

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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### Kabbalah

by J.K. McKee updated 10 April, 2013 www.messianicapologetics.net

#### What is your opinion of the Jewish Kabbalah?

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, references to Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, and associated writings like the Zohar or Sefer Yetzirah, largely remained contained to the fringe of the broad Messianic community.<sup>1</sup> This is notably not literature that mainstream Biblical scholars, Jewish or Christian, employ in their research, as representing views and ideas from the Biblical period, or in the four to five centuries following. In the late 2000s and into the 2010s, though, ideas stemming from either Medieval Jewish mysticism or traditional Kabbalistic literature and later offshoots, are becoming more and more “mainstream,” as it were. Whereas earlier, it would not be too common for various Messianic Jewish teachers to refer to Jewish mystical literature from the Middle Ages, as somehow paralleling the words and teachings of Yeshua and the Apostles, it is now becoming more and more commonplace. Aside from the obvious historical problem of acting like theological or spiritual views from a millennium or more *after* the period of Yeshua and the Apostles were very close to those of Second Temple Judaism—which would be anachronistic—the roots of such spiritual views have not often been approached with a great deal of discernment *or* trepidation. When one encounters the Jewish Kabbalah, he or she is going into a very dangerous area, which many persons in Judaism itself feel is either irrational, or just flat off limits.

Ideas and concepts originating from Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages, are beginning to spread in some distinct parts of the Messianic world via various teachers and leaders, who are tickling many unsuspecting ears. Jewish mysticism had existed in various “primitive” forms, as there were fringe elements of influence present in Second Temple Judaism, perhaps associated with the ideas of proto- or incipient-Gnosticism (as would have been particularly confronted in Paul’s letter to the Colossians). But while Gnosticism became relatively dormant by the Fourth Century, Jewish mysticism continued to develop and actually became a formalized area of Judaism by the Twelfth Century. *The Jewish Study Bible* notes that “Kabbalah taught that God was inaccessible through direct experience, and could only be apprehended through emanations of the Godhead; Torah in kabbalistic teaching had a hidden meaning, and meditation on texts was a method of ascent to a mystical vision.”<sup>2</sup> One of the primary thrusts of Jewish mysticism was to view the Hebrew Scriptures as esoteric and try to find a hidden meaning behind almost everything. Consequently, many superstitions morphed into what became Kabbalah. “‘Kabbalah’ is the traditional and most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism, especially the forms which it assumed in the Middle Ages from the 12th century onward” (*EJ*).<sup>3</sup> *Everyman’s Talmud*, a condensed collection of writings from the Jewish Rabbis over the centuries, summarizes,

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<sup>1</sup> A most poignant example of this would be Brad Marcus (a/k/a Avi ben Mordechai), *Messiah Volume 3: Understanding His Identity and Teachings Through the Soul of the Torah* (Millennium 7000 Communications, 2001), which blatantly has on its cover an image of the Kabbalistic sefirotic tree. As a testament to this teacher’s personal inconsistency, though, his later volume *Galatians: A Torah-Based Commentary in First-Century Hebraic Context* (Jerusalem: Millennium 7000 Communications, 2005), endorses a Karaite perspective of the Torah, a definite flip-flop given the hyper-traditionalism and hyper-Talmudism of *Messiah Volume 3*.

<sup>2</sup> *Jewish Study Bible*, 2132.

<sup>3</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Kabbalah (J. mysticism),” in *EJ*.

“The Talmud reveals very clearly a conflict between the pure, rational doctrines of the Bible and the debased beliefs and superstitions which pervaded the world in which the Jews lived. The Scriptures vehemently denounced every kind of magical practice and all attempts to pierce the veil which conceals the future from human men by means of divination. We see several Rabbis, particularly in the early period, waging a brave fight to stem the tide of sorcery which threatened their community, but in vain. In the later period even Rabbis succumbed, and credulity prevailed over faith.”<sup>4</sup>

At first, the study and practice of Kabbalah in Judaism was not popular. It arose during a time in the Middle Ages when superstition and myth saturated much of Europe. While the formalization of Jewish mysticism for the most part began in Muslim Spain where Jews were not as influenced by Christian European superstitions, Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike were nevertheless infected by superstitious beliefs, and mysticism was by no means limited to just Judaism. During this same period, Muslim mysticism, Sufism, also arose, and superstitious beliefs regarding Biblical saints or Biblical characters were affluent throughout Catholicism. As *EJ* notes, “there are elements common to Kabbalah and both Greek and Christian mysticism, and even historical links between them.”<sup>5</sup> While those often practicing some form of mysticism were trying to seek a deeper and more profound experience with God, the way that many went about doing so was largely not only condemned, but explicitly prohibited by Scripture.

During the Twelfth Century, the primary texts and mythos surrounding Kabbalah were formulated. Many of these texts attest to this form of “communicating with God” going all the way back to Abraham, or perhaps even much farther to prior to the Noahdic Flood. True communion with God is described as something that is simply unattainable by people, and so humans must use esoteric and mystical methods to commune with Him. These include radical re-interpretations of the Scriptures, taking entire portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, perhaps putting pages of the Bible through some kind of numerical chart to determine one’s future, and even using séance-type techniques to communicate with the Higher Power. Certainly, while the study of Jewish mysticism is very complex, when one with a discerning eye looks at some of its practices, immediately the Holy Spirit inside the person should be convicting him or her that this is wrong. Consider this rather forthright description of Kabbalah from *EJ* regarding its origins:

“From the beginning of its development, the Kabbalah embraced an esotericism closely akin to the spirit of Gnosticism, one which was not restricted to instruction in the mystical path but also included ideas on cosmology, angelology, and magic. Only later, and as a result of the contact with medieval Jewish philosophy, the Kabbalah became a Jewish ‘mystical theology,’ more or less systematically elaborated. This process brought about a separation of the mystical, speculative elements from the occult and especially the magical elements, a divergence that at times was quite distinct but was never total....There is no doubt that some kabbalistic circles (including those in Jerusalem up to modern times) preserved both elements in their secret doctrine, which could be acquired by means of revelation or by way of initiation rites.”<sup>6</sup>

This Jewish source sums up what Kabbalah is all about quite well. It says it comes out of an esoteric strain of thought “akin to the spirit of Gnosticism,” which “included ideas on cosmology, angelology, and magic.” It says that there are many elements in Kabbalah that come straight from the occult. Does Kabbalah sound like something that would be supported by

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp 274-275.

<sup>5</sup> Scholem, “Kaballah (J. mysticism),” in *EJ*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Scripture, or condemned by Scripture? Would one practicing Kabbalah be subject to the penalty of practicing divination and witchcraft? Certainly, according to Leviticus 20:27 if a person becomes a medium or spiritist, he or she would be subject to the Torah's capital punishment.

Interestingly enough, within its entry for "Sorcery," *EJ* tells us that "While there is no information about the measure of law enforcement in this field in talmudic and pre-talmudic times, it seems certain that this branch of the law fell into disuse in the Middle Ages. Superstitions of all kinds not only flourished and were tolerated, but found their way even into the positive law (see YD 179, *passim*, for at least eight instances). **What became known as 'practical Kabbalah' is, legally speaking, sorcery at its worst.**"<sup>7</sup> This same entry goes on and says, "The penal provisions relating to sorcery are a living illustration of the unenforceability of criminal law (whether divine or human) which is out of tune with the practices and concepts of the people. In modern Israel law, witchcraft and related practices are instances of unlawful false pretenses for obtaining money or credit (Penal Law Amendment (Deceit, Blackmail, and Extortion), Law, 5723–1963)."<sup>8</sup> While attesting to the fact that proper punishment upon those practicing Kabbalah was not readily enforced in Judaism, it is nevertheless illegal in modern Israel to use witchcraft as a means for advancing oneself.

Unfortunately, as today's Messianic movement continues to develop and work through an entire host of issues—some will accept the teachings of the Jewish Synagogue without question and without discernment, not understanding some of the complexities and diversity of Jewish history (or for that same matter Christian history), and they will have little understanding that Judaism has its own internal divisions and theological errors just as Christianity does. Many who accept the study and practice of Jewish mysticism and/or the Kabbalah as being valid for their "Biblical faith," have not recognized its highly esoteric, and even occultic origins in places, which are readily documented by Jewish sources.<sup>9</sup> In fact, few realize that when the Chassidic movement arose in Eastern Europe in the Seventeenth Century, that it was opposed as heretical by many of the Jews in Eastern Europe. One of the reasons that it was opposed by the mainline Orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe was because some of the early Chassidic leaders practiced magic:

"Some 19th-century scholars described modern Hasidism, founded by Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, as a prime example of magic and superstition...[M]any leaders of the hasidic movement believed in magic and practiced it, especially in giving amulets (the Ba'al Shem Tov himself dealt in magic and probably made his living as a popular healer and magician)..." (*EJ*).<sup>10</sup>

However, in total fairness, this same entry does note that "the vast homiletic literature which describes its ideology, is devoid of all magic elements." It goes on to say that "The difference between the 'practical tradition' of Hasidism, which practiced magic, and the 'ideological (theoretical) tradition' of the movement is probably more pronounced in modern Hasidism than in any other mystic movement" (*EJ*).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, these sorts of attestations as to what the Chassidic movement and Chabad have included from their beginning, should make many of today's Messianic people be suspect of considering much of their theology, and whether or not it should really have a major place within the future development of our faith community.

The presence of Jewish mysticism, and specifically Kabbalah, has not gone unnoticed by various figures within contemporary Messianic Judaism. A brief article appearing in the May

<sup>7</sup> Cohn, "Sorcery," in *EJ*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> A rather extensive review is provided by Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton University Press, 1987). Also to be considered is his work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Dan, "Magic," in *EJ*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

2011 edition of the *Levitt Letter*, published by Zola Levitt Ministries, appeared largely denouncing Kabbalah as a danger to be avoided by contemporary Believers:

**Todd Baker, “Kabbalah and the God of the Bible” *Levitt Letter* May 2011.**

To amplify on a question posed to Dr. Seif (see p. 23), the Kabbalah poses many dangers to the Bible-believing Christian—chiefly how it views who God is. While its writings can inform us about how Jewish medieval thinking developed, its view of God is unbiblical. Today in Israel, the Kabbalah still has a pervasive and strong influence.

The Kabbalah, alternatively spelled Qabalah, or Cabalah, developed between the 6th and 13th centuries among the Jews in Babylonia, Italy, Provence, and Spain. The Kabbalah is a set of mystical/occult writings purporting to reveal and convey hidden wisdom and knowledge about God that only a few select people can secretly attain.

The word *Kabbalah* means “to receive” and refers to revelation from God received by Jews and passed to succeeding generations through oral tradition.

The Kabbalah views God as a series of ten descending emanations. God created the material world through these emanations with each one farther away and weaker than God Himself. So the Kabbalah contradicts the Bible when it says that God directly brought Creation into existence by His spoken word (see Genesis 1; Psalm 148:5,6). Furthermore, the Bible reveals God as an externally self-existent Person who exists apart from Creation and is not dependent upon it for His existence (Acts 17:24-26).

The Kabbalah writings also view God through the lens of Pantheism. Pantheism views God as the universe and the universe as God. But again, the Bible repeatedly maintains an essential distinction between the Creator and the creation He brought into existence. The Bible teaches that God is infinite; His being is so immense that creation itself cannot ever contain Him. As it is written: “*Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You*” (1 Kings 8:27).

The Kabbalah does hold to the Bible being the inspired Word of God. But it claims that the meaning of Scripture must be found through decoding the numeric value of the Hebrew letters in order to find the true, hidden meaning of a passage. God, however, has made it clear that He desires *all* people to understand His Word in a clear and simple fashion (John 1:1-2,14; 5:39). The Kabbalah violates the first rule of Biblical interpretation: When the plain meaning makes sense, seek no other sense, otherwise you end up with nonsense!

Finally, the Kabbalah denies the Messiahship of Jesus and His incarnation as God in the flesh. It also believes the knowledge of the secret and hidden is the way to God. But again, the Scriptures teach that the only way to God is through His Son Jesus Christ (John 3:16) and that eternal life comes by knowing Him through a relationship of trust and faith (John 17:3). For these reasons the Kabbalah should be strongly rejected on biblical grounds.

A somewhat centrist position regarding presumed pros and cons of both the Jewish Kabbalah and the Chassidic movement, are summarized by Daniel C. Juster in his 1987 version of *Jewish Roots*:

The Kabbalah is an ancient Jewish mystical tradition. This tradition is primarily based in the Zohar, a late Middle-Age compilation of mystical ideas of God and creation, numerology, concepts of redemption and magic. From the Messianic Jewish perspective, the Kabbalistic tradition is truly a mixed-bag. At times, one can find within Kabbalism the most profound and Biblically-valid thoughts on everything from the Messiah’s suffering for sin to even a Triune concept of the unity of God. However, Kabbalism also contains concepts from magic and paganism.

Gershom Shalom [sic.; actually Scholem], in his monumental book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, shows that Kabbalism has roots in second and third century gnosticism. Gnosticism was a religious approach from paganism that influenced *heterodox* Christianity and Judaism. Gnosticism was a system that taught salvation by the way of a secret knowledge of spiritual and magical realities which was only to be conveyed to initiates. This secret knowledge assured passage after death unto salvation as well as a means to tap into spiritual powers whereby current events and situations could be manipulated. When the Kabbalah partakes of these magical and gnostic viewpoints, the Messianic Jew judges it to be dangerously occult and to be avoided. Yet not everything in Kabbalism is of this nature. No one but the most spiritually mature should seek to discern the difference between the strands of tradition.

*The Chasidic Movement* flourished in the eighteenth century and continues to this day. It traces its origins to the Baal Shem Tov, the Lord of the Good Name. Today's Chasidim are strictly Orthodox Jews; but in the beginning, the Chasidic Movement was considered to be heterodox. Martin Buber has sought to give us an appreciation for this movement.

Chasidism was a renewal movement within Judaism which brought exuberance, the Chasidic leaders, although greatly interested in Torah and Talmud (traditional Jewish areas of study and practice), also were greatly influenced by and involved in Kabbalism. The Mitnagdeem, the Orthodox establishment of the day, condemned Chasidism. Usually a picture is painted of the Mitnagdeem as dry scholars with no spiritual life who rejected the Chasidim, who were themselves full of love, fervor and energy. It was not so simple. The Mitnagdeem not only recoiled at the untraditional actions in Chasidic life and worship, but at what they considered involvement in magic and heretical concepts!

In the Chasidic literature, we find many stories of rabbis who lost their minds in Kabbalism. There were many who dabbled in magic. However, there were other leaders who eschewed the magical aspects of Chasidism. Stories in the literature note the extreme dangers for even the most spiritual who became involved in magical means to produce certain ends or to bring the Kingdom of God. Some almost lost their lives. The dangers of Kabbalism are certainly at least reflected in the stories; yet, via the Zohar, the dangers exist even to the present day.

The Chasidic stories also recount teaching and examples that are closer to New Testament teachings and attitudes. The incredible example of Zusia, who allows himself to be abused for the sake of others, but thoroughly loves his enemies, is a primary example. The love of God and of neighbor, mercy and justice, are reflected in profound yet simple stories of great beauty. These aspects of Chasidism make it a great attraction to the rootless young today.<sup>12</sup>

Juster is someone who would probably not be too favorable for any of today's Messianic Jewish congregational leaders to really associate themselves with the Jewish mystical tradition. Yet, some of his colleagues in Messianic Jewish leadership show a much more favorable approach to it. Messianic Jewish theologian Mark Kinzer, is one, who while legitimately expressing how "Kabbalah remains repugnant to many evangelical Christians and rationalist Jews...[because] Jewish mysticism has often been associated with magic and superstition," is still tempted to conclude that "Jewish mysticism has much to teach us."<sup>13</sup> We should expect groups like the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute to promote some degree, albeit limited, of Kabbalistic observance in the lives of future Messianic Jewish leaders.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Juster, *Jewish Roots*, pp 238-240.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Kinzer, "Hashem (The Name)" *Verge* Vol. 1, Iss. 7, December 2009.

<sup>14</sup> One piece of literature circulating throughout the Messianic movement, with a high degree of engagement with the Jewish mystical tradition, is *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary* (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2009). This piece itself is a commentary based on the book Paul Philip Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*

Concurrent with a growing acceptance for the Jewish mystical tradition and the Kabbalah in various Messianic Jewish quarters, it is being interjected that Biblical literature like the Book of Ezekiel, the Book of Revelation, and the Gospel of John may be regarded as “mystical.” There is no question that a simple survey of Biblical texts like these reveals that they are spiritually deep, complex, and that there are mysteries in them. *Whether Ezekiel, Revelation, or John can be declared to be “mystical,” though, can and should be contested.* The term “mystical” does not appear anywhere in the Holy Scriptures, whereas the term “mystery” does—particularly as God’s unfolding plan for the ages steadily presents itself to mortals in history.

We have to be extremely cautious of teachings circulating in our midst, and if someone is bringing Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah into our assemblies, he or she needs to be approached and silenced. The origins of Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah are not Biblical, and they lie with the occult and practices which are mainly classified in the Bible as being divination (Exodus 22:18; cf. Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10-12). While some of these mystical teachings might sound good, and might even sound intriguing, their origin is not the Holy Scriptures. Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, even historically, come from a much later time than the broad Biblical period. There is too much that the Biblical period has to offer us, and a legitimate window of extra-Biblical literature, that will be overlooked and ignored if the Messianic movement has a wide tolerance for Jewish mysticism.

We as Believers are always called to test the fruit of something, to see if that fruit be good and wholesome, and that the fruit is leading into a greater and better relationship with the Lord. We also have to be very careful with the company that we keep. The Apostle Paul writes, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14). It cannot go overlooked how the study of Kabbalah has actually become quite popular among some Hollywood celebrities. The most notable celebrity who has embraced Kabbalah has been Madonna. An article entitled “Madonna adopts kabbalah and a new wave of controversy,” appearing in the 26 July, 2004 edition of the Houston Chronicle, reports,

“On a recent news-magazine show, she discussed her interest in kabbalah and how she has adopted a Hebrew name, Esther. She has worn a red string on her wrist to ward off the ‘evil eye,’ and used sacred prayer accessories and symbolic Hebrew letters in music videos and concerts....Madonna is a student of the Kabbalah Centre, a worldwide education organization...The center does not require students to be Jewish, and the study can be incorporated into any faith, said Robin Davis, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles-based organization.”<sup>15</sup>

We know that the influence that this one celebrity has had on modern-day America, and indeed the world, has been anything but positive. The same can easily be said with some of the other celebrities who are likewise investigating Kabbalah. Is this just a passing fad for them, or is it something more permanent? Regardless of whether it is a passing fad or not, we do know that such celebrities have experimented with various religions, specifically those relating to New Age and the occult, and Kabbalah is of the same spirit as these things are. The Scriptures plainly warn

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(Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2009), a 1923 work of comparative religion produced by an early Hebrew Christian pioneer, who was originally raised in the Chassidic tradition in Belarus.

The publication *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary* has been negatively received by Tim Hegg, in his article “Are the Scriptures Alone our Sure Foundation or Do We Need Something More?” accessible via <[www.torahresource.com](http://www.torahresource.com)>.

<sup>15</sup> Tara Dooley (2004). *Madonna adopts Kabbalah and new wave of controversy*, 27 July, 2004. *Houston Chronicle*. Retrieved 10 October, 2004, from <<http://www.religionnewsblog.com>>.

us, “examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

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