

# **The Worldview of Kabbalah: A Brief Guide for the Perplexed**

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## **Introduction: God and the Infinite**

Reflections on the infinite are the gateway to mysticism, and this holds true for the Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah. When one focuses on the infinite, the mind dwells on that which is indescribable, paradoxical, and beyond human rationality. If at once we set our mind's grasp upon the infinite, our thoughts slip through our fingers. Mysticism embraces this phenomenon and seeks increasing speculations and unity with the unreachable infinite.

For followers of Yeshua, human inability to grasp the infinite is unsurprising. In the biblical presentation, the infinite is not an impersonal abstraction, but rather the personal God himself. He is the unsearchable one (Rom. 11:33) whose thoughts and ways are infinitely beyond us (Isa. 55:8–9), and whose essence and attributes are higher than heaven (Job 11:7–9). As finite creatures, human beings will never fully comprehend the infinite God.

Yet this is no cause for concern. Our ability to relate to God is not dependent upon our reasoning *up* to the divine; rather, he has come *down* to us. Whereas humanity cannot cross the infinite divide to God's unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16), in his omnipotence and love, God himself has bridged the infinite gap by first approaching us. He initially bridged the gap by creating the cosmos out of nothing and then by speaking intelligible words in the Scriptures. However, his ultimate act of bridging the gap between God and man was taking upon a human nature for our redemption. The Son of God in his incarnation is both infinite (according to his

divine nature) and finite (according to his human nature)—the mysterious miracle of miracles. Thus, when considering the infinite, followers of Yeshua have no need to spin endlessly in mystical speculation and irrationality. We have a concrete, final answer—or rather, the incarnate Word—who provides our restless minds with shalom and rest as we learn from him (Matt. 11:30). Moreover, because we believe in a universe created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), we expect it to be finite and discoverable through scientific investigation and rational inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Thus, with a worldview grounded in the Scriptures, we may have concrete, understandable, and satisfying answers about God, ourselves, and reality.

Very little of this is helpful for understanding Kabbalah, which encourages speculations about the infinite along a different path. Kabbalists view the world as an active, enchanted place invested with layers of infinite meaning, power, change, and mystery in *all* corners of the cosmos. Whereas Scripture teaches that God alone is the infinite one, Kabbalah both accepts this notion and subverts it by including all that exists *within* God himself. In the Kabbalistic worldview, finite things are illusions with infinity trapped inside. Moreover, because everything has the spark of infinity within—and those sparks alone are real—there are no ultimate differences between any two things. Eventually, the chair one sits on, the thoughts one thinks, and the world one lives in will shed the illusion, and all will be revealed to be One in God.

Just as Kabbalistic teachings are unintelligible to most followers of Yeshua, so too does Kabbalah make the gospel unintelligible to many Orthodox Jewish people. Kabbalistic thought,

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1. For a comprehensive defense of creation *ex nihilo*, see Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004). For the comprehensibility of scientific investigation because of creation *ex nihilo*, see Nancy Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 80–81.

as just outlined, undermines biblical teachings concerning the divine nature, cosmology, metaphysics, good and evil, atonement, and much more. This worldview distance between Kabbalah and the Scriptures is likely unsurprising to those accustomed to viewing Kabbalah as dangerous, superstitious, and irrational occultism that is believed by only a Haredi fringe. However, the resurgence of Orthodox Judaism in recent decades<sup>2</sup> means that those devoted to the task of Jewish evangelism can no longer afford to remain unfamiliar with Kabbalah. Yes, Kabbalah is occultic and false, but it needs to be understood on its own terms and challenged from an informed perspective so we can communicate truth to a growing demographic of Orthodox Jewish people.

During the research portion of my Doctor of Ministry with over fifty of our peers in the Messianic missions movement, I discovered that most of us are perplexed by Kabbalistic thought.<sup>3</sup> We don't know the basic concepts and we lack confidence in how to grasp it. Thus, the aim of this essay is twofold: 1) To provide a brief overview of Kabbalah for those perplexed by it, and 2) To provide avenues for nudging Kabbalists, Lord willing, closer to biblical truth. This essay will seek to portray some of the most common features of mainstream Lurianic Kabbalah

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2. Pew Research Center, *Jewish Americans in 2020* (Pew Research Center, 2021), 9; David Eliezrie, "US Jewry Is Shifting Profoundly and Chabad Is on Rise - Pew Research," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 30, 2021, sec. Opinion, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/pew-us-jewry-is-shifting-profoundly-chabad-is-on-rise-669549>.

3. Brian James Crawford, "Pathways for Addressing Jewish Theological and Philosophical Objections to the Incarnation," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (D.Min., La Mirada, CA, Biola University, 2021), 128–60, <http://www.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/2610388914/>.

while acknowledging that multiple Kabbalist streams articulate their teachings in differing ways.<sup>4</sup>

### **Recommended Studies on Kabbalah**

During the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) of the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries, many European Hasidic Jewish people left Kabbalah behind and accepted Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>5</sup> They brought a proficiency in Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, and Kabbalistic ideas that had flourished in pre-WWII European Judaism. When these believers wrote about Kabbalah, they could write with authenticity and authority. Tragically, when the Nazis destroyed Jewish life in Europe, they also murdered many Jewish believers in Jesus familiar with Kabbalah. Since then, there has been a scarcity of knowledge of Kabbalah in the Messianic Jewish world, leading to a diminished gospel witness to Jewish people with a mystical orientation. Unfortunately, due to these factors, some of the best in-depth works on Kabbalah from a Jesus-following perspective

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4. In other words, Kabbalah is not monolithic. Lurianic Kabbalah derives from Rabbi Isaac Luria (*HaAri* or *Arizal*), who lived from 1534–72. Lurianic Kabbalah focuses on theosophical speculations about the divine and how to integrate one’s halakhic duties with the repair of the world. In contrast, ecstatic Kabbalah (*Kabbalah Nevu’it*) emphasizes mystical experience that results in oneness with God, and practical Kabbalah (*Kabbalah Ma’asit*) focuses on magical practices to bring about desired effects. There are also Kabbalistic schools of thought stemming from different traditions (Abulafia, Ashlag, Mitnagdim, differing Hasidic rebbes, and earlier forms represented by *Sefer Yezirah*, *Sefer Bahir*, and the *Zohar*). It is beyond the scope of this essay to address these nuances.

5. For details on the successes of Jewish evangelism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see A. E. Thompson, *A Century of Jewish Missions* (Chicago, IL: Fleming H. Revell, 1902); Mitchell Leslie Glaser, “A Survey of Missions to the Jews in Continental Europe, 1900-1950” (PhD, California, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999). Glaser’s revised publication of his dissertation is forthcoming.

date from over a century ago and need contemporary updating.<sup>6</sup> A recent study of note by a Gentile believer is by Michael McClymond, but it is tucked away as a 105-page chapter in a much larger work on Christian universalism.<sup>7</sup> There is much work to be done in critically assessing Kabbalah, especially by those in the Messianic movement.

Consequently, the best contemporary sources for learning about Kabbalah are to be found in the writings of nonbelievers. Due to the barriers of the Hebrew language and arcane terminology, many primary Kabbalistic works (such as the *Zohar* or *Tanya*) are inaccessible for the uninitiated English reader. However, at least three introductions to Kabbalah, written in English by Chabad practitioners, may be recommended: Immanuel Schochet's *Mystical Concepts in Chasidism*, Chaim Dalfin's *Demystifying the Mystical*, and Nissan Dovid Dubov's *Discovering Jewish Mysticism*.<sup>8</sup> Schochet focuses on the metaphysical and cosmological aspects of Kabbalah, whereas Dalfin emphasizes the psychological and moral aspects. Beyond these, there are many readable works available by non-practitioner Jewish scholars. The most important

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6. Two recommended older studies may be found in Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development, and Literature*, Reprint Edition (London, UK: Routledge, 2016); Bernhard Pick, *The Cabala: Its Influence on Judaism and Christianity* (Chicago, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1913). A less recommended work that commits syncretism and historical error is Christian William Henry Pauli, *The Great Mystery; or, How Can Three Be One?* (London, UK: William Macintosh, 1863), <http://archive.org/details/greatmysteryorh00paulgoog>.

7. Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 1:125–230.

8. Jacob Immanuel Schochet, "Mystical Concepts in Chasidism," in *Tanya - Likutei Amarim* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 2014), a35-116; Chaim Dalfin, *Demystifying the Mystical: Understanding the Language and Concepts of Chasidism and Jewish Mysticism* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995); Nissan Dovid Dubov, *Discovering Jewish Mysticism, The Key to Kabbalah 1* (New York: Dwelling Place Pub., 2006), <https://www.chabad.org/article.asp?aid=361868>.

scholar in Kabbalah studies continues to be Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), who first established a comprehensive academic study of Jewish mysticism. Scholem provided a broad overview in his groundbreaking *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1946), and his *Origins of the Kabbalah* (1962) provided an excellent intellectual history of the movement.<sup>9</sup> Scholem’s nearly 100-page article on Kabbalah in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* is also a good starting point.<sup>10</sup>

Subsequent Jewish scholars have both followed and diverged from Scholem’s trailblazing path. For a recent one-volume introduction, Marvin Sweeney has written a monograph on Kabbalah’s intellectual history entitled *Jewish Mysticism*.<sup>11</sup> Advanced academic studies may be found in the works of Elliot Wolfson,<sup>12</sup> Shaul Magid,<sup>13</sup> and Moshe Idel.<sup>14</sup> A comprehensive

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9. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Kindle (New York, NY: Schocken, 1995); Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush, Kindle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

10. Gershom Scholem, “Kabbalah,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 11:585-677.

11. Marvin A. Sweeney, *Jewish Mysticism: From Ancient Times through Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020).

12. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, Revised ed. edition (Princeton University Press, 1997); Elliot R. Wolfson, “Jewish Mysticism: A Philosophical Overview,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, Routledge History of World Philosophies 2 (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997).

13. Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Shaul Magid, *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014); Shaul Magid, *Piety and Rebellion: Essays in Hasidism* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019).

14. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 2002); Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Continuum, 2008); Moshe Idel, *Primeval Evil in Kabbalah: Totality, Perfection, Perfectibility* (Brooklyn, NY: KTAV Publishing House, 2020).

overview of many aspects of Kabbalah may be found in Geoffrey Dennis' *Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic, & Mysticism*.<sup>15</sup> These are but a few recommendations, for the scholarship on Kabbalah is vast.

When reading these works on Kabbalah, it is important for believers to practice a biblically-grounded epistemic distance. In most cases, one should not approach Kabbalistic thought to learn *from* it, but rather to learn *about* it. At times there may be room for a fruitful application of “comparative theology” and “redemptive analogies” where one remains grounded in biblical orthodoxy while seeking instances where Kabbalistic thought may be compatible.<sup>16</sup> However, as we will see, Kabbalistic teaching is largely incompatible with Scripture and sound philosophy, and it does not have the Jewish pedigree it claims for itself. There are both recent<sup>17</sup> and historical<sup>18</sup> examples of how easily syncretism takes root when believers are attracted to Kabbalah with an uncritical eye. If these warnings are not heeded, then a dilution of biblical authority and the loss of theological orthodoxy will likely result.<sup>19</sup>

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15. Geoffrey W. Dennis, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic & Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2016).

16. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 3–4.

17. Itzhak Shapira, *Return of the Kosher Pig* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer Messianic Publications, 2013); Paul Philip Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age*, 2nd ed. (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2009). Toby Janicki, D. Thomas Lancaster, and Brian Reed, *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary*, 4th ed., Messianic Luminaries (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2012).

18. For Renaissance and early modern Christian Kabbalists who syncretized with Kabbalah, see Pico della Mirandola, Nicholas of Cusa, Jacob Böhme, and Johannes Reuchlin. Also consult Pauli, *The Great Mystery*; John Oxlee, *The Christian Doctrines of the Trinity, and Incarnation Considered and Maintained on the Principles of Judaism*, 3 vols. (London, UK: J. Wertheimer & Co., 1815), [https://books.google.com/books?id=6JA2QU\\_6RWwC](https://books.google.com/books?id=6JA2QU_6RWwC).

19. For more on this theme, see Crawford, “Pathways,” 73–89.

## Important Themes for Understanding Kabbalah

Getting a good grasp on the following themes will likely help the uninitiated observer of Kabbalah experience less vertigo when first diving in.

### Origins in Greek Mystery Philosophies

Kabbalah is best understood as a cholent-like mixture of many streams of ancient Greek mystery philosophies, but served on a halakhically authorized hotplate. The Greek background of Jewish mysticism often goes unnoticed because Kabbalah claims origin from rabbinic sages, such as Simeon bar Yochai, or from Adam himself.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, much of Kabbalah's view of the world is drawn primarily from Neopythagoreanism (first century AD), Gnosticism (second century AD), and Neoplatonism (third century AD), rather than from the Hebrew Scriptures or rabbinic originators.<sup>21</sup> In other words, Kabbalah first trains Jewish people to be metaphysical disciples of Greeks such as Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and Plotinus, and only when this has been achieved may an adherent become a disciple of Moses and the Sages.

Kabbalah represents a movement that often accepts minority positions on major philosophical and scientific questions, thereby keeping alive old ideas that mainstream

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20. Nissan Dovid Dubov, "Adam," in *Discovering Jewish Mysticism, The Key to Kabbalah 1* (New York, NY: Dwelling Place Pub., 2006), [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/361873/jewish/Adam.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/361873/jewish/Adam.htm).

21. "The Kabbalah, in its historical significance, can be defined as the product of the interpenetration of Jewish Gnosticism and neoplatonism." Scholem, "Kabbalah," 11:603. In this remark, Scholem included Neopythagoreanism as well, as he indicated elsewhere (Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Chapter 1.4, Kindle), since Neopythagoreanism was incorporated into Neoplatonism by the Middle Ages. Carl Huffman, "Pythagoreanism," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/pythagoreanism/>. Other influences include Hermeticism (for its magical teachings) and to a lesser extent, Aristotelianism. For more on this theme, see Crawford, "Pathways," 179–84.



philosophers have long discarded. For example, Kabbalah promotes metaphysical idealism over realism, matter and multiplicity as evil, belief in the four Aristotelian elements,<sup>22</sup> and pre-Copernican geocentricism.<sup>23</sup> Rather than accepting discrete meanings for words, Kabbalah employs *gematria*, which interprets letters and words according to arcane mathematical formulas. This practice derives from the *geometria* and *isopsephy* of Neopythagoreanism, which is nowhere affirmed by Scripture as an option for biblical interpretation.<sup>24</sup> The Kabbalistic acceptance of reincarnation also stems from Neopythagoreanism, and its view of God comes from Neoplatonism. Consequently, understanding the history of philosophical thought—including where the mainstream turned right and the mystical underground turned left—is an essential prelude for making rational and historical sense of the dynamics of Kabbalistic thought.<sup>25</sup>

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22. Earth, water, air, fire. Aristotle, *De generatione et corruptione* 2.3.

23. Jeremy Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013). See Brown pages 254–59 for a discussion of the geocentricism of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson. The following is an example from a 2006 Chabad Lubavitch work: “A person can establish direct contact with G-d through prayer, and bypass the influence of the stars. Influence extends only from the visible members of our solar system. The distant planets such as Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, which are invisible to the unaided eye, are not considered to have any significant astrological influence. In order of their distance from Earth, the planets are: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon. Saturn is furthest from the earth and the moon the closest.” Nissan Dovid Dubov, “Angels and Mazalot,” in *Discovering Jewish Mysticism, The Key to Kabbalah 1* (New York, NY: Dwelling Place Pub., 2006), [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/361901/jewish/Angels-and-Mazalot.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/361901/jewish/Angels-and-Mazalot.htm).

24. Revelation 13:18 is likely one exception, but this is not grounds for a generalized usage of the practice. For an overview of the Greek mystical origins of *gematria*, see Kieren Barry, *The Greek Qabalah: Alphabetical Mysticism and Numerology in the Ancient World*, Illustrated edition (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 1999).

25. To get acquainted with this history of philosophical thought, the following books may be helpful: Anthony Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy*, 3rd edition (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018); Garrett J. DeWeese and J. P. Moreland, *Philosophy Made*

## Panentheism

Cosmology is the study of the origin of the universe and its current composition.<sup>26</sup> For Jewish mystics, cosmology is theology, and theology is cosmology. These two are identical in Kabbalah due to its teaching of panentheism, which means “all is in God.”<sup>27</sup> Panentheism was classically affirmed by Parmenides (fourth century BC) and the Neoplatonist Plotinus (third century AD), but Kabbalah contains its own interpretation of the idea. According to panentheism, all that exists in the universe is a continuous emanation of God’s own being. A common analogy for panentheism is that of the sun emanating light, which was historically seen as a mysterious unity of source and effect.<sup>28</sup> It is believed that the divine light may be partially

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*Slightly Less Difficult: A Beginner’s Guide to Life’s Big Questions*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021); Pearcey and Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy*; Mortimer J. Adler, ed., *The Syntopicon: An Index to the Great Ideas*, Second Edition, 2 vols., Great Books of the Western World (Chicago, IL: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1990). For an overview of Western mysticism, see McClymond, *Devil’s Redemption*.

26. This definition employs the broad form of the term. A narrow definition would relegate cosmology only to the composition of the universe, with cosmogony defined as the study of the origin of the universe.

27. John W. Cooper, *Panentheism—the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). A classic rabbinic statement appearing to endorse panentheism may be found in Bereshit Rabbah 68:9: “R. Jose b. Halafta said: We do not know whether God is the place of His world or whether His world is His place, but from the verse, Behold, there is a place with Me (Ex. 33:21), it follows that the Lord is the place of His world, but His world is not His place.” H. Freedman and Isadore Epstein, eds., *The Soncino Midrash Rabbah*, Judaic Classics DVD-ROM, 10 vols. (Brooklyn, NY: Judaica Press, 1983). Also see Bradley Shavit Artson, “Holy, Holy, Holy! Jewish Affirmations of Panentheism,” in *Panentheism Across the World’s Traditions*, ed. Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 18–36.

28. In Schochet’s explanation, he quotes Rabbi Joseph Albo (1380–1444) and Rabbi Joseph Ergas (1685–1730) making now scientifically-disproven statements about light, which are then used as the metaphorical basis to teach Kabbalistic concepts about God’s relationship with the cosmos. Schochet approvingly cites Ergas as saying, “Light has numerous qualities characteristic of the Divine emanations, as, for example: (i) Light is emitted from the luminary

concealed in individual things, but ultimately everything that exists is divine and is united with everything else because all things have the spark of divine light within them. To use another analogy, in panentheism, the universe is like the God's body, which he animates with his overflowing being, but his existence also goes beyond the limits of the universe.

Scholem wrote that Kabbalah "is driven to something very much like a mythos of God giving birth to himself."<sup>29</sup> Idel calls it "divine autogenesis."<sup>30</sup> The story can be summarized as follows. Kabbalah uses the term *Ein Sof* to refer to God, which means "Him who has no end."<sup>31</sup> Kabbalah identifies *Ein Sof* only through what he is not, never describing him for what he is (negative theology). As the mind cannot grasp the infinite, so too the mind cannot grasp *Ein Sof*. Kabbalah portrays God's unfathomable infinity as extending in all possible directions, such that God's infinity takes up all the "space" within which anything else could exist. In order to "make room" for things other than himself, *Ein Sof* had to "contract himself" (*tzimtzum*) and make the

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without ever becoming separated from it.... (ii) Light spreads itself instantaneously.... (iv) Light does not mix and mingle with another substance. (v) Light per se never changes." Schochet, "Mystical Concepts in Chasidism," a47-48. These claims are incorrect as follows: (i) Light is a physical particle-wave duality that spatially departs from the emitting source. (ii) Light has a fast, but not instantaneous speed of approximately 300,000 meters per second. (iv) Light can encode and transmit data, such as in fiber optics, illustrating how light may be mixed with other substances. (v) Visible light may be converted up and down the electromagnetic spectrum (such as into invisible ultraviolet light). Light can also be converted into sound using a transducer. Each of these truths about light illustrate how light is a separate, changeable thing in our finite universe, and not an infinite thing that should be used to illustrate the unchangeable divine essence. This is an example of the doctrine of correspondences (see below) backfiring: bad science leads to bad theology.

29. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Chapter 7.6, Location 5597.

30. Idel, *Primeval Evil in Kabbalah*, xiv.

31. Scholem, "Kabbalah," 11:623. Earlier sources were more consistent with their apophatic theology and understood *Ein Sof* to mean "That which has no end," thereby negating personhood and gender from *Ein Sof*, as would be necessary to be consistent.

conceptual shape of a hollowed-out sphere within his infinity. *Ein Sof* sent a ray of his infinite light into this sphere, and this light became refracted into ten spiritual spheres with named potencies, known as *sefirot*. Catastrophically, some of these *sefirot* shattered, and eventually the light fell and became more and more concealed in the waste parts of the spheres (*kelipot*) until the physical universe emerged. The physical universe, because it conceals the infinite light, is seen as evil, as in Gnosticism. Kabbalah's negative stance towards matter encourages a neglect of scientific pursuits, which are called unclean "sciences of the nations."<sup>32</sup>

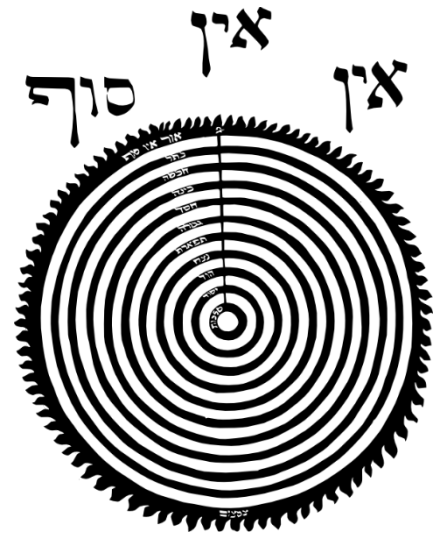


Figure 1 - The ray of *Ein Sof* tracing out the ten *sefirot*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seder\\_hishtalshelus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seder_hishtalshelus)

One should not ignore the comprehensiveness of this theological vision. Panentheism quite literally means *all* is in God, which includes even the unsavory parts of existence. In the biblical presentation, it would be unthinkable to consider whether God's essence includes evil (Psalm 136:1; Mark 10:18). But in Kabbalah, the presence of evil within God is an intractable problem that is demanded by the system as a whole.<sup>33</sup>

32. Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya: Likutei Amarim*, trans. Nissan Mindel, Revised Bilingual Edition (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 2014), 34.

33. Idel classifies three schools of thought among Kabbalists on the topic of evil emerging from God. 1) Evil came first, and good emerged from it; 2) Evil and its roots within God are a part of God's perfection; 3) Evil and good are mixed together at the highest level of the divine sphere, but through the emanation process they separate from each other. Idel, *Primeval Evil in Kabbalah*, xlvi–xlix.

## As Above, So Below

Kabbalah shares a feature with many other mystical schools of thought: the doctrine of correspondences. This is often summarized using the dictum, “as above, so below.”<sup>34</sup> The basic idea is that lower realms of reality (microcosm) are patterned upon higher realms (macrocosm). If one can discern the nature of the divine essence and its dynamics above, then one can have mystical insight into how things work below.<sup>35</sup> In practice, the relationship often works in reverse as well: if one can discern reality below, then one has more insight into the divine essence above. Consequently, in Kabbalah, understanding the nature and interrelationships of the ten *sefirot* above is crucial for knowing how to live one’s everyday life down below, and vice versa.

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34. Zohar, II:20a: “And He made this world corresponding to the world above, and everything which is above has its counterpart here below, and everything here below has its counterpart in the sea; and yet all constitute a unity.” Harry Sperling, Maurice Simon, and Paul P. Levertoff, eds., *The Zohar: An English Translation*, 2nd ed., Judaic Classics DVD-ROM (Brooklyn, NY: Judaica Press, 1984).

35. This is a concept separate from astrology, but it shares much of the same logic. Astrology focuses on observable phenomena, whereas the doctrine of correspondences relates to non-observable spiritual entities. Nevertheless, Kabbalah encourages astrological speculations. “Many well-educated Jews studied and practiced astrology well into the modern era, it being an accepted part of medieval medicine and sciences. No philosophic education would have been considered complete without some knowledge of how the stars affect the sublunary realms. Examples of horoscopes written by Jews have been found in the Cairo Geniza. A wide array of famous scholars, ranging from mystics to rationalists, wrote treatises on the topic, including Sa’adia ben Joseph, Abraham ibn Ezra, Nachmanides, Levi ben Gershon, Judah Loew (the Maharal of Prague), and the Vilna Gaon. Rationalist philosophers Maimonides, Crescas, and Albo were among the few skeptics, attacking its validity and condemning it as forbidden by Scripture. On this point they were largely ignored.” Geoffrey W. Dennis, “Astrology,” in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic & Mysticism* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, February 8, 2016), 45.

The doctrine of correspondences informs the psychological teachings and mystical experiences of Kabbalist practitioners. The famous “Tree of Life” depiction of the ten *sefirot* often includes the image of a man (*Adam Kadmon*) as the “shape” of the *sefirot* after the shattering of the spheres. This image conveys how the human body and soul are thought to correspond with divine inner-workings. By uniting various aspects of the human psyche through *mitzvot* and mystical practices, one can unify with the corresponding potencies in the higher realms. Thus, Kabbalah can be aptly summarized as a psychologized theology that is worked out in mystical practice and study. The psychological teachings of Kabbalah are multifaceted and profoundly complicated, full of arcane correspondences with metaphysical concepts and layers of experience.<sup>36</sup> Descriptions of the divine unification process often take on erotic connotations in Kabbalistic discourse, as the male-female relationship on earth is

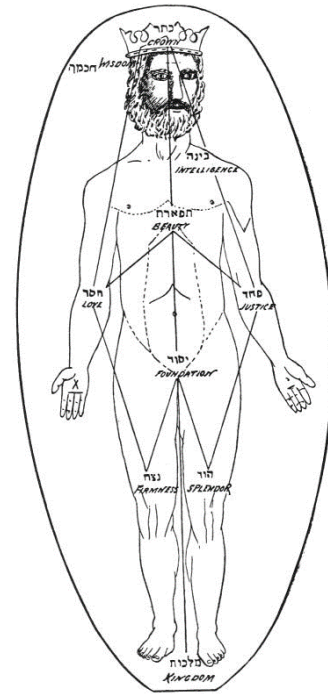


Figure 2 - *Adam Kadmon*, from “Adam Kadmon,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia*

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36. Shahar Arzy and Moshe Idel write, “[M]ajor trends in Jewish Kabbalah managed to alter distinct neurocognitive mechanisms through the use of specific techniques. These excitations caused a change in the mystic’s processing of functions related to his own self, such as the sense of embodiment or visuo-spatial perspective taking, leading to different variants of autoscopic and trance experiences and accompanied by prominent prophetic-like experiences of a “speaking double” or internal “maggidic” voice, thus facilitating further expansion of the borders of the mind and consciousness. We therefore propose that it is the mystical technique that leads the mystic to experience autoscopia, heautoscopy, out-of-body experience, or trance. The mystic might interpret these as sacred or prophetic experiences that reveal mystical secrets about human or divine nature.” Shahar Arzy and Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah : A Neurocognitive Approach to Mystical Experiences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 116–17.

thought to exist in the divine nature as well.<sup>37</sup> From this idea comes some of Kabbalah's most alien teachings for those accustomed to Scriptural descriptions of God.<sup>38</sup>

### Esoteric versus Exoteric

Esoteric teachings are restricted to an inner circle of enlightened initiates, whereas exoteric teachings are generally understandable by the masses without special enlightenment. Judaism has had an esoteric undercurrent since at least the time of the Mishnah (second century), which famously declared that knowledge of the mysterious chariot of Ezekiel 1 is not permissible for anyone but the most adept sages. In the same passage, the sages also warned, "Whoever reflects upon four things would have been better off had he not been born: what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is beyond" (m. Hagigah 2:1).<sup>39</sup> Jewish mysticism portrays itself as the vehicle for delivering these mysteries, and Hasidism in particular has chosen to ignore the Mishnaic warnings. Now it is said in Hasidic circles that all Jews are obligated to learn Kabbalah.<sup>40</sup> Anyone on the outside of the mystic circle is trapped with a

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37. Zohar, 1:29b: "When the upper world was filled and became pregnant, it brought forth two children together, a male and a female, these being heaven and earth after the supernal pattern. The earth is fed from the waters of the heaven which are poured into it. These upper waters, however, are male, whereas the lower are female, and the lower are fed from the male and the lower waters call to the upper, like a female that receives the male, and pour out water to meet the water of the male to produce seed. Thus the female is fed from the male." Sperling, Simon, and Levertoff, *The Zohar*.

38. For example, Elliot Wolfson writes, "The mystic vision expressed in Jewish sources is fundamentally a phallic gaze." Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 5.

39. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 330.

40. Nissan Dovid Dubov, "Key FAQs," in *Discovering Jewish Mysticism, The Key to Kabbalah 1* (New York, NY: Dwelling Place Pub., 2006), [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/361872/jewish/Key-FAQS.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/361872/jewish/Key-FAQS.htm).

surface-level understanding of Judaism and the Torah. Moreover, it is claimed that the esoteric teachings of Kabbalah must be learned experientially within a Kabbalistic community. That is, one cannot know the secrets of Kabbalah by reading books as an outsider, but only as an insider who adopts the tradition and practice fully alongside an adept teacher.

Because of this esoteric dimension of Kabbalah, the written Torah is portrayed as the mere garment of the Torah that must be peeked behind through mystical means. Exoteric knowledge, accessible to the masses, is only a prelude to mystical illumination. Yet, mystical illumination is by definition unavailable to non-Kabbalists, so the multifaceted true meaning of a biblical passage is thereby irrevocably shielded from outsiders' eyes. Thus, when speaking with a Kabbalist, if one takes a Protestant-style grammatical-historical interpretive approach to the Torah, or even reads the Talmudic sages literally, one will likely find himself viewed as unsophisticated, unenlightened, and focused on the mere garment while ignoring the reality of Torah underneath. Therefore, it is recommended that hermeneutics be discussed before attempting to interpret religious texts with a Kabbalist.

### Universalist Soteriology

The story of Kabbalah explains how God unfurled his unity into multiplicity through the emanation of the *sefirot* and the lower worlds, such as our own. This unfurling of *Ein Sof* into multiplicity is portrayed as a shattering and a catastrophe. Thus, the eschatological goal of Kabbalah is to restore all of existence into the simple unity it once came from. The original meaning of *tikkun olam* refers to restoring the world by releasing the infinite sparks of divinity that are hidden in all existing things. To put it in theological terms, soteriology and eschatology are very closely related in Kabbalah, because to “save” the universe is to reduce the multiplicity



until there is nothing but unity, which will eventually happen in the future. All will be saved, and Israel is the central actor who is tasked with repairing the shattering within *Ein Sof*.

In Kabbalistic thought, human sin is not the fundamental problem of the universe. The Fall of Adam was a lesser fall that took place in a cosmos that had already descended into physicality and multiplicity. Theoretically speaking, a human being could live a sinless life and still need redemption in the Kabbalist worldview, because that person is still encumbered by a body, a distinct consciousness, and a sense of self. Consequently, those invested in Kabbalist thought can envision no need for the Son of God to become incarnate as a human being (if such a Son existed), for indeed the entire universe is *already* God's body and *already* has the seed of its own redemption within. Humans need no atonement to be spiritually restored to God, for they are already ontologically united with God, but trapped in an illusion of finitude. Instead, what they need is to be freed from the garments of physicality by Israel practicing *mitzvot* for the purpose of releasing the waste parts (*kelipot*) of the universe up into the higher realms.

### **Some Suggestions for Engagement on a Worldview Level**

Thus far, this essay has sought to provide a theoretical basis for understanding Kabbalah, but ministering to Kabbalists requires more than just theoretical knowledge. Learning *about* Kabbalah is different from effectively communicating the gospel *to* Kabbalists. At this point, I must confess the limits of my personal experience. I have familiarized myself with Kabbalistic thought only in the last four years, and I have had fewer opportunities to engage with Kabbalists than I would like during that time. Given these caveats, here are some of my suggestions for how to engage with Orthodox Jewish people of the mystical stream.

### 1. Learn to Think Like a Kabbalist Without Becoming One

There are few shortcuts in Orthodox ministry. A vast worldview difference lies between Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians on one hand, and Kabbalists on the other. Bridging the gap between our communities will not come easy. An evangelist will need to learn the skill of viewing the world in a completely different light, while remaining grounded in the truth of Scripture. This paper has provided many footnoted book recommendations to begin this journey, as well as warnings that one must be wary of syncretizing with Kabbalistic thought.

### 2. Earn Their Respect

Because of their esoteric system of thought, Kabbalists expect that non-Kabbalists will be completely unaware of their beliefs and practices. If an evangelist conveys *respectful* familiarity with Kabbalistic concepts and terminology, this will hopefully communicate an investment of time and interest that will garner respect. The same dynamic can be seen when an evangelist becomes familiar with the Hebrew language: an evangelist's knowledge of Jewish thought patterns and words can generate curiosity in the listener and disarm personal opposition. To use a Kabbalistic analogy, an evangelist can earn the respect of his or her audience by employing Kabbalistic terminology as a garment for Gospel truths. The more our movement learns about Kabbalah and takes steps to engage with Kabbalist Jewish people, the wiser we will all become at doing this.

### 3. Attempt to Introduce Historical Context Through Questions

At some point, an encounter with a Kabbalist will need to shift gears into discussing worldview differences. Unfortunately, Kabbalist thought is anachronistic to its core, and Kabbalists are well-known in Jewish scholarship for resisting the historical contextualization of

their beliefs.<sup>41</sup> They rarely think in terms of historical timelines and causes and effects. For example, Kabbalists think that their principal text, the *Zohar*, was written in the second century by the famous rabbi Simeon bar Yochai. This belief obscures how the *Zohar* is actually a pseudepigraphal work by the thirteenth-century Spanish rabbi Moses of Leon.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Kabbalists have no direct familiarity with Greek mystery philosophies such as Neoplatonism, so they are unable to recognize that their beliefs originated from pagan sources in the millennia past.<sup>43</sup> Because of this lack of historical consciousness, the evangelist may need to ask the Kabbalist leading questions, such as, “How do you know that the sages of the Talmudic era practiced Kabbalah?”<sup>44</sup> Or, “Are you familiar with older mystical writings that teach different

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41. “Kabbalists themselves rarely attempt to attain a historical orientation.” Scholem, “Kabbalah,” 11:587–88.

42. For a discussion on the medieval sources, style, and authorship of the *Zohar*, see Gershom Scholem, “Zohar,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 21:652–58.

43. Sociologists call the phenomenon of forgetting the origin of one’s ideas “stimulus diffusion.” A. L. Kroeber, “Stimulus Diffusion,” *American Anthropologist* 42, no. 1 (1940): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1940.42.1.02a00020>.

44. The reason for this question may be expanded: The Mishnaic and Talmudic sages lived between the second and sixth centuries, whereas Kabbalah became widespread starting in the thirteenth. How can we know that Rabbi Akiva, for example, believed in *tzimtzum*? Is there any evidence of such belief?

concepts than modern Kabbalah?”<sup>45</sup> One can only pray that the Kabbalist will be curious about this unfamiliar line of historical questioning.<sup>46</sup>

#### 4. Challenge Panentheism Via Creation *Ex Nihilo*

Creation *ex nihilo* is the doctrine that God created the universe out of nothing, through the power of his spoken word (Gen. 1:3ff, Ps. 33:6), rather than out of preexistent matter (creation *ex materia*) or as an extension of his own eternal being (creation *ex Deo*). Creation *ex nihilo* posits an ontological dividing line with a binary view of reality, whereby there are only two classes of existence: (1) God, and (2) the things he created separate from himself. There is nothing else in between.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, creation *ex nihilo* asserts that the universe is finite and has a temporal beginning point. Thus, it is not in any way eternal or divine.

Kabbalah rejects the traditional understanding of creation *ex nihilo* because of its origin story for the universe. Instead, it teaches that the universe is an emanation of the divine being, which classifies Kabbalah as a version of creation *ex Deo*. However, Kabbalistic sources still claim to affirm creation *ex nihilo*, but only because they change the meaning of “nothing.”

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45. The evangelist could have any number of other differences in mind when asking this question about the evolution of Kabbalistic thought over time. For example, consider the *Sefer Yetzirah*, an early mystical text that speaks of an emanational process that is different than that of Lurianic Kabbalah. While *Sefer Yetzirah* teaches that there are ten *sefirot* (and 22 Hebrew letters) that are the foundation of the world (a Neopythagorean concept), the *sefirot* are defined physically and spatially, not metaphysically. The ten *sefirot* in this early work are: 1. The spirit of the living God, 2. Air, made from spirit, 3. Water, formed from spirit, 4. Fire, formed from water, and then the six geometrical directions of height, depth, east, west, north, and south.

46. For more on how to use insightful questioning in evangelism, see Gregory Koukl, *Tactics*, 10th Anniversary Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

47. William M. Wright IV and Francis Martin, *Encountering the Living God in Scripture: Theological and Philosophical Principles for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 109–26.

Because there is “nothing” to hold on to in the mind when considering *Ein Sof* (negative theology), he is equated with nothing.<sup>48</sup> If *Ein Sof* is nothing, then Kabbalists feel justified saying that they hold to creation out of “nothing.” However, this equivocation of terms should be seen for what it is: a rejection of actual creation *ex nihilo*.

Properly defined, *nothing* is not a thing, as if it is the medium through which the universe has been composed. Nothing does not have potential to become being through emanations. Rather, it is metaphysical non-being that lacks all conceivable and inconceivable concepts, definitions, properties, and potential, such that the word “is” in this sentence becomes null by necessity, since non-being cannot have anything predicated about it. This definition of *nothing* is indeed the classical strict definition, accepted by Christians and non-Kabbalist Jews alike, and it serves as the basis for what is meant by creation *ex nihilo*. Creation out of actual nothingness is affirmed throughout the Hebrew Scriptures,<sup>49</sup> the New Testament,<sup>50</sup> and in ancient Jewish

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48. A preferred way of speaking about *Ein Sof* is to liken him to the Hebrew letter *ayin*, which has no audible sound. Daniel C Matt, “Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism,” *Tikkun* 3 (May 1988): 43–47.

49. Proverbs 8:22–31; Psalm 33:6–9, 102:25–28; Jeremiah 10:12.

50. Romans 4:17, 11:36; Hebrews 11:3; John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16.

sources.<sup>51</sup> The doctrine has been the traditional position within Judaism, appearing in the Talmud<sup>52</sup> and garnering the support of Sa'adia Gaon and Maimonides.<sup>53</sup>

Outside of religious sources of knowledge, the idea of the universe having a temporal and spatial beginning has been corroborated both scientifically and philosophically. The standard big bang model of cosmology is based on extrapolations of observable data, and it implies a temporal and spatial beginning.<sup>54</sup> Philosophically, the impossibility of the existence of an actual infinite, among other arguments, indicates that the universe is finite, and not infinite in age.<sup>55</sup>

The incompatibility of Kabbalah with creation *ex nihilo* may present a fruitful avenue for presenting Jesus to a Kabbalist. If one can demonstrate to the Kabbalist that the Scriptures, Jewish tradition, scientific models, and philosophical reasoning each call for creation out of absolute nothingness, then the universe is automatically un-divinized. Because the universe *is not* ontologically united with God, but Yeshua *is*, one can encourage the Kabbalist to mentally

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51. 4 Ezra 6:38; Sibylline Oracles 1.7–21; 2 Baruch 14.17; Judith 16:14; Wisdom of Solomon 9:1; 2 Maccabees 7:28; 3 Maccabees 2:3; Jubilees 12:4; Philo, *Planting* 50.

52. b. Megillah 13b: “It was clearly known to the one who spoke and made the world come into being.” b. Sanhedrin 19a: “Him who spoke and brought the world into being.” Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011). This affirmation of God’s creation of everything from nothing forms the beginning of the traditional prayer *Baruch She’amar*.

53. For Sa’adia, see Seymour Feldman, “Philosophy and Theology of Medieval Judaism,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, and William Scott Green (Boston, MA: Brill, 2000), 2:711–12. For Maimonides, see Feldman, “Philosophy,” 2:720–21.

54. Copan and Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing*, 222–24; William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 126–28.

55. Copan and Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing*, 197–218; William Lane Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, ed. John Hick and H. G. Wood (Wipf and Stock Publishers: Eugene, OR, 2000); J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1987), 15–42.

transfer all the wonder, mystery, and beauty he finds in the emanated universe onto the incarnate Son of God.

This move would require a massive worldview shift and rejection of the foundational teachings of Kabbalistic cosmology. It may feel like an unwelcome reduction of mystery to a Kabbalist who has been brought up to embrace mystery everywhere. In response, the evangelist could argue that this limitation of God's range of embodiment to Jesus alone in no way diminishes the incomprehensible infinity of God, who remains infinite, but in a different sense than he has been accustomed to thinking. Moreover, God remains omnipresent, and he sends his Spirit to indwell believers in Jesus (1 Cor. 6:19, 2 Cor. 1:22). He does not leave his people alone. On the grounds of God's oneness (Deut. 6:4), it could be argued that it is safer to *discount* something as united with God, to protect from idolatry and divination (Exod. 20:3, Deut. 18:10–14), than it is to *increase* the scope of things united with God. Certainly, provision must be made to help the Kabbalist land on precisely three divine persons as united in God, but the undivinization of the universe is an excellent first step.

Thus, asking a Kabbalist about his or her views about the origin of the cosmos may be a good pathway for fruitful worldview conversation. Ironically, conversations about *nothing* may actually be conversations about *something* quite profound.

### **Conclusion**

We in the Messianic missions community are called to reach the Jewish world with the gospel, but we often place the Kabbalists outside of our efforts. We know we ought to reach them, and we are yearning to do so, but we do not know where to begin. The situation is not unlike a young preacher who feels unqualified to preach a sermon because he has never taken a class in hermeneutics. How can he understand the text and formulate a message if no one has

taught him how to do so? He knows he has been called, but he has not been equipped; thus, he ought to become equipped so he may fulfill his calling.

So too with the Messianic missions movement today. The time is nigh to leave our unfamiliarity with Kabbalah behind, so we may be equipped to reach this growing segment of Jewish people.



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