

The Early Kabbalah

The basic concepts introduced in Segment 1 will all be discussed in more detail as the course progresses, and new concepts will be introduced as appropriate. This segment begins by exploring the Kabbalah's roots in biblical times, its early development in Palestine during the rabbinic period, and further developments in Babylonia in the early Middle Ages. Then we shall explore one of the most creative periods in the history of the Kabbalah: the 11th-13th centuries. In that "golden age" in southern Europe, Kabbalistic teachings and practices acquired forms that we recognize today. We shall examine the emerging concepts of the Godhead and the sefiroth. Finally we shall identify the divine names attached to the sefiroth and explore their significance and use in relation to the larger scope of Jewish mysticism.

This segment includes the following sections:

- Origins of the Kabbalah,
- The Kabbalah in Southern Europe
- The Sefiroth
- The Divine Names
- Correspondences
- Reflections, Resources and Assignment.

Origins of the Kabbalah

The word *Kabbalah* (Hebrew: QBLH, קבלה) was coined in the 11th-century to refer to an esoteric movement that was rapidly gaining momentum. It was derived from a root-word meaning "to receive" or "accept," and *Kabbalah* is usually interpreted as "received wisdom" or "oral tradition." The first person known to have used the term was the Spanish poet and Neoplatonic philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol. The conjunctive name *ibn* ("son of") draws attention to the Islamic culture in which he and many of his medieval contemporaries lived and the Arabic language in which they wrote. Solomon's own Jewish culture would have favored the Hebrew *ben* or the Aramaic *bar*. It is important to remember that Kabbalistic studies flourished in Muslim countries at a time when Jews were continually persecuted in Christian countries.

We know a lot about the Kabbalah in the Middle Ages, but its true origins are clouded in mystery. One legend claims that Moses received two sets of teachings on Mount Sinai: the exoteric teachings of the *Torah* and the esoteric teachings of the Kabbalah. The esoteric teachings allegedly were entrusted to 70 elders, to be passed on orally from generation to generation. Another legend traces the Kabbalah back to Abraham. Yet another asserts that the Kabbalah was originally taught to the angels, whereupon the Archangel Metatron revealed it to Adam to give him new hope after the expulsion from Eden. Certainly Judaism had an esoteric dimension from early times; the question is whether it in any way resembled "Kabbalah" we know today.

Esotericism in Antiquity

The best chance of detecting early signs of the Kabbalah lies in examining the Greco-Roman period from about 200 BCE to 400 CE. With particular reference to Judaism, those six centuries spanned the late biblical era, which ended with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, and the early rabbinic era that followed. The 600-year period saw the appearance of a number of Jewish esoteric texts.

Apocalyptic and “wisdom” literature emerged in Hellenic Judaism and was incorporated into the Greek Septuagint—though not in the Hebrew Bible approved by the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Palestinian Jewry. The *Books of Enoch* supposedly described mystical experiences of the biblical prophet Enoch, son of Jared and great-grandfather of Noah. The *Sibylline Oracles* presented a mixture of classical mythology and Judeo-Christian sacred stories. The book of *Revelation*, which would be included in the New Testament, did likewise. The *Chaldean Oracles* claimed to present the teachings of Zoroaster. Finally, the so-called Hermetic texts professed to communicate the secret wisdom of the ancient Egyptian priesthood. Whether any Kabbalistic texts appeared at that time, and what impact they might have had, will be discussed as we proceed.

Two esoteric movements within Judaism at that time were the *Maaseh Merkabah* and *Maaseh Bereshit*. *Maaseh* means “work of,” while *Merkabah* is derived from the Hebrew word for “chariot,” referring to Ezekiel’s chariot ride to heaven described in *2 Kings*. *Maaseh Merkabah* became popular in the early centuries of the Common Era. Its key texts were *The Lesser Hekhaloth* and *The Greater Hekhaloth*. The *Merkabah* movement and its influence on the mystical Kabbalah will be discussed in Segment 3 of this course.

Bereshit, the opening word in the Hebrew Bible, means “creation.” *Maaseh Bereshit* absorbed Platonic and Gnostic concepts of cosmology, including notions of multiple levels of reality spanning the gulf between pure spirit and physical matter. It may form a link between early Jewish esotericism and the theoretical Kabbalah that emerged centuries later. However *Maaseh Merkabah* was never purely mystical, nor *Maaseh Bereshit* purely intellectual; crossover took place in both directions. For example, the *Maaseh Bereshit* produced a number of hymns of praise, while the *Maaseh Merkabah* helped mold the theoretical underpinnings of the Kabbalah.

Interest in esoterica extended far beyond Judaism during the period under consideration. Exotic ideas, beliefs, and mystical practices were valued by the intelligentsia of the Roman Empire. Well-to-do Greeks and Romans made pilgrimages to Egypt, and sometimes to other parts of the Middle East, to savor ancient wisdom and religious rituals. The cultural environment of late Platonism had already taken on a religio-mystical dimension that would play out over time in pagan and Christian Gnosticism and, by the third century, in Neoplatonism.

Rabbinic Schools in Palestine

Of the various groups that comprised Palestinian Jewry in late biblical times, several may have taken an interest in esoteric matters. The Sadducees, members of the tribe of Levi and descendents of Zadok, formed the hereditary temple priesthood. Outwardly they opposed the notion of an oral tradition extending back to Moses, but they may have studied and taught esoteric topics in the privileged environment of the temple. After the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, the focus of Jewish religious life shifted to the synagogues, ritual sacrifice gave way to teaching and study, and the Sadducees rapidly faded from history. The rival sect of the Pharisees, whose principal focus was study and observance of Judaic law, was more supportive of an oral tradition. They expanded to fill the void caused by the temple’s demise and provided the basis on which the new rabbinic Judaism was built.

Esoteric studies may also have been pursued in the communities of the Essenes. One theory links the formation of those communities to disaffected Sadducees who left the temple when the priesthood became corrupt and politicized during the Maccabean regime. The Essenes vanished from history at about the same time as the Sadducees, probably as a result of destruction of their communes by the Romans.

Prominent in rabbinic Judaism were teachers known as the *Tannaim*, and in their work we find plausible evidence an early Kabbalah. The *Tannaim* saw as their mission the preservation and

continuation of an oral tradition in Judaism. They placed emphasis on memorizing the teachings of their instructors and earlier sages. Students were also expected to debate and resolve disputed issues, quoting traditional teachings in support of their arguments. Accounts of their deliberations found their way into the *Mishnah* (“Instruction”), which reached mature form in about 200 CE and eventually acquired the status of canonical Jewish texts.

Jewish schools, or *yeshivoth* (singular: *yeshivah*), which had been attached to the temple in Jerusalem, ceased to exist when the temple was destroyed. But those attached to synagogues continued to operate, albeit under difficult conditions and often in secrecy. In some cases the schools withdrew from Judea—the region hardest hit by Roman devastation in the late first and second centuries—to remote areas of Palestine. Some schools were run as residential communities. Teachers were drawn from various traditions, but by then all were called “rabbis.” *Rabbi* literally meant “my master,” and could be used as a respectful form of address. More generally it simply meant a religious teacher. Formal ordination of rabbis was common but never universally recognized. It was banned altogether by Roman edict in 425 CE as part of efforts to christianize the Empire.

The main topic of study in the yeshivoths was the Torah. Strictly speaking, *Torah* denotes the first five books of the Bible, but often it referred to the whole Hebrew Bible. Later the Talmud and other scriptural commentaries were added to the curriculum. Esoteric topics, where they were included, were offered on a restricted basis, probably only to advanced students. Attitudes were influenced by a passage from the book of *Sirach* (or *Ecclesiasticus*):

Seek not out things that are too hard for thee, neither search the things that are above thy strength. But what is commanded thee, think thereupon with reverence, for it is not needful for thee to see with thine eyes the things that are in secret. Be not curious in unnecessary matters: for more things are shewed unto thee than men understand. [*Sirach* 3:21-23]

Moreover, a passage in the Mishnah warns: “The Maaseh Bereshit is not to be explained to two men, the Maaseh Merkabah not even to one, unless he be wise and deduce wisdom of his own accord.”

Esoteric teachings never found their way into the Mishnah. What little written material there might have been remained in manuscript form, copied rarely and only for internal use. Some teachers would not even share written notes with students and insisted that their writings be buried with them when they died. Schools that included esoteric teachings in their curricula resembled the initiatory schools of the ancient mystery tradition and the occult societies of the early modern period.

The Hillel Dynasty

Because of the secrecy we know little about the work of the esoteric schools in Palestine. Nevertheless, comments in the Talmud and elsewhere give us glimpses into their work. One school, founded before the destruction of the temple, is particularly noteworthy because several generations of its members became famous. The school is noteworthy also because of claims that it produced the classical texts of the Kabbalah. If the school’s members did write the texts it would represent the first known center of Kabbalistic studies.

The school’s founder was Rabbi Hillel (c.110BCE–10CE), often referred to as “Hillel the Elder.” In addition to his teaching responsibilities he served as president of the Sanhedrin. Hillel is remembered for the ethical precept: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.” The school became known as the House of Hillel, and its members—most of whom identified themselves as Tannaim—were known as the “Sages of the Mishnah.”

Hillel's chief disciple was the Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Yochanan became a student at age 40 and a teacher at age 80; allegedly he lived to 120 years of age. He was a primary contributor to the Mishnah. After the Jews were banished from Jerusalem, Yochanan reestablished the Sanhedrin at Jabneh on the coast of Galilee and served as the first president at its new location. He is mentioned in a *midrash*, or commentary, from the period:

The Temple is destroyed. We never witnessed its glory. But Rabbi Joshua did. And when he looked at the Temple ruins one day, he burst into tears. "Alas for us! The place which atoned for the sins of all the people Israel lies in ruins!" Then Rabbi Yohannan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: "Be not grieved, my son. There is another way of gaining ritual atonement, even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain ritual atonement through deeds of loving-kindness."

The reference to tears may mean more than just an emotional response to what Joshua had witnessed. Weeping was a traditional technique in Jewish mysticism.

Yohannan's chief disciple was the Talmudic scholar Rabbi Nechunia ben ha-Kana who lived in Emmaus, Judea. The classical text, the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, begins with a statement attributed to him, and tradition credits Nechunia with being its author. The *Bahir* and other classical texts will be discussed in due course.

One of Nechunia's disciples, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha (90–135 CE), was the principal speaker in *The Greater Hekhaloth*, one of the key texts of Merkabah mysticism, though he may not have written it. Some writers claim that Ishmael was the last high priest of the Jerusalem temple, but the timing is problematic, and those writers are probably confusing him with his grandfather of the same name. In any event the title "rabbi" would not have been used while Ishmael was still performing sacerdotal duties.

Another of Nechunia's disciples, much older than Ishmael, was the Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph (c.50–c.135 C.E.). Referred to in the Talmud as the "Head of all the Sages," Akiba became a revered authority on Jewish tradition. He was another major contributor to the Mishnah and also contributed to the *Midrash Halakhah*, a scripturally based study of Jewish law. He is named as one of the people who may have written the classical Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Akiba was the principal speaker in *The Lesser Hekhaloth*, and is sometimes assumed to be its author. He seems to have been involved in the rebellion against Roman rule in 133–135 CE. While his role is unclear, he revered the rebellion's leader Shimon bar Kokba as the "King Messiah." Akiba died in his eighties, reportedly under torture by the Romans.

Akiba's most famous student, Shimon bar Yochai, may also have been implicated in the rebellion. According to a passage in the Talmud, he was sentenced to death for "speaking ill of the Romans." However Shimon evaded arrest and, along with his son, hid for 13 years in a cave at Safed in Galilee. That location is fascinating in view of the role that Safed would play in 16th-century Kabbalah. According to legend, Shimon spent his time pursuing ascetic spiritual disciplines, guided and taught by the prophet Elijah. Upon emerging from the cave he reportedly dictated the monumental text, the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, to close disciples. Shimon is also reported to have prophesied that a time would come when even a six-year-old child could study the wisdom of Kabbalah; meanwhile, the *Zohar* would remain concealed for 1,200 years. A grave near Safed is still revered as Shimon's. If Shimon really was the *Zohar*'s author, he would be the first known Safed Kabbalist, living many centuries before those whose names are familiar to us today.

One of Akiba's disciples was Eleazer ben Shammua, sometimes referred to as "Eleazer the Great." That Eleazer is not to be confused with another member of the school, the first-century Rabbi Eleazer ben Arakh, who is another candidate for authorship of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

After the bar Kokba rebellion was crushed, many Palestinian Jews were killed or sold into slavery. Although a few yeshivoth survived in Galilee and neighboring provinces, Jews were banished altogether from Judea. The emperor Julian finally permitted Jews to return to Judea, even to Jerusalem, in the fourth century, but numbers remained small. Judaic schools in Tiberias and Caesaria, Palestine, produced the *Jerusalem Talmud* in about 400 CE.

The Gaonic Period

Meanwhile, the main center of Judaic study had moved to Babylonia, which corresponds to modern-day Iraq. Substantial numbers of Jews had remained in Babylon after the exile in the sixth century BCE, and more joined them in the second century CE. With Jerusalem in decline, the rabbis of Babylon claimed to be the ultimate sources of Judaic authority. The gaonic (from *gaon*, “pride” or “splendor”) academies of Sura and Pumbedita, near Baghdad, flourished from the sixth to the 11th century. Babylonian culture—captured by stories of the Arabian Nights—reached its peak under the Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad, which lasted from about 760 to 1258 CE.

The gaonic academies boasted outstanding scholars who pursued studies in both exoteric and esoteric Judaism. The most significant contribution to orthodox Judaism was the *Babylonian Talmud*. Among contributions to the emerging Kabbalah was the translation, by Saadia ben Yosef Gaon (c.882–942), of the *Sefer Yetzirah* into Arabic. Saadia also laid the groundwork for the development of Judaic philosophy. Philosophical speculation had never played a significant role in Judaism, but the movement took root and culminated in the work of Moses Maimonides in the 12th century. However, when Saadia’s philosophical writings were translated from Arabic into Hebrew, they were misinterpreted as mystical works! As in earlier times, the esoteric schools of Babylonia operated under a cloak of secrecy. Teaching was primarily oral, and publication of esoteric works was not permitted.

Aside from the migration to Babylonia, the Diaspora in the early centuries of the Common Era took Jews to north Africa, Spain, southern France, Italy, and the Rhine Valley of Germany. From Germany Jews would eventually migrate in large numbers to Poland. Significant numbers of Jews would also return to Palestine—to the city of Safed and other parts of the country.

Two main divisions of medieval and later Jewry emerged from the Diaspora. The Jews in Spain, southern Europe, and the Middle East became known as the *Sephardim*. Those who settled in Germany, and later in eastern Europe, were called the *Ashkenazim*. Over time, the two branches of Jewry developed different customs, linguistic differences—the Ashkenazim developed Yiddish—and, most important for our present story, differences in their approaches to the Kabbalah. In very broad terms, and with notable exceptions we shall explore, Ashkenazic Judaism produced the mystical Kabbalah, and Sephardic Judaism the theoretical Kabbalah.

The Kabbalah in Southern Europe

Small number of Jews had settled in southern Europe in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Many more arrived in the ninth and tenth centuries, as the Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad went into political decline, and Babylonia ceased to provide a supportive environment for Jewish culture. Many Jewish scholars and mystics left the region, taking with them important texts in Hebrew, Arabic and Greek. As before, Germany and southern Europe were two of their destinations.

Existing Jewish settlements expanded in Provence, in southern France, and new settlements were established to accommodate immigrants. The region was Christian, but Charlemagne had created a broad measure of religious tolerance in the territories he conquered in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. The new environment allowed Jewish merchants from Babylonia to set up

commercial and financial operations. Jews in Christian Europe were not permitted to join craft guilds or, in many cases, to own farmland. But they provided the main source of business and personal financing because usury laws prohibited Christians from lending money at interest. Toleration in Provence continued in the French feudal jurisdictions that emerged from the breakup of the Carolingian Empire. Orthodox Christians, neo-Gnostic Cathars, and Jews continued to live together in relative harmony.

Many more Jews followed their Muslim overlords from Babylonia to Moorish Spain, or *Al-Andalus*, as the Arab conquerors called it. In 912 CE Abd-al-Rahman III proclaimed himself caliph, creating a society which embraced Muslims, Christians and Jews. During his Ummayyad dynasty the country reached its cultural apogee. Jewish mystics, scholars, and ordinary people enjoyed an environment comparable to what had existed in the East. Although discrimination eventually increased as Al-Andalus broke up into independent states, life for Jews remained tolerable for several centuries.

Close contacts were maintained among the Jewish communities in a multinational region extending from Provence to Castile, and those contacts helped mold Sephardic Jewry into something approaching a unified religious and cultural entity. Furthermore, in an environment characterized by “acceptance” more than mere tolerance, close contacts developed between Jews and their Muslim and Christian neighbors. It must be remembered that, despite ongoing efforts to Romanize it, Spanish Christianity retained traces of its early Visigoth Arianism, which was closer to Judaism and Islam in its theology. For example the Arians did not insist on belief in the Trinity and questioned Christ’s equality with God the Father. Provençal Christianity was a mixture of Roman and Cathar persuasions.

On the one hand Jewish-Christian contacts may have allowed non-Jewish motifs to find their way into the Kabbalah; in particular, some commentators have detected Sufi influence. On the other, Kabbalistic motifs found their way into Christian culture. In the 14th and 15th centuries many Jews would convert—willingly or unwillingly—to Roman Christianity, providing one of the principal driving forces behind the Christian Kabbalah.

Meanwhile, elite schools of Kabbalah were established in southern Europe. Their greatest contribution was publication of the classical Kabbalistic texts. The *Sefer Yetzirah* (“Book of Creation”) and the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (“Book of Brilliance”) were published in Provence, probably in the late 12th century, and the much-longer *Sefer ha-Zohar* (“Book of Splendor”) appeared in Castile a century later.

Although the classical texts continued to circulate within small, elite groups of Kabbalists, mostly rabbis, publication permitted greater access than had previously been possible. The texts communicated a worldview that reflected the combination of biblical Judaism with late Platonism, Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. They established a theology based on the descent of the Divine into manifestation; defined forms of mysticism and magic involving the Hebrew alphabet and divine names; and provided a wealth of teachings on the nature of man, his ethical responsibilities, and spiritual development.

The origin of the classical Kabbalistic texts remains the subject of fierce debate. Hard-line skeptics contend that they were medieval creations, while “believers” attribute them, if not to the patriarch Abraham or Moses, at least to the House of Hillel. Since esoteric works dating from the rabbinic and gaonic periods were closely guarded, we may never have a definitive answer. However the weight of evidence suggests that the medieval publishers had access to earlier materials of some sort. Most likely the publishers did significant compilation and editing, with the result that it is difficult to tell how much was their own composition and what might have been written earlier. The main uncertainty is whether the earlier materials were whole manuscripts or just rough notes or fragments.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* and *Bahir*

Saadia Gaon and many others believed that the *Sefer Yetzirah* was written by the patriarch Abraham, while in the 16th century, Moses Cordovero cited a minority opinion that it was written by Akiba ben Joseph of the Hillel school. Another theory is that Eleazar ben Arakh was its real author. References to the text in the *Talmud* and elsewhere support its antiquity, and, as noted, Saadia translated it into Arabic at the beginning of the 10th century. Alternative versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* exist, ranging in length from 1,300 to 2,500 words and from six to ten pages.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* is a perplexing text, and Kabbalists have long debated what purpose it was intended to serve. The title, “Book of Creation,” or “Book of Formation,” suggests that the objective was to provide an allegorical description of the creation of the world. Perhaps it was linked to the Maaseh Bereshit. However, comments in the Babylonian Talmud suggest that incantations from the *Sefer Yetzirah* were used for magical invocation. For example, one passage claims that a group of rabbis created a three-year-old calf and ate it on the Sabbath.

Whether or not that particular claim is true, the *Sefer Yetzirah*’s emphasis on the Hebrew letters—which were regarded as powerful symbols—suggests that the text may well have served as a manual for magic and/or meditation. The text begins by discussing the word *sefirah* and mentions three of its linguistic roots: “number,” “writing” and “revelation,” all of which share the same consonants. It goes on to discuss 32 paths, or *netivoth* (singular: *nativ*), to God. Ten of those “paths” correspond to the sefiroth, while the remaining 22, each identified by a letter in the Hebrew alphabet, refer to the links among them. The *nativoth* may represent the paths taken by the divine essence as it descended from Kether to Malkuth. But they also have significance for the human journey. From the latter perspective, each *nativ* offers seekers a distinctive experience, challenge, or opportunity for spiritual growth.

Tradition attributed the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (“Book of Brilliance” or “Book of Illumination”) to the first-century Nechunia ben ha-Kana. If we discount the possibility that the *Sefer Yetzirah* dates back to Abraham, the *Bahir* would be the earliest known Kabbalistic work. However, most modern scholars regard Nechunia’s authorship as pseudepigraphical. *Pseudepigrapha*, in which an author attributes his or her ideas to prominent historical figures, has been a common literary device throughout the centuries. Notable examples were the books of *Enoch*, written nearly two millennia after the real biblical character lived. (“Forgery” is reserved for situations involving purposeful intent to deceive.)

References to the *Bahir* go back at least to the ninth century, but publication is conventionally dated to the late 12th century. Its editor is usually assumed to have been the Provençal scholar Rabbi Isaac Saggi Nehor (c.1160–1235). Often referred to as “Isaac the Blind,” he was later given the accolade of “Father of the Kabbalah.” Isaac wrote a number of other Kabbalistic works and may also have compiled and published the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

The *Bahir* consists of 12,000 words, covering 83 pages. It lists the 10 sefiroth, naming seven of them. The text presents the sefiroth as divine attributes or powers emanating from God. Like the *Sefer Yetzirah*, it mentions the 32 paths to wisdom and emphasizes the significance of numbers and the names of God. The *Bahir* makes a reference to Merkabah mysticism by citing passages in *Exodus* and *Ezekiel* that refer to the “Throne of Glory” on a pavement of sapphire. It anticipates the medieval mystical Kabbalah by stating that “the Blessed Holy One has 72 names.”

Reflecting Gnostic influence, the *Bahir* discusses reincarnation and the problem of evil. “Why,” the text asks, “is there a righteous person who has good, and (another) righteous person who has evil?” Answering the question, one Rabbi Rachumai explains: “This is because the righteous person was wicked previously, and is now being punished... I am not speaking of his present

lifetime.” The *Bahir* ends with a description of the Fall, in which the wicked angel Samael takes the form of the serpent.

The Zohar

The *Zohar*, as we have seen, was traditionally attributed to the second-century CE Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Its title was inspired by a passage in *Daniel*: “And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness [zohar] of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.” [*Daniel* 12:3] The text is sometimes referred to as the *Midrash of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, drawing upon the term for the sometimes-lengthy scriptural commentaries of the late-biblical and rabbinic periods. The *Zohar* is formatted as a series of rambling discourses on the Torah. Its characters include Shimon, his teacher the Rabbi Akiba, and other members of the House of Hillel. Shimon and some of the other named discussants were real people, but we do not know whether the statements were theirs or were attributed to them later. The *Zohar* includes a number of subordinate texts, the most important being the *Book of Concealment*, the *Greater Assembly*, and the *Lesser Assembly*.

The *Zohar* was published toward the end of the 13th century by the Spanish Rabbi Moses ben Shem-Tov de León (c.1250–1305). León was his father’s ancestral home, but Moses was born in Guadalajara, Castile, and he lived in the kingdom most of his life, eventually settling in Ávila. Moses de León wrote several other books which he claimed as his own. But he claimed that the manuscript of the *Zohar* was discovered in Shimon bar Yochai’s grave and found its way into his hands. Even in his own time, skeptics accused him of concocting the story to inflate the text’s monetary value.

Arguments can be made for and against the *Zohar*’s antiquity. The text mentions people who lived later and events that occurred after Shimon’s death. However much of the *Zohar* is written in Aramaic rather than the Hebrew of most other medieval Jewish texts. That might support the belief that the *Zohar* was written by Shimon, since Aramaic was the vernacular language of second-century Palestinian Jews. However a version of Aramaic survived in Babylonia, along with its close relative, Syriac. Both the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud were written in Aramaic, and medieval Jews knew enough of the language to read them. The *Zohar* may be of Babylonian origin. Or it may have emerged over an extended period, accumulating contributions from a number of authors. In any event Moses de León seems to have re-written the text, adding commentaries and giving it distinctive characteristics of his own literary style.

Within two centuries of its publication and despite its controversial origins, the *Zohar* acquired a standing comparable to that of the Torah and the Talmud—not just in Kabbalistic circles but in Judaism at large. We say that Moses “published” the *Zohar*. But we must remember that invention of the printing press lay far in the future; all texts of the time were copied laboriously by hand. The first printed copy of the *Zohar* did not appear until 1558.

Moses de León died in Ávila. In due course the Convent of the Encarnación was built over the cemetery where he was buried, and the renowned Christian mystic John of the Cross lived in one of its cells. Several writers have commented on Kabbalistic influence on both John and his mentor Teresa of Ávila.

Other Authorities

Isaac the Blind and Moses de León were not the only prominent Jewish scholars of southern Europe whose work influenced the Kabbalah. Another was the Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1135–1204), also known as “Maimonides” or “Rambam,” an acronym of his name. Maimonides was born in Córdoba, Spain, but later spent time in Morocco before becoming physician of the Grand Vizier Alfidhil and Sultan Saladin in Egypt. Often regarded as the greatest Jewish philosopher of

the Middle Ages, surpassing even Saadia Gaon, he asserted that there could be no contradiction between divine revelation and the insights of the rational mind. His *Guide for the Perplexed*, originally written in Arabic, influenced the renowned Christian scholar Thomas Aquinas.

Maimonides and Aquinas were concerned to defend their respective religions against Islamic competition, and we must remember that Muslim culture, then at its zenith, exerted considerable influence on the intellectual climate of the time. However they were both drawn to classical philosophical tracts, including the works of Aristotle, that were currently available only in Arabic. Through their work, Aristotelian principles penetrated western thought and fueled the rise of scholasticism.

Maimonides and Aquinas each faced challenges in their embrace of Aristotelian philosophy. Aquinas had to tread carefully since Platonism had held sway for more than a millennium and enjoyed strong support from church authorities. Maimonides confronted the fact that philosophical speculation had few precedents in Judaism—notwithstanding Saadia’s pioneering work—and was frowned upon by many rabbis. He was criticized by colleagues for proposing a 13-point creed, which affirmed the existence and unity of God, God’s sovereignty as the sole object of worship, the immutability of the Torah as divine law, and God’s foreknowledge of human action.

Yet another important Jewish scholar was the Catalan physician, biblical scholar, and Kabbalist Moses ben Nachman (1194–c.1270) of Gerona. His name was Latinized to Moses Nachmanides, but he was known in Jewish circles as “the Ramban”—not to be confused with Rambam. Rabbi ben Nachman defended Maimonides against his harshest critics. However he disagreed with Maimonides’ scholasticism, arguing for a more mystical approach to God. Among other things Nachmanides supported the view that the sefiroth participate in the divine essence of the Ain Sof.

One of Nachmanides’ most memorable accomplishments was to defend Judaism in the Disputation of Barcelona held before King James I of Aragon in 1263. Such “disputations”—more like trials—were common in the High Middle Ages, as Christianity tried to win converts by pointing out the “obvious weaknesses” of Judaism. However, Nachmanides won the debate and collected the king’s cash prize. After the disputation Nachmanides published the questions and his answers as the *Sefer ha-Vichuach*, whereupon angry Christian authorities banished him from Aragon and burned the book. Nachmanides eventually settled in Palestine and was buried in Hebron.

In northern Europe important Kabbalistic authorities, during the 12th and 13th centuries, included Eleazar of Worms and Abraham Abulafia. Their work will be discussed in Segment 3.

By 1300 CE all of the major components of the theoretical Kabbalah were in place or at least hinted at in the literature. We shall now explore what was known of the sefiroth and the divine names at that time. Development of the mystical/ecstatic Kabbalah will be explored in the next segment of the course..

The Sefiroth

The sefiroth are introduced in the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Bahir* and are discussed in considerable detail in the *Zohar*. It is unlikely that those texts were written before the rabbinic era—they may have been written later—but their authors made use of terminology that was familiar to every devout Jew. The names of the sefiroth and the divine names all come directly from the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians call the Old Testament.

Before we proceed to examine the biblical roots of the sefiroth, however, we should note some alternative names that were in common use during the medieval period. Four of the sefiroth were sometimes known by other names. *Tabun* (“Intelligence”) was sometimes used as an

alternative for Binah, *Gedulah* (“Greatness”) for Chesed, and *Din* (“Severity”) for Geburah. Furthermore, the lowest sefirah, Malkuth, was identified with the *Shekinah*, the divine presence in the world. The Shekinah will be discussed in Segment 4. We shall also see that the Safed scholars introduced additional names for Geburah and Tifareth. Meanwhile the sefiroth, as they were known in the Middle Ages are listed in Table 1, along with their transliterated Hebrew spellings and conventional English names. For information on the rules of transliteration, see Appendix 1.

**Table 1. The Sefiroth
as Understood in the Early Kabbalah**

| | Sefirah | Transliterated Hebrew Name | English Translation |
|----|------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Kether | KThR | The Crown |
| 2 | Chokmah | ChKMh | Wisdom |
| 3 | Binah or Tabun | BYNH or TBVN | Understanding or Intelligence |
| -- | Daath | DETh | Knowledge or Gnosis |
| 4 | Chesed or Gedulah | ChSD or GDVLH | Mercy or Greatness |
| 5 | Geburah or Din | GBVRH or DYN | Severity Judgment |
| 6 | Tifareth | ThPARTh | Beauty or Harmony |
| 7 | Netzach | NTzCh | Victory or Eternity |
| 8 | Hod | HVD | Splendor |
| 9 | Yesod | YSVD | Foundation |
| 10 | Malkuth or Shekinah | MLKVTh or ShKYNH | The Kingdom |

The fact that the sefirothic names appear in the Hebrew Bible has prompted some authorities to conclude that the Kabbalah dates back to biblical times, but we should be cautious in doing so. Those names were common Hebrew words, some of them with quite ordinary meanings. Random occurrences of the names in scripture cannot be construed as supporting an early date for the Kabbalah. Nevertheless, juxtapositions of several names—statistically improbable combinations—may provide evidence that some aspects of the Kabbalah may date back that far. Possibly the sefirothic names formed a kind of cipher, recognized by initiates but invisible to the average reader.

Most persuasive of the juxtapositions of names is a verse in *1 Chronicles* that brings together six of the seven lower sefiroth—only Yesod is missing:

“Thine, O Lord, is the greatness [gedulah], and the power [geburah], and the glory [tifareth], and the victory [netzach], and the majesty [hod]: for all that is in the heaven and

in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom [malkuth], O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all.” [1 *Chronicles* 29:11, KJV.]

Interestingly, this passage is one of the few instances where the King James Bible translates *netzach* as “victory,” the English name usually assigned to it in the Kabbalah. More often *netzach* conveys the sense of a far-off, even unattainable, goal: the light at the end of a very long tunnel. For instance, *netzach* can be translated as “for ever and ever.” The less common representation of *Netzach* as “Eternity” or “Endurance” may be more appropriate. Efforts have been made to find a hidden reference to *Yesod* in the phrase: “all that is in the heaven and in the earth,” or even just in the word “all.” “All” translates the Hebrew word *kol* (KVL); perhaps it provides an alternative name for *Yesod*.

Another statistically improbable combination of sefirothic names is found in *Proverbs*:

So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom [chokmah], and apply thine heart to understanding [tabun]; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge [binah], and liftest up thy voice for understanding [tabun]... Then shalt thou understand [bin] the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge [daath] of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom [chokmah]: out of his mouth cometh knowledge [daath] and understanding [tabun]. [*Proverbs* 2:2-6]

Note that this passage contains *tabun* as well as *binah* (and *bin*, the associated verb: “to understand”). The consensus of most biblical scholars is that *Chronicles* was written between 450 and 400 BCE, while *Proverbs* was written no earlier than 350 BCE. These dates are important if we are to trace esotericism resembling the Kabbalah back to biblical times.

Other passages of possible significance, including one (in *Exodus*) that may have been written as early as 600 BCE, are the following:

And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom [chokmah], and in understanding [tabun], and in knowledge [daath], and in all manner of workmanship. [*Exodus* 31:3]

When wisdom [chokmah] entereth into thine heart, and knowledge [daath] is pleasant unto thy soul. [*Proverbs* 2:9-10]

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom [chokmah]: and the knowledge [daath] of the holy is understanding [binah]. [*Proverbs* 9:10]

The names of the four “worlds” of the Kabbalah do not appear explicitly in scripture, but they are derived from Hebrew root verbs that do. For example, *Briah* is derived from *bara* (BRA, “to create”), *Yetizriah* from *yatzar* (YTzR, “to mold”), and *Assiah* from *asah* (AShH, “to make or accomplish”). All three appear, in the correct order, in a passage from *Isaiah*:

Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created [bara] him for my glory, I have formed [yatzar] him; yea, I have made [asah] him. [*Isaiah* 43:7]

The four worlds will be discussed in more detail in Segment 4.

Organization of the sefiroth into the glyph known as the Tree of Life was a relatively late development. Nevertheless the term itself is familiar from scripture and medieval Kabbalistic literature. The Tree of Life was the centerpiece of the Garden of Eden, and, after the Fall, God was concerned that Adam and Eve might eat its fruit “and live for ever.” [*Genesis* 3:22] The Tree is also mentioned four times in *Proverbs*. One passage of interest seems to identify the Tree with *Chokmah* and *Tabun/Binah*—or possibly just with the latter:

Happy is the man that findeth wisdom [chokmah], and the man that getteth understanding [tabun]... She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her... She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her. [*Proverbs* 3:13-18]

Clearly the Tree of Life had not yet acquired its modern form containing all the sefiroth.

“Tree of Life” occurs more than 1,000 times in the *Zohar*. In most cases the Tree is related firmly to the Torah. For example: “The Torah is the Tree of Life that gives life to everyone who becomes mighty in Torah, who becomes mighty in the Tree of Life, as it is written: ‘She is a Tree of Life to those who lay hold on her’.” A passage that may have inspired the assignment of initiatory grades to the sefiroth—a practice adopted by the 19th-century Society of the Golden Dawn—is the following:

Come and behold: The Tree of Life is divided into several grades, but they are all unified into one. For in the Tree of Life there are grades upon grades—branches, leaves, husks, the trunk, and the roots. All of them are the tree. In the same manner, whoever strives to study the Torah is strengthened and improved by the Tree of Life.

The Divine Names

The Hebrew Bible is replete with names for God, each expressing a particular divine attribute and playing an appropriate role in devotion, mystical contemplation, prayerful supplication, or magical invocation. Divine names have played significant roles in most religions. For example, the Christian Lord’s Prayer contains the line “Hallowed be thy name.” Every *surah*, or chapter, in the *Qur’an* begins with “In the Name of Allah.” Islam also recognizes the 99 names of Allah. Mohammed reportedly exclaimed: “O God, I invoke you with all your beautiful names.” Jewish priests, prophets and rabbis did no less.

The most important divine name for Jews of the biblical period was YHVH (יהוה). Known as the *Tetragrammaton*, (Greek: “name of four letters”), it occurs more than 6,800 times in the Hebrew Bible. It was considered so powerful that only the high priest was permitted to speak—or perhaps chant—it, and then only once a year, at Yom Kippur, in the privacy of the Holy of Holies. Classical Hebrew is composed entirely of consonants, so we do not know the correct pronunciation. Translations of the Bible that render it as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” are just offering guesses. In the King James Bible the Tetragrammaton is often expressed simply as “Lord” or “God.” Modern Kabbalistic scholar Leonora Leet suggests that it should be pronounced EYAHUWAH, but her suggestion has not yet received broad support.

In everyday speech, Jews of the biblical and rabbinic periods avoided uttering YHVH for fear of blasphemy; instead they might allude to it as “The Name.” They would do the same even when writing scholarly or devotional texts. Alternatively they might substitute *Adonai* (ADNY, “Lord”). *Adonai* appears in the Bible almost as many times as YHVH. It appears in one passage together with the Tetragrammaton: “A Psalm of David. O Lord [YHVH] our Lord [Adonai], how excellent is thy Name.” [*Psalms* 8:1]

By the High Middle Ages, some Jews had become less shy of invoking the Tetragrammaton for devotional or magical purposes. One of them was the Rabbi Joseph Gikatilia who was born in Castile, Spain, in 1248. In his best-known book, *The Gates of Light*, he promoted its use while explaining that caution was still needed:

The great, glorious, fearsome name, YHVH, is a name that included all the other divine names that are mentioned in the *Torah*. There is no divine name that is not included in the name YHVH. Realizing this, you must be aware how careful you must be when you pronounce this name. When you pronounce the name YHVH, you take on your lips all the holy names. It is then as if your mouth and tongue are carrying all the holy names, upon which depend the universe and everything in it.

Gikatilia also provided one of the first lists of divine names assigned to the sefiroth. Many others have done so since, and there is some variation from one teacher to another. Table 2 shows a

representative set of the names, as it emerged over succeeding centuries. Like the names of the sefiroth themselves, the divine names assigned to them all appear in scripture. Moreover, we know that the ten names were already given special significance in the fourth century CE because church father Jerome—a Christian scholar with unusual proficiency in Hebrew—listed them in a letter to his female friend Marcella.

Table 2. Divine Names Assigned to the Sefiroth

| | Sefirah | Divine Name | Transliteration | Translation |
|----|----------|----------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 1 | Kether | <i>Eheieh Asher Eheieh</i> | AHYH AShR AHYH | “I am that I am” |
| 2 | Chokmah | <i>Yah</i> | YH | Yah |
| 3 | Binah | <i>YHVH Elohim</i> | YHVH ALHYM | YHVH Elohim |
| 4 | Chesed | <i>El</i> | AL | El |
| 5 | Geburah | <i>Elohim</i> | ALHYM | Elohim |
| 6 | Tifareth | <i>YHVH Adonai</i> | YHVH ADNY | YHVH Lord |
| 7 | Netzach | <i>Adonai Sabaoth</i> | ADNY TzBAVT | Lord of Hosts |
| 8 | Hod | <i>Elohim Sabaoth</i> | ALHYM TzBAVT | Elohim of Hosts |
| 9 | Yesod | <i>Shaddai El-Chai</i> | ShDY AL ChY | Almighty Living God |
| 10 | Malkuth | <i>Adonai</i> | ADNY | Lord |

The Tetragrammaton and Adonai, which appear in Table 2 in association with Binah, Tifareth and Malkuth, have already been mentioned. *Eheieh Asher Eheieh*, the divine name associated with Kether, is usually translated as “I am that I am”—or possibly “I will be what I will be.” It was God’s response when Moses asked who he was. [Exodus 3:14] The name *Yah*, associated with Chokmah, occurs explicitly in the psalm: “Sing unto God, sing praises to his name: extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his name Yah.” [Psalm 68:4] Our word “Hallelujah” is formed from *Yah* and *Halal* (“praise”).

The related names *El* and *Elohim*, associated with Binah, Chesed, Geburah and Hod, appear numerous times in the Hebrew Bible, usually translated simply as “God.” The Israelites probably borrowed El from earlier Semitic religions. It signified the supreme God, implying that there were lesser ones. The names of key biblical characters ending in “-el,” such as Rachel and Ezekiel and the angels Gabriel and Raphael, denote divine favor. El is also contained in the very word “Israel.” *Elohim*, which is an irregular plural noun (the singular is *eloah*), occurs in the very first verse of *Genesis*: “In the beginning God [Elohim] created the heaven and the earth.” [Genesis 1:1]. The suggestion of a plural creator has inspired some modern wags to assert that the world is in such disarray because it was created by a committee. *Elohim* occurs along with the Tetragrammaton in the passage: “[T]he God [Elohim] of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name [YHVH] for ever. [Exodus 3:15]

Sabaoth, associated with Netzach and Hod, literally means “armies,” though it is usually translated more delicately as “hosts.” Sometimes it is used to denote the “congregation of Israel,” the Jewish people. An example from scripture containing *Sabaoth*, *Adonai* and the Tetragrammaton, is: “Therefore saith the Lord [Adonai], the Lord [YHVH] of hosts [Sabaoth].”

[Isaiah 1:24] *Shaddai El-Chai*, associated with Yesdod, means “Almighty living God.” *El Shaddai* was an early name used by the patriarchs: “I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God [El] Almighty [Shaddai].” [Exodus 6:3]

Some Kabbalists were not satisfied with variety of divine names that appeared in scripture; they sought to create new ones. The basic building blocks were of course the Hebrew letters. Based on the belief that the letters were sacred, any combination of letters, formed with appropriate intent, was also sacred.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* discusses the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet at considerable length, dividing them into their three categories: three “mother” letters, seven double letters, and 12 single or “elemental” letters. Assembling the letters into new divine names became popular for purposes of both meditation and incantation. Meditation on artificially constructed divine names formed a basis of the ecstatic Kabbalah which will be discussed in the next segment of the course. As already noted, incantations from the *Sefer Yetzirah* may have been used for magical purposes.

One method, adopted by some medieval Jews, for creating new divine names was the method of *temurah*. The letters of an existing word were rearranged to create new words. The concept was introduced in the *Sefer Yetzirah*:

Twenty-two letters... Engrave them, carve them, weigh them, permute them, and transform them, and with them depict the soul of all that was formed and all that will be formed in the future... Form substance out of chaos and make nonexistence into existence. Carve great pillars out of air that cannot be grasped. This is the sign: One foresees, transposes, and makes all creation and all words with one Name.

Twelve new names can be formed from the Tetragrammaton, each which can be correlated with one of the tribes of Israel. The individual who made the most use of *temurah* was Gikatalia’s teacher, Abraham Abulafia, whose work will be discussed in Segment 3.

Correspondences

Beside the divine names, many other things have been associated with the sefiroth. For example, an archangel and an order of lesser angels customarily are assigned to each sefirah. The names of these celestial beings provide additional opportunities for meditation and magical invocation. The notion of angels on progressively higher levels of reality calls the mind the image of Jacob’s ladder: “And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.” [Genesis 28:11]

The *Sefer Yetzirah* introduced many correspondences that would inspire later Kabbalists. For example, it correlated the ten sefiroth with ten “directions.” Six of those directions were the familiar ones in physical space: up, down, east, west, north and south, which formed the “cube of space” discussed by some later Kabbalists. The other four were associated with time and morality. Thus we find the evocative notions of “a depth of beginning, a depth of end, a depth of good, a depth of evil.” Aryeh Kaplan, whose scientific background enabled him to draw upon modern technical concepts, comments that the Kabbalah takes as its framework a five-dimensional continuum. But it is doubtful whether the early Kabbalists would have thought in those terms.

In discussing the seven double letters in the Hebrew alphabet, the author of the *Sefer Yetzirah* mused upon:

Seven Universes, seven firmaments, seven lands, seven seas, seven rivers, seven deserts, seven days, seven weeks, seven years, seven sabbaticals, seven jubilees, and the Holy Palace. Therefore, He made sevens beloved under all the heavens.

We shall see in a later segment of the course that the notion of seven sabbaticals and jubilees was developed into a Kabbalistic theory of epochs in the history of the world. On the twelve single letters, the *Sefer Yetzirah*'s author meditated on “twelve constellations in the Universe, twelve months in the year, and twelve directors in the Soul, male and female.” Perhaps disappointingly, the “directors of the Soul” turned out to be organs in the physical body.

Correspondences with the sefiroth will be explored in considerable detail in later segments of the course.

Reflections

The origins of the Kabbalah continue to fascinate commentators of all persuasions. We may never know for certain whether the classical texts were written in antiquity or were medieval compositions. If the latter, the 12th and 13th centuries must have been times of exceptional creativity—and Isaac the Blind, Moses de Léon, others must have been truly exceptional people. However, those individuals claimed that the Kabbalah already had a long history. The very term “Kabbalah” signifies *tradition*, and to suggest that the Kabbalah suddenly exploded into existence is to suggest that the term was a fraud. Judaism is hardly a religion that welcomes radical change, and the medieval Kabbalists—all prominent rabbis—were no less conservative than most of their contemporaries.

The Kabbalah, of course, is larger than its classical texts. Even if it could be proved that the texts were medieval creations, that in no way proves that the Kabbalah—or its direct Judaic antecedents—did not extend back to the first century CE or to biblical times. However caution is still in order as we speculate on its origins, and such caution has not always been exercised. In the 19th century, the French philosopher Adolphe Franck asserted that Kabbalistic doctrine could be traced to Zoroastrianism. To explain the lineage he suggested that Jews came into contact with the doctrine during the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE. Franck's compatriot, the Marquis Saint-Yves d'Alveydre, offered another theory:

For the Jews, the Kabbalah came from the Chaldeans through Daniel and Esdras. For the Israelites who preceded the dispersion on the ten non-Jewish tribes, the Kabbalah came from the Egyptians through Moses. For the Chaldeans as for the Egyptians, the Kabbalah was a part of what all the metropolitan Universities called Wisdom, that is, the synthesis of sciences and arts reduced to their common Principle. This Principle was the Word.

Helena Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, claimed that the real origin of the Kabbalah lay in “Upper India, or Turkestan, far before the time of a distinct separation between the Aryan and Semitic nations.”

Terms such as “Chaldean Kabbalah,” “Egyptian Kabbalah,” “Islamic Kabbalah,” “Oriental Kabbalah,” and “Buddhist Kabbalah” all appear in the literature. The intent may have been to stimulate reflection on the underlying concepts. But such expressions also tend to make language meaningless. Certainly, as Arthur Waite points out, the Kabbalah had antecedents. However it developed within the specific religious culture of Judaism, in whatever period—biblical, rabbinical, gaonic or medieval—we feel offers the best evidential support.

“Believing” Kabbalists, as distinct from academic historians of the Kabbalah, have always viewed their craft as part of the ageless wisdom: divine revelation handed down in an unbroken tradition from generation to generation. But it would be a mistake to view the Kabbalah as something that originated in complete form in the remote past, never to be tampered with over succeeding centuries. The Kabbalah is an organic system that grows as scholars, mystics, magi and others reflect on what they have received and add their own insights and wisdom. The process continues today.

Resources

- Adolphe Franck *The Kabbalah: The Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews.* Bell Publishing Co., 1843/1940.
- Moshe Idel *Kabbalah.* Yale University Press, 1988.
- Aryeh Kaplan *Meditation and the Kabbalah.* Weiser, 1982.
 Sefer Yetzirah. Weiser Books, 1997.
 The Bahir. Weiser Books, 1998.
- Leonora Leet *The Secret Doctrine of the Kabbalah.* Inner Traditions, 1999.
- Gershom Scholem *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism.* Schocken Books, 1946/1954.
 Kabbalah. Meridian Books, 1974.

Online Resources:

- Online *Zohar* <http://www.kabbalah.com/k/index.php/p=zohar>

Assignment

Instructions for preparing your report are provided below. Your report should be headed SES Kabbalah Course, Segment 2, and should include your name, email address, and date of submittal. Send your report to seselectives@gmail.com.

- Following are a number of issues raised in this segment of the course. Write a paper discussing two or more of the issues.
 - (a) Choose six individuals whose work shaped—or was believed to have shaped—the early Kabbalah. Identify their contributions. What factors: background, unique talents, or environmental factors, contributed to their success?
 - (b) Efforts have been made to trace the Kabbalah from the Middle Ages back to the rabbinic period or even to early biblical times. What motivated those efforts? Would it make any difference us if historians could prove conclusively that the Kabbalah was a medieval creation?
 - (c) The Kabbalah’s roots lay in Judaism, but an argument could be made that it would never have developed into a major esoteric system without Islamic support. Do you agree or disagree with that argument? Explain and justify your position.
 - (d) Using the online *Zohar* or a similar source, find occurrences of “Tree of Life” in the text and discuss their relevance to Kabbalistic teachings.
 - (e) Could a good case be made to restrict the modern study of Kabbalah to carefully screened groups of students? Could this be done despite the wide availability of material in books or on the Internet? In what sense can the Kabbalah be regarded as an *esoteric* system?
- Do you have any questions or comments about this segment of the course?

The instructor will critique your report, respond to questions, offer suggestions for further study, and provide encouragement in your subsequent work in the course.