied Greek and Hebrew, was influenced by the work of Pico della Mirandola. He wrote books in Latin on Kabbalah[12] and argued that Kabbalah should be accepted by the Church because it proved the truth of Christian teachings and could be used to convert Jews to Catholicism.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) drew extensively from Kabbalah throughout his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*,[13] a very influential compendium of Western occultism and magic.

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was a Dominican friar who studied the works of Pico, Reuchlin, and Agrippa, and wrote several books himself.[14] He traveled around Europe trying to find a royal patron who would support him in his quest to have the Church adopt Kabbalah and magic. Bruno did not find the support he sought, and he made the mistake of returning to Rome, where he was arrested by the Inquisition and burned at the stake for heresy in 1600.

Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636-1689) translated parts of the Zohar and other Kabbalistic works from Hebrew into Latin in a compendium called *Kabbala Denudata* (The Kabbalah Unveiled).

At first, Christian Kabbalah was a public movement seeking recognition by the Catholic Church. The Church never accepted it, and finally suppressed it, but it was perpetuated in esoteric movements including Rosicrucianism,[15] Freemasonry,[16] and Martinism.

In her history of *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, Frances Yates says that "'Christian Cabala' and 'Rosicrucianism' may be synonymous."[17] She goes on to say that

> The philosophy of Christian Cabala as expressed by Giorgi and Agrippa is very close to the so-called Rosicrucian philosophy, as expressed in the Rosicrucian manifestos and by Robert Fludd . . . We can now better understand the history of Rosicrucianism by linking it with the history of Christian Cabala as carried into the Elizabethan age.[18]

Hermetic Kabbalah

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as it developed in underground esoteric movements, Christian Kabbalah gradually incorporated more pagan elements and alchemical symbolism. By the late nineteenth century, the term "Hermetic Kabbalah" was used to distinguish it from the Christian Kabbalah of the Renaissance.

Alphonse Louis Constant, writing under the name of Eliphas Levi (1810-1875), connected the cards of the Tarot deck with the letters of the Hebrew Alphabet, the ten *Sefirot* of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, and the *Sefer Yetzirah*.[19]

One of the most familiar names from that era is Dr. Gerard Encausse, known as Papus (1868-1916). He was involved in several esoteric societies and was a co-founder of the Ordre Martiniste (Martinist Order) and the Kabbalistic Order of the Rose-Croix, whose membership was limited to Martinists who had attained the S.I. degree, and was structured around three degrees named Bachelor of Kabbalah, Master of Kabbalah, and Doctor of Kabbalah.[20] His books include *The Qabalah: Secret Tradition of the West*.[21]

The best known and most influential of the hermetic occult societies was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which was founded in England in the late 1800s. Its focus was Ceremonial Magic, and it included considerable Kabbalistic material along with other mystical and magical traditions.[22] S. L. MacGregor Mathers, who was one of the order's founders, translated Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbalah Unveiled* from Latin into English.[23]

Dion Fortune (1890-1946) was a member of several esoteric and occult groups, and later formed her own organization, called "The Fraternity of the Inner Light" (later renamed "The Society of the Inner Light"). Her most famous and influential book is *The Mystical Qabalah*.[24]

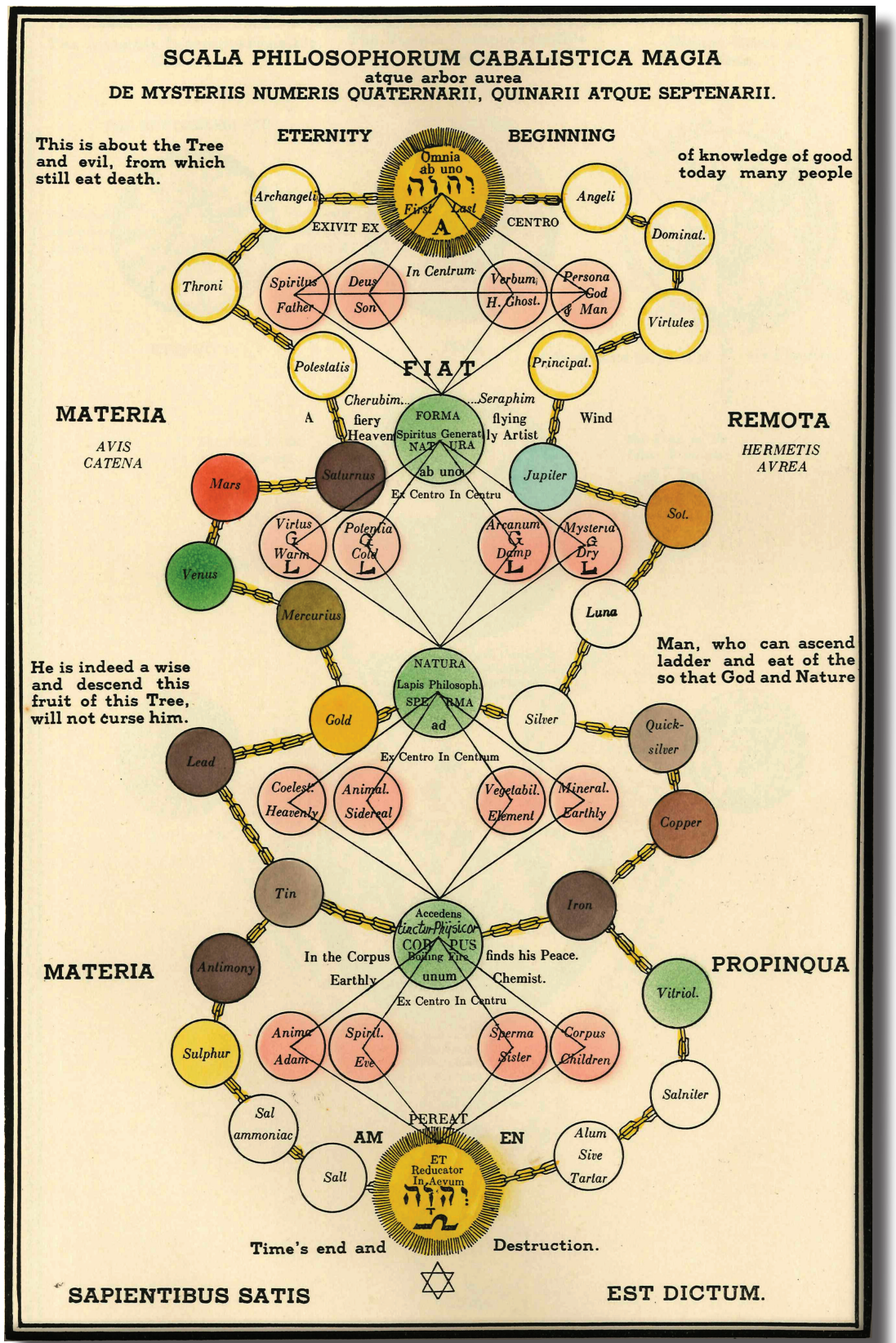
Conclusions

Because of the wide variety of ideas and practices that have been included under the term "Kabbalah," when reading books on this topic, it can be very helpful to identify the specific tradition and branch of Kabbalah that the author is presenting.

There are strong connections with Kabbalah in Rosicrucianism and Martinism, and Kabbalah remains an important aspect of the teachings of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC and the Traditional Martinist Order.

ENDNOTES

1. In books on Christian Kabbalah, "Kabbalah" is generally spelled with a "C" (e.g., Cabala), probably because the original sources were written in Latin. Hermetic Kabbalah books tend to spell it with an initial "Q" (e.g., Qabalah). Books on Jewish Kabbalah most often use the initial letter "K," possibly because of early books written in German. While these conventions are not always observed, an author's spelling can often be a clue to which system the book is presenting. For the sake of simplicity, except for direct quotations from other sources, only the spelling "Kabbalah" is used in this article.
2. For a general survey, see Perle Epstein, *Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001). For a brief and accessible historical synopsis, see the DVD, *Decoding the Past: Secrets of Kabbalah* (The History Channel, 2006).
3. E.g., Kim Zetter, *Simple Kabbalah* (Conari Press, 2000; distributed by Red Wheel/Weiser, York Beach, ME).
4. E.g., Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1982).
5. E.g., Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1984).
6. Isidor Kalisch, trans., *Sepher Yezirah: A Book on Creation* (San Jose: Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, 2002). Aryeh Kaplan, trans., *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*, rev. ed. (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1997).
7. E.g., Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, ix.
8. Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). Daniel C. Matt, trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, multiple vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004-).
9. Hayyim Vital, *The Tree of Life: Chayyim Vital's Introduction to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria. Volume I: The Palace of Adam Kadmon*, trans. Donald Wilder Menzi and Zwe Padeh (New York: Arizal Publications, 2008).
10. Joseph Dan, ed., *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books & Their Christian Interpreters* (Cambridge: Harvard College Library, 1997).
11. S. A. Farmer, trans., *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)* (Tempe: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 2008), 497.
12. Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah: De Arte Cabalistica*, trans. Martin and Sarah Goodman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).
13. Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. James Freake, ed. & annotated by Donald Tyson (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 2000).
14. Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
15. Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge, 2001), 197-205.
16. Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2002), 262-277.
17. Yates, *Occult Philosophy*, 105.
18. Ibid., 195.
19. Eliphas Levi, *The Book of Splendours: The Inner Mysteries of Qabalism* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1984), 130-131.
20. Christian Rebisse, *Rosicrucian History and Mysteries* (San Jose: Grand Lodge of the English Language Jurisdiction, AMORC, 2005), 138.
21. Papus, *The Qabalah: Secret Tradition of the West*, trans. W. N. Schors (York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2000).
22. Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1989).
23. S. L. MacGregor Mathers, trans., *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006).
24. See note 5.



Scala Philosophorum Cabalistica Magia. From the *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians of the 16th and 17th Centuries,* hand colored by H. Spencer Lewis.