

Introduction

This volume represents the first attempt to provide modern Kabbalah with a comprehensive and autonomous history. It is a good idea to stress at the outset that while Gershom Scholem, a founder of academic research in Jewish mysticism, began his own account of modern Kabbalah with the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain, here we commence (for reasons to be explained in Chapter 1) with the spiritual revolution that took place in the Galilean town of Safed around the mid-sixteenth century. Since this time and even somewhat earlier, Kabbalah has been an important player not only in Jewish history, but also in the cultural and intellectual life of Europe.

It was only in the modern age of print and other forms of rapid communication that Kabbalah became a major factor in Jewish textual, liturgical and ritual life, engendered mass social movements (Sabbateanism, Hasidism and the Zionist school of R. Avraham Itzhak Kook) and also significantly impacted European intellectual life (mostly notably in the case of Baruch Spinoza). Fueled by print and lately digital technology, modern Kabbalah is quantitatively vast (and constantly expanding): the literature composed in various kabbalistic worlds in this period is staggeringly voluminous (rendering any attempt to summarize it in one volume a true challenge). For example, the *Otzar Ha-Hokhma* database (created in recent years in traditional Yeshiva circles in Jerusalem), one of several, contains approximately 10,000 Hasidic books (all modern) and printed works of Kabbalah (almost all modern). On the qualitative level, we are dealing with a highly diverse array of complex theosophical systems, intricate techniques, radical ecstatic and revelatory experiences and intense conflicts (also in scholarship. . .). All these spread not only throughout Kabbalah's continents of origin, Europe and the Middle East (especially impacting the sociopolitical development of the state of Israel)

but also, later, to the Americas (as well as other global locations such as South Africa and India). All of the above processes greatly accelerated in the late modern period and hence my stress on the last two centuries.

Yet surprisingly, there is no scholarly (or even popular or traditional) book on the history of modern Kabbalah. Actually, there is no English-language work on the history of Kabbalah as such.¹ Scholem's canonical *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* is explicitly confined to what he himself regarded as the central schools of kabbalistic and pre-kabbalistic Jewish mysticism, mostly premodern (thus, there is virtually no discussion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in this 1941 book). Scholem's focus on the late antique, medieval (and at most early modern) periods is in tension with his above-noted emphasis on the very early modern event of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, as well as his obvious fascination with the seventeenth-century Sabbatean movement and its offshoots.² Furthermore, the next generation of phenomenological overviews of prominent kabbalistic themes was also focused mainly on premodern periods (as in the works of Moshe Idel, Elliot Wolfson and Charles Mopsik).³ This is obviously true of what is perhaps the most successful publishing project in the field, Stanford University Press' multivolume translation of the thirteenth-century classic, the *Zohar*. It is only in recent years that the autonomy of modern Kabbalah and its discontinuities with premodern forms have been increasingly recognized, due mainly to the work of Shaul Magid, Boaz Huss, myself and the new generation of scholars. As a result, we have seen a marked increase in specific studies devoted to modern figures and developments, yet without any attempt at organizing these in an unbroken and comprehensive narrative, which would also include the numerous unresearched (or entirely unstudied, even in traditional circles) centers, figures, texts and trends.

Actually, there are two schools that have captured the popular imagination from the early twentieth century, due to the writing of Scholem and his

¹ The Hebrew-language series on the history of Kabbalah, currently being composed by Joseph Dan, not yet reaching the modern period, frankly has had a very mixed academic reception. One should also note the undergraduate introduction to premodern Kabbalah, soon to be published by the Open University of Israel, and the user-friendly popular introductory work: Giller, *Kabbalah – A Guide for the Perplexed* (focused on the medieval period). One should praise Darmon, *L'Esprit de la Kabbale*, whose brief, mostly thematic history has a strong modern emphasis, addressing less-known corpora. See also Hallamish, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah*.

² As recent archival research by Jonatan Meir has revealed, Scholem himself drew up an outline for a project similar to the present one.

³ See especially the monumental triad: Idel, *Kabbalah – New Perspectives* (later translated into Hebrew); Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*; Mopsik, *Les grands textes*.

archival Martin Buber: the radical Sabbatean movement and the highly colorful Hasidic worlds. More recently, these have been joined by the twentieth-century schools of Kook (due to his remarkable influence on the history of Israel) and R. Yehuda Leib Ashlag (due to his universalistic reading of Kabbalah, facilitating massive popular reception and reworking). However, all of these have been sequestered in discrete conversations, rather than being integrated within the panorama of modern Kabbalah or, more ambitiously, within that of modern intellectual history. In this sense, the present project is complemented by broad studies of modern Judaism, such as those penned by David Ruderman and Leora Batnitsky.

This volume will provide a detailed century-by-century description of the major developments, schools, figures, works and challenges of modern Kabbalah. This narrative format, utilizing the convenient centennial convention (which does not always work neatly in actual practice), facilitates contextualization and dialogue with other fields of research. Yet again, the focus here shall be on the role played by Kabbalah in the development of modern Judaism (with the history of Christian Kabbalah/kabbalistic Christianity and its tributaries assigned a supportive role). The five historical chapters (whose respective length will favor later periods, as indicated above), will be preceded by a chapter explaining the uniqueness of modern Kabbalah and detailing the themes that it carried over from premodern periods. The concluding chapter will trace recurrent topics over the entire modern period, summarizing the differences between subperiods, and briefly pointing at domains for further research. The purpose of this structure is to combine a focus on recent and contemporary developments with long-term historical perspective.

Major scholarly positions and disputes, both early and current, will be extensively addressed, yet interwoven into the discussion of the kabbalistic materials, in order to prioritize the texts themselves. This choice reflects the heavily exegetical nature of kabbalistic discourse (referring both to canonical Jewish sources and, increasingly, to the kabbalistic canons and subcanons), in which the text itself is seen as an embodiment of the divine, with its study being regarded as the quintessential form of world-maintenance and world-enhancement. It can be well argued that this dominance of the text sets Kabbalah apart from most other forms of mysticism (alongside other differences, to be discussed in Chapter 1). Of course, this is not to negate nontextual dimensions of kabbalistic life, whether we are dealing with oral transmission, mystical or magical forms of life and practice or ineffable inner experiences. Nonetheless, unless we are speaking of contemporary or very recent phenomena, we only have access to the para-textual through its recording and preservation in texts.

This text-centered approach is also expressed in numerous, yet concise quotes from striking passages, found in existing translations or first translated here (thus increasing the scope of key texts available to readers in English). While the emphasis shall be on studies available in English, one of the aims of this work is to acquaint readers with the best of scholarly writing in other languages (naturally mostly Hebrew), in all three generations of modern Kabbalah research (the history of which shall be described in its context in Chapter 6, while its present state shall be addressed in Chapter 7). Thus, readers shall be exposed to the current burgeoning of graduate and postgraduate work in the field, alongside a taste of the vast material yet to be researched. Social scientific approaches, particularly sociology and psychology, shall also be engaged in dialogue, in order to explore the nexus of intellectual, cultural and social history (as in the case of formation of elite circles and later of mass movements).

The overall implications of the book include the need to place modern Kabbalah in its own context, thus capturing its autonomy from (yet also continuity with) earlier periods, its dialogue with mystical traditions in other religions, its basic coherence over five centuries and its unique impact on modern culture. It shall be argued that the reflexive nature of modernity carried over into the self-awareness of modern kabbalists (calling for a different toolkit from that employed in the study of medieval Kabbalah). Recurrent themes to be encompassed, century by century and also in tandem, will include: forms of social organization; new genres of writing (especially autobiography and hagiography) and literary style; the impact of print culture; systems of psychological thought; emergent forms of self-cultivation and regimes of ritual and daily life; increased sophistication in the cultivation of meditative or trance states; transformations of discourse on gender and sexuality; the increase of nationalistic discourse; and new ways of interpreting canonical, nonkabbalistic works (such as the Bible and the Talmud), joined by modern Kabbalah's self-interpretation. In sum, the main contributions of the book will be the first-time (in English) comprehensive historical-chronological presentation of kabbalistic literature, combined with a manageable and justifiable focus on the modern period; pioneering exposure to central schools, figures and works; especial treatment of recent and contemporary developments; a coherent account of central recurring themes; placement of the subject in a broader Jewish and extra-Jewish historical context; dialogue with the social sciences; an updated, critical and hopefully nonpartisan history of scholarship in various languages, pointing toward areas for further research.



Premodern and Modern Kabbalah

Breaks and Continuities

INTRODUCTION

The premise behind a separate history of modern Kabbalah lies in its autonomy from premodern Kabbalah. This is evident first and foremost on the intrinsic level – the self-consciousness of modern kabbalists and their unique forms of social organization and new genres of writing. Yet this claim also rests on extrinsic factors – the impact of the dramatic changes heralded by Jewish and general modernity. At the same time, autonomy by no means entails independence or isolation, so that the chapter will take up the major themes continuing premodern kabbalistic approaches. These include exegesis of canonical texts (Bible and Talmud), gendered views of the divine world and perceptions of theurgical or magical impact of embodied human action on the supernal and, conversely, the demonic realms. In this context, we shall follow specific historical chains of continuity and examine the changing role of canonical premodern kabbalistic corpora, especially the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Zoharic literature (composed in Castile, Spain). However, the excessive dominance of the influence of this corpus in existing studies of modern Kabbalah shall be critiqued.

It is well beyond the scope and goals of this work to examine in detail nonkabbalistic premodern influences on modern Kabbalah. These include general (Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism) and Jewish (*Heikhalot*, or chambers of the supernal realm, literature and magical writings) forms of mysticism in late antiquity. These were then joined by medieval phenomena: Jewish (*Hasidut Ashkenaz*, or German Pietism and Judeo-Sufi Pietism and Spanish mystical poetry) and general (Islamic and Christian mysticism). Some of these shall be alluded to throughout, yet strictly when the topic at

6 PREMODERN AND MODERN KABBALAH: BREAKS AND CONTINUITIES

hand calls for it. It is even less appropriate to do more than mention the complex and contested question of the interrelationship between mythical-mystical sources (Jewish or otherwise) dating to even earlier antiquity (e.g. the period of the Mishna, as in the second chapter of tractate *Hagiga*, Gnostic sources or the corpus of Philo) and the open manifestation of Kabbalah (literally reception of transmission), under that very name, in the Middle Ages.¹ Therefore, this chapter shall focus on modern Kabbalah's dialogue with its immediate predecessor, namely the tradition surfacing or developing, mainly in Southern Europe (Provence, Spain and Italy), between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Thus, it should be stressed, it does not purport to provide any history of medieval Kabbalah (though such a volume, placing this lore in its often-neglected historical-geographical context, would be greatly desirable).² Rather, it shall provide the modicum of detail necessary for appreciating the prelude to modern Kabbalah, a screenshot, as it were, of the state of affairs at its inception.

THE AUTONOMY OF MODERN KABBALAH

The writings of modern Kabbalah can be readily shown to reflect a strong awareness of its autonomy, on both intrinsic and extrinsic levels.³ Firstly, kabbalists operating after the sixteenth century were often committed to autobiographical, biographical and hagiographical writing, producing a treasure of 'egodocuments', including diaries and letters.⁴ In doing so, they stand in stark contrast to the dearth of personal testimonies in medieval Kabbalah. A major exception to this rule, that of the Spanish mystic R. Abraham Abulafia (1240–c.1291) and his followers, shall be discussed below. Actually, the historical study of premodern Kabbalah is troubled by the opposite tendency, toward pseudo-epigraphy (accompanied by writing in pseudo-Aramaic, imitating the lingua franca of late antiquity) and anonymity. The modern focus on the individual, clearly reflecting wider cultural trends (observable, for example, in sixteenth-century Spanish Christian mysticism), also lent itself to a discourse of much greater intricacy in psychological thought. Here one must mention the modern development

¹ See e.g. Stroumsa, 'A Zoroastrian Origin'; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 22–37; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 33–51; Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth*, 1–64; Mopsik, *Les grands textes*, 52–65; Idel, *Ben*, 51–57, 160–164; Schäfer, *Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, esp. 20–25.

² For an example of such contextualization (discussing the earliest medieval center of Provence), see Ben-Shalom, *The Jews of Provence*, esp. 565–631.

³ Garb, *Modern Kabbalah* (which contains a lengthy English abstract).

⁴ Chajes, 'Early Modern Jewish Egodocuments'.

of the doctrine of reincarnation, not shared by all medieval kabbalists and in many cases highly esoteric.⁵ Not coincidentally, it was in early modernity that the term ‘interiority’ came into its own.

Secondly, focused as they were on the charisma and mystical-psychological achievement of outstanding individuals (as well as the texts they composed), kabbalists from the sixteenth century onwards tended to cluster in fellowships or fraternities, again reflecting wider developments in the social structure of religion (especially apparent in the Catholic revival, aka Counter-Reformation, as well as the institutionalization of Sufi fraternities under the resurgent Ottoman Empire). While in the case of medieval Kabbalah we have often-vague scholarly discourse on circles and at best conjectures (based on literary analysis) as to interactions within alleged fellowships, in the case of modern kabbalists we have actual contracts enumerating the members of the fraternities and detailing their obligations and the goals and shared rites of the group.⁶ Furthermore, the dominant medieval esoteric stance (in both mystical and philosophical circles), often extending to one-to-one oral transmission, mitigated against the development of larger groups.⁷

To wrap up our discussion of intrinsic factors, it should be stressed that modern kabbalists were keenly aware of both the innovative nature of their writing and practice and its divergence from earlier systems. Thus, they betray a strong sense of placement in specific generations. This self-perception joined an ideology of aggressive proliferation, often justified by that very generational situation. This combined set of beliefs powerfully breached the strong esotericist barriers erected by medieval kabbalists.⁸ Although the new technology of print played an obvious role here, one should not ignore the even stronger effect of messianic hopes placed on the spread of Kabbalah (and underpinning the sense of the exceptional status of ‘later generations’). It is no coincidence that it was only in the modern period that Kabbalah generated mass social movements, often of a messianic nature. It is also no coincidence at all that it was only in the Renaissance and in the modern period that Kabbalah significantly impacted the non-Jewish

⁵ The most extensive development of this is in the writings of the radical R. Yosef ben Shalom Ashkenazi, who was loosely affiliated with R. David ben Yehuda he-Hasid (to be discussed below). Ashkenazi viewed reincarnation as a cosmic imperative, undergone by all beings, from the *sefirot* to the inanimate.

⁶ Garb, *Modern Kabbalah*, 16, n. 15; Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts*, 409–415.

⁷ Wolfson, ‘Beyond the Spoken Word’; Wolfson, ‘Circumcision’; Wolfson, ‘Murmuring Secrets’.

⁸ Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 140–141. Cf. Wolfson, ‘Review’.

8 PREMODERN AND MODERN KABBALAH: BREAKS AND CONTINUITIES

world. As we shall see, most of modernity also witnessed the almost unchallenged sway of Kabbalah over large areas of Jewish life, including Halakha, exegesis, liturgy and custom.⁹ This process accompanied the gradual yet clear reduction in interest in philosophy, again in contradistinction from medieval Kabbalah (which engaged in a complex dialogue with this literature).¹⁰

As intimated just now, none of these processes can be detached from the powerful and constantly accelerating impact of European, Near Eastern and later global modernity on the Jewish world and its surroundings. The claim that modern Kabbalah constitutes an autonomous domain rests on the statements of many modern kabbalists (rather than being merely a scholarly conjecture). These writers responded in increasing detail to new technologies, geopolitical shifts, reformation and secularization and later to dramatic events such as the Chmielnicki massacres, the Holocaust and the formation of the state of Israel. Consequently, we shall not be surprised to encounter the explicit phrases ‘us moderns’, or ‘modern kabbalists’, usually coined in European languages. In this linguistic context one should note the importance of Jewish languages that largely developed in the modern period, most importantly Yiddish, yet also the Judaeo-Spanish or Ladino of the Spanish Diaspora, for the popular reach of Kabbalah. This vernacular development accompanied the decline in command of languages such as classical Arabic or Latin, both foundational for philosophical discourse in medieval Jewry. This shift also reflects a final extrinsic factor, the relocation of the Jewish and thus kabbalist center of gravity, from southwest Europe and northwest Africa eastwards and northwards, alongside with massive demographic expansion in these new regions. Cumulatively, geopolitical and individual (or micro-sociological) forms of awareness coupled in making modern kabbalists far more aware of their regional identities.

CONTINUITIES: EXEGESIS, GENDER, THEURGY AND MAGIC

Attempting to summarize the shared body of knowledge and practice that modern kabbalists inherited requires both massive simplification and a conscious avoidance of some scholarly schemata often used to describe premodern Kabbalah. The latter actually preserved its place of pride in writing and teaching, contributing to blanket assumptions of continuity with

⁹ For rare medieval critiques of Kabbalah, see Ravitzky, *Maimonidean Essays*, 181–204.

¹⁰ Huss, ‘Mysticism versus Philosophy’ (and the case study: Vajda, ‘L’histoire du conflit entre la Kabbale et la Philosophie’).

modern developments rather than examining it case by case. For instance, we shall not enter the knotty question of the validity of the Scholemian distinction (greatly developed by Idel) between the mainstream (often Zoharic) theosophical-theurgical and the ecstatic or prophetic Kabbalah associated with Abulafia.¹¹ Rather, this chapter will focus on four main themes that can be broadly claimed to encompass the various schools and concerns of medieval Kabbalah, all of which had continuous impact on its later forms. Some of these also markedly differentiate Kabbalah as a whole (to the extent that such an essentialist designation is viable) from the other major forms of Western mysticism.¹² Yet it is crucial to remember that even within these four centuries of medieval Kabbalah, one can discern various ruptures and divergences (also between geographical centers) which shall not concern us in this deliberately brief chapter.

The most obvious and enduring of continuous themes is the commitment to interpretation of sacral texts dating from antiquity. First and foremost amongst these we have the Hebrew Bible (which is of course a shared exegetical interest with Christian mysticism), especially the creation account in Genesis, the vision of the prophet Ezekiel (in the first chapter of the book of Ezekiel) and the Song of Songs. Kabbalistic exegetical concerns also gradually extended to Talmudic-Midrashic literature (mostly the *Mishna*, the cosmologically oriented Midrash Genesis Rabbah and the *Aggadic* portions of the Babylonian Talmud) and also encompassed the liturgy, as well as the enigmatic treatise (of debatable provenance), couched in cosmology, linguistic and anatomical terms, known as *Sefer Yetzira* (Book of Creation or Formation).¹³ The assumption shared by virtually all kabbalists is that these texts contain a hidden, esoteric, sublime level, exposable by means of a host of new hermeneutical methods, including symbolism, inspiration gained in pneumatic or ecstatic states of consciousness, automatic writing and especially methods pertaining to the Hebrew language in which the great majority of the texts were composed.¹⁴ The core belief here, again strongly consensual, is that this language is sacral, perhaps predating creation, rather than conventional.

¹¹ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 124, 145; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, xi–xix, 260–261; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 94–134; Pedaya, *Vision and Speech*, esp. 135–136, 204–205.

¹² Cf. Wolfson, 'Structure, Innovation'; Huss, *The Existence of Jewish Mysticism*, 77–89, 93–95.

¹³ Liebes, *Ars Poetica*, emphasizes continuity in reception of this treatise.

¹⁴ Goldreich, *Automatic Writing*. Symbolism occupies a major place in the Scholemian interpretation of Kabbalah, yet this stress has been significantly modulated subsequently, esp. by Idel (see e.g. *Absorbing Perfections*, 272–313).

10 PREMODERN AND MODERN KABBALAH: BREAKS AND CONTINUITIES

Prominent amongst the latter were techniques (also in the sense of aids for attaining mystical experiences), mostly originating in prekabbalistic German Pietism. These included recombinations of the letters, contemplation of their shape and composition (at times invoking parallels to the human form), as well as *gematria* (calculation of their numerical value). This linguistic speculation extended to discussions of the theosophical meaning of the vowels (which are separate from the letters in Hebrew) and the *te'amim*, or musical accents with which the Torah is ritually chanted in the synagogue.¹⁵ Above all, kabbalists of various schools and periods shared the belief in the centrality of the divine names (a theme with clear Islamic parallels), especially the Tetragrammaton.¹⁶ Often, these linguistic concerns eclipsed the better-known visual imagery of the *sefirot* (to be described shortly), although much attention was given to parallels between the two systems. At the same time, numerous texts (especially within the above-mentioned Zoharic corpus but also reflecting Ashkenazic influences) assume that the key to penetrating the secret layer of the text lies in visionary experience:

The Holy One blessed be He, enters all the hidden things that He has made into the Holy Torah . . . The Torah reveals that hidden thing and then it is immediately clothed in another garment, where it is hidden . . . and even though that thing is hidden in its garment, the sages, who are full of eyes, see it from within its garment. When that thing is revealed, before it enters into a garment, they cast an open eye on it, and even though [the thing] is immediately concealed, it does not depart from their eyes.¹⁷

The ongoing commitment to earlier corpora also entails the development of two themes central in virtually all of those.¹⁸ The first of these is a linear historical narrative, blended (as is to be expected) with strong mythic images. Its span reaches from the creation and its nebulous origins, through the fall of Adam, the ancestral founders of Jewish nationhood and the Exodus, to the kingdom (especially that of David) and temple, through their destruction, and then through the Diaspora and its trials to the messianic

¹⁵ See e.g. Abrams, 'From Germany to Spain'. For the complex question of the interrelationship between Ashkenazi mysticism, such as German Pietism, and Kabbalah, see e.g. Idel, 'Some Forlorn Writings', esp. 196.

¹⁶ See Ben Sasson, *YHWH*, esp. 171–237.

¹⁷ *Zohar*, vol. II, 98B, translated and discussed in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 384–385 (see also 355).

¹⁸ Though *Sefer Yetzira* is a seeming exception to this rule on both counts; see Meroz, 'Inter-religious Polemics'.