

KABBALAH

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Secrecy, Scandal and the Soul

HARRY FREEDMAN

BLOOMSBURY CONTINUUM
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CONTINUUM
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in Great Britain 2019

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data has been applied for

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4729-5098-7; ePDF: 978-1-4729-5096-3; ePub: 978-1-4729-5097-0

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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Dedicated to the memory of

Louis Freedman 1921–2017

Joan Freedman 1926–2018

For the winter is past, the rain has gone. The buds have appeared
on the earth, the time for song has arrived and the voice of the
dove is heard in our land.

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Introduction	I
The Origins of Kabbalah	II
Out of the East	33
The Beginning of Kabbalah	45
Radiance	67
Christian Cabala	89
The City of Mystics	105
Cabala and the Occult Sciences	123
Golem	137
Good, Evil and the Life of the Soul	147
Critics and Crisis	157
Decline and Revival	175
Hasidism	185
The Occult Revival	201

Towards Modernity	211
The New Age	221
<i>Appendix: A Very Brief Outline of the Sefirot</i>	235
<i>Glossary</i>	239
<i>Notes</i>	243
<i>Bibliography</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	269

List of Illustrations

1. Manuscript of *Shaarei Orah*,
Gates of Light, c. 1400
Vatican Library
2. Title page of the first
printed edition of the
Zohar, Mantua, 1558
Courtesy of the Hebraic
Section of the African and
Middle Eastern Division,
Library of Congress
3. Shabbetai Tzvi
Alamy
4. Pages from manuscript of
Abraham Abulafia's *Sefer
Hatsiruf*
The National Library of Israel
5. Title page from Knorr
von Rosenroth's *Kabbala
Denudata*
Wellcome Collection
6. Amulet for a safe pregnancy
Wellcome Collection
7. Page from Abraham
Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah*
British Library/Bridgeman
Images
8. Athanasius Kircher diagram
of the Names of God
in *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*,
Egyptian Oedipus
Wiki Commons

- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| 9. | Diagram of the <i>sefirot</i> from Knorr von Rosenroth's <i>Kabbala Denudata</i> | Wiki Commons |
| 10. | The Formation of the Soul, from <i>La clef des grands mystères</i> , by Eliphas Lévi | Wellcome Collection |
| 11. | Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa | Images from the History of Medicine/Wiki Commons |
| 12. | Prayer following a circumcision. From <i>Book of the Secret of the Lord</i> , 1687 CE | Wellcome Collection |
| 13. | Eliphas Lévi, 1874 | Charles Revel/Wiki Commons |
| 14. | Tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai | Yeshayahu Refelowitz/Wiki Commons |
| 15. | Fantasy crowning of Shabbatai Tzvi | <i>Jewish Encyclopaedia</i> /Wiki Commons |
| 16. | Fourteenth-century commentary on <i>Sefer Yetsirah</i> by a student of Eleazar of Worms | British Library/Bridgeman Images |

Preface

Next time you meet a Hollywood celebrity, take a look at their left wrist. See if they have a knotted red string tied around it. If they do, the chances are they have visited a Kabbalah Centre, where red string can be bought for as little as \$26 a length and small bottles of Kabbalah water for only \$4 each.

The Kabbalah Centre used to say that their water was subjected to a process that restructured its intermolecular binding. After a BBC documentary challenged their assertion they dropped it from their website. In reality, Kabbalah water doesn't seem to be any different from the ordinary variety. Yet the claims made for its healing powers are outrageous. It is beneficial to soak one's feet in it, while meditating on letters from the Hebrew alphabet. It can, apparently, even cure cancer. Madonna, the most prominent of all the Kabbalah Centre's devotees, planned to fill her swimming pool with it.

Red string bracelets are said to protect against the evil eye. Whatever its power, it didn't help David Beckham at the Euros in 2004; he wore the string, missed a penalty and England were out of the competition.

Neither red string nor Kabbalah water seems to offer much protection against calumny and scandal, if events surrounding the international network of Kabbalah Centres are anything to go by. Set up in the 1980s by an enterprising former insurance salesman and his wife, the Kabbalah Centre proved astonishingly

successful in attracting wealthy celebrities, as well as selling string and water. At the peak of their popularity, which occurred perhaps not coincidentally around the turn of the millennium, their VIP visitors included Ashton Kutcher, Demi Moore, Lindsay Lohan, Elizabeth Taylor and Sandra Bernhard. Mick Jagger, Princess Eugenie of York, Kylie Minogue and Britney Spears are just some of those seen wearing the red bracelet.

But as the glamour years subsided, fraud and sex scandals began dogging the Centre's reputation. Its leaders were accused of running a cult. Sandra Bernhard, who had first introduced Madonna to the Kabbalah Centre, summed it up: 'The wheels started to fall off ... Unfortunately, money corrupts everything, even spirituality.'

By its very nature celebrity attention is ephemeral. It was bound to pass. Perhaps for the rock stars and movie icons Kabbalah was nothing more than a passing fad, a whimsy by which public lives could attempt to reconnect with their inner being. But there is nothing faddish about the philosophers, scientists and intellectual giants who have been drawn to Kabbalah. C. G. Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, brought the subject to the attention of post-war Europe's intelligentsia, maintaining as he did that Kabbalah's portrayal of the cosmos reflected the structure of the human psyche. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the philosopher who claimed to have discovered the principles of mathematical calculus, dabbled in Kabbalah, while his great rival Isaac Newton studied and repudiated it. John Locke, the founder of modern political liberalism, the poet John Milton and maybe even William Shakespeare were familiar with Kabbalah. Today, scientists of a mystical bent point to the astonishing similarity between the fifteenth-century Kabbalistic description of the creation of the universe and the modern theory of the Big Bang.

Critics of Kabbalah – and there have been many – will point to the so-called cranks and social misfits whose Kabbalistic dabblings enabled them to impress, influence and often manipulate their more gullible followers. Aleister Crowley invariably tops this list, followed by Eliphas Lévi and a host of lesser-known occultists, of whom the most interesting is probably the obscure Dr Falcon, known as the Ba'al Shem of London. Centuries earlier, Kabbalah's

weird and wonderful cast list had included Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, immortalised in literature as Dr Faustus, the magician John Dee, Emperor Rudolf II of Prague and, as legend would have it, the golem who terrorised the streets of his city.

History is full of the names of those drawn to the mysteries of Kabbalah, some immersing themselves deeply, others barely scratching the surface. Yet, for the different ages in which they lived, and for the great variety of their lifestyles, they all had one thing in common. They all consumed Kabbalah as if they were plucking from a tree laden with ripe fruit. They barely gave a thought to how its theories were devised, how its cosmology had developed or how its mysteries had been revealed. That Kabbalah was a mysticism immersed in the Jewish tradition, with roots going back two thousand years, meant very little to them. They knew nothing of the years of study, the self-abnegation and ascetic rigour which had enabled the classical Jewish kabbalists in Provence, Spain and finally Galilee to perfect their art.

And nor need they have known. For the most part the philosophers, magicians and scientists were drawing not on the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah, but on its Christian reformulation, conceived during the Renaissance by men like Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin, Christian scholars of the Hebrew mysteries.

Arguably it was the divergence of Christian Cabala from its Jewish progenitor which paved the way for other Kabbalistic strands that emerged through the ages. Again arguably, it is the existence of these diverse strands that make it impossible for anyone today, even the classical kabbalists, to claim that theirs is the sole, legitimate expression of Kabbalah. That at least is the argument of this book.

Kabbalah today is more popular than it has ever been. In its classical Jewish incarnation it is practised and studied by mystically inclined Pietists in inward-looking communities. A world away, those seeking to overcome the stresses and conflicts of modern life take courses, read books and attend lectures on Kabbalah's contemporary manifestation. These two Kabbalahs speak to wholly different cultures, but they share the same story. It is the story I hope to tell.¹

Introduction

Kabbalah was never meant to be fashionable. Its earliest exponents, deeply mystical, other-worldly Jews, studying in closed, secretive groups in twelfth-century Provence, would have been amazed, probably horrified, to hear how far and wide their doctrine has spread and how universal it has become.

The recent interest in Kabbalah emerged out of the hippy movement's fascination with mysticism and meditation in the 1960s. It became particularly popular with the advent of New Age spirituality in the late twentieth century, when it was feted as a powerful technique for personal development. This was not Kabbalah as it had been practised in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. But Kabbalah has always evolved, changed and bifurcated into different strands. The twentieth century was by no means the first time that Kabbalah had broken away from its early, exclusively Jewish confines.

Christian Cabala (note the different spelling) was conceived at the high point of the Renaissance, in Lorenzo de' Medici's Florence. As the sixteenth century progressed it became allied to magic, alchemy and Hermeticism. Kabbalah contributed to the scientific revolution and played a central part in the nineteenth-century occult revival. Meanwhile, enigmatic new Kabbalistic practices and beliefs were becoming ever more closely embedded into mainstream Jewish life. Kabbalah is a rare example of a spiritual philosophy open to people of all creeds, yet one that does not detract from their faith. Today

it is studied by more people, of all religions and none, than ever before.

The essence of Kabbalah is the quest to understand how the divine will conceived, created and maintains the universe, to use that understanding to draw closer to the unknowable source of all, and ultimately to restore the flawed cosmos to its original perfection. But, of course, it's far more complicated than that.

This book tells the story of Kabbalah's origins, its development and spread, from its earliest beginnings until the present day. Exactly when those earliest beginnings were is not so easy to pinpoint.

Our story begins in the first centuries of the Common Era with a group of Jewish mystics whose curiosity about the nature of heaven inspired them to embark on mystical voyages of discovery. We do not know the names of these people, nor where they lived, but we do have some of the literature they left behind. Sunk deep into meditative trances, they constructed elaborate travelogues of their visits to heaven, describing in detail the architecture and layout of the empyrean palaces and halls, cataloguing the dangers waiting to entrap the unwary traveller and extolling the delights awaiting those who deserve them. They knew the names of the angels, categorised them according their various ranks and hierarchies, brought back tales about their complaints and rebellions and learned to sing their songs and adulations. The heaven they described, its awesome majesty and teeming host, appears little different from the court of an ancient oriental potentate. Heaven in their imagination was the idealised paradigm of an earthly seat of power, splendour and glory.

The heavenly voyagers hewed pathways along which the initiate might travel to experience celestial bliss. But for later generations, experiences rhapsodised by enchanted minds were not enough. It was illuminating to know that through the use of meditations, incantations and body contortions one could experience the sublime: that through the use of such techniques one might attain mystical communion with God and his angels. But utopian delight is not intellectually satisfying. Human curiosity demands more.

The intellectual component arrived, in the form of a book that set out in complex and impenetrable detail the numinous tools and techniques used by the Almighty to create the world. Written in Hebrew, the Book of Formation is a strange, terse, almost haunting work, impossible to understand when read literally. It created a mystical vocabulary for the first time, and a quasi-scientific, interconnected way of understanding how, in the eyes of its unknown author, the cosmos was formed. It was all to do with language, and numbers.

The Book of Formation's laconic hints were developed and expanded by different schools of mystics, philosophers and putative scientists over the succeeding centuries. By the time the threads were drawn together in twelfth-century Provence, the principles of Kabbalah were established.

One only has to read the first chapter of Genesis to know that God commanded the world into being. 'Let there be light' is the first thing he said, and sure enough 'There was light'.¹ The world was created through God's speech. Hebrew speech, for that is the language of the book of Genesis. Speech is composed of words, and words are made from letters. Letters, specifically Hebrew letters, are therefore the basic tools of creation. The discovery that the alphabet is the foundation of the material world was as important to mystics at the end of the first millennium as was the discovery of DNA's centrality to life for scientists a thousand years later.

Letters are the building blocks of the cosmos. And, like all building blocks, letters can be arranged, jumbled up and rearranged. When they are arranged in a certain order they appear as the text of the Bible. Within this text, the mysteries of the world's creation are all encoded. By manipulating and rearranging the letters of Scripture, Kabbalah aims to decode and make clear the divine mysteries.

By the end of the tenth century or thereabouts, the Jewish mystical tradition had discovered how to travel to heaven, the means of communication with the angels and the principles of decoding the Bible to reveal the secrets of the greatest of all powers, the power to create worlds. The focus of Kabbalah now became putting this knowledge together into a coherent, if mystically fuzzy,

system. And then to learn how to make use of this knowledge to draw down heavenly bounty that bestows benefit upon individuals, humankind and the world.

Armed with this knowledge, Kabbalah no longer needed to simply gaze at the heavens. Understanding how the cosmos was created brings with it the ability to manipulate creation, to transfigure the physical world. Even before the first kabbalists had finished setting out their doctrine, some of those who possessed mystical knowledge discovered how to use it to change the natural order of things. Far more successful than the magicians of old, the things they could now do were amazing. They outwitted demons, annulled spells, procured wealth, induced fertility and cured illnesses. Kabbalah is not magic. It is much more powerful than that. Ever since Kabbalah was discovered, magic has always ridden in its slipstream.

The word Kabbalah means reception, in the sense of a received tradition. This tradition, according to the kabbalists, was handed down through the generations by word of mouth, beginning with Moses, who received it directly from God. It was eventually set down in writing, according to these same kabbalists, by a second-century rabbi in the Land of Israel. His name was Shimon bar Yoḥai. A member of the fraternity who laid the foundations for modern Judaism, he is quoted frequently in the early rabbinic literature. However, there is no mention in this literature of the book he is supposed to have written, in which he explicated Moses's oral tradition. This book was lost, or deliberately concealed, for over a thousand years. It eventually surfaced in the thirteenth century, bearing the name Zohar, in the Castile region of Spain.

The mystery of what happened to the Zohar during its years of concealment is, to historians and rationalists, no mystery at all. They believe it only 'appeared' in the thirteenth century, because that is when it was written. They believe it was attributed to Shimon bar Yoḥai by its medieval authors, in order to provide it with a venerable prestige.

Of all the many Kabbalistic books, the Zohar is by far the most important. The questions of who wrote it, where it came from and whether it really is the product of an ancient revealed tradition

are all secondary to the impact that the book has had on the development of Kabbalah.

The Zohar is a gigantic tome that meanders between stories, parables, metaphors, mystical allusions and metaphysical speculation. It is a compelling, if lengthy, book to read. Yet beneath the captivating romance of its narrative lie the mystical outlines of Kabbalah, ideas which were elaborated upon and systematised by devotees over succeeding decades. As time went by Kabbalah became more intricate, its concepts more abstruse, its terminology more complex, its allusions more daring.

The world of the Zohar and its kabbalists was small and secluded. It stayed that way for over 200 years. Then, in the space of just five years, two unconnected events took place, after which Kabbalah could never be the same again. In 1492, the closed world of the kabbalists was ruptured when the Jews were expelled from Spain together with their Kabbalah. Around the same time, in Renaissance Florence, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola extracted Kabbalah from its Jewish context, proclaiming it a universal science whose true importance was not to Judaism but to Christianity. Pico's scholarship marked the beginning of Christian Cabala.

From that moment, Kabbalah dwelt in two distinct, disconnected worlds. In Christian Europe it became the source of arcane hints designed to support the principles of Christianity. Later, Christian Cabala was utilised to buttress new, emerging systems of thought. As a putative natural science it contributed to Enlightenment philosophy, its occult nature underpinned the dissident beliefs of nineteenth-century supernaturalists and as a tool for self-development it fuelled much of the esotericism of the twenty-first-century New Age.

Christian Cabala influenced the scientific outlook of men like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Isaac Newton, albeit negatively in the latter case. Its symbols and motifs found their way into the literature of Spenser, Marlowe and perhaps even Shakespeare.² The angelic ranks and demonic hierarchies of Milton's *Paradise Lost* are drawn directly from its mythology; John Locke investigated it when formulating his political philosophy. Most

spectacularly, Christian Cabala became allied with magic, Hermeticism, alchemy and lesser arts within the occult galaxy, to inspire devout, misunderstood magicians like Cornelius Agrippa and John Dee. Controversially, Kabbalah and the concealed arts strode side by side into the twentieth century, at the heels of the infamous Aleister Crowley.

While Christian Cabala was forging new paths, Jewish mystical fraternities in the northern Israel city of Safed were pushing at classical Kabbalah's boundaries, seeking a theology to explain their nation's traumatic exile. Scarred by the Spanish expulsion yet with their cultural horizons expanded through sojourns in Turkey, North Africa and the European Mediterranean, the Safed kabbalists embarked on a reappraisal of their mystical doctrine. Their work reached its peak in the thought of Isaac Luria, who saw earthly exile as merely a consequence of a far greater dislocation that had taken place in the divine realms above. This dislocation, the drama of heavenly exile in Luria's theory, was a necessary act, essential for the creation of the world. Isaac Luria became as important to the future of Jewish Kabbalah as Pico della Mirandola had been to its Christian offspring. Significantly, or not, both men died at a very young age.

The approach of modernity did nothing to lessen Kabbalah's appeal to the dreams and fantasies of the masses, or to diminish its disruptive potential. A messianic crisis rooted in Kabbalah rocked the Jewish world in the seventeenth century. Its repercussions could be felt across Europe; they still reverberate today. A hundred years later Kabbalah was instrumental in creating Hasidism, the most vibrant, yet anti-modern of all Jewish religious movements.

Kabbalah became fashionable in the late twentieth century. The Kabbalah Centre, famous in its heyday for its celebrity devotees, formulated Kabbalistic responses and techniques to address the aspirations, stresses and traumas of modern life. Buffeted by accusations of cultism, sexual offences and financial misdemeanours, its short history has been rocky. It has won

praise and criticism in roughly equal measure; as has all Kabbalah throughout its history.

Today, Kabbalah exists in many incarnations, and is taught from many perspectives. Its story is far from over. I have tried in this book to provide a flavour of its history so far.

A vast amount has been written on the Kabbalah. There are many guides aimed at lay people, the best of which offer an accessible introduction to the principles and theory of Kabbalah. Yet the great majority of the literature is highly specialised and technical, inaccessible to a general readership, frequently mystifying even to those who have immersed themselves in the subject for years.

A critical approach to Kabbalah is taken by the academic community. Scholarly researchers come at the subject from many different angles. Some look at how particular ideas developed by examining their historical setting or external influences. Others explore the social structure of Kabbalistic communities, and the environments in which they flourished. Still others seek to identify previously unknown mystical circles, investigate the literary structure of Kabbalist texts or review how Kabbalah has influenced the life and thought of those beyond its borders.

I have taken a slightly different approach. Rather than being a book about what Kabbalah is or how different variants and theories emerged, I have chosen to discuss what happened to Kabbalah, looking at milestones in Kabbalah's history and its key interactions with the external world. I have written it for anyone who thinks that the history of Kabbalah might be interesting, interesting enough at least to spend a few hours reading about it. It is an unusual history, and one well worth pondering.

Although the academic study of Kabbalah is as much a part of its history as everything else, I have not devoted a separate chapter to the subject's many scholars. This book is based, in large measure, on the research, theories and conclusions of the academic community, as referenced in the footnotes and bibliography. I hope that conveying their insights to the best of my ability is the most appropriate

way of expressing their contribution to Kabbalah's history. I have frequently had to choose between competing academic theories, but I trust that for the most part I have remained close to whatever consensus may be said to prevail among the scholarly community. All errors and infelicities in the text are, of course, mine.

Kabbalah's popularity today was never a foregone conclusion. It has always had opponents who ridiculed and vilified it. Even today there are many who look with suspicion upon what they term pop-Kabbalah or Kabbalah-lite, who mock the mystically absorbed, closed world of the devout religious kabbalists, or who scorn the whole subject as superstition. Such views might indeed be correct: it is not the purpose of this book to persuade you otherwise. Like all religious beliefs, Kabbalah may be irrational; it is certainly not an empirically validated science. But the bigger point surely isn't whether or not Kabbalah is superstition, but whether it works for those who practise it. Provided, of course, it is not used to exploit the vulnerable or to justify unethical practices, a charge which has been levelled against some practitioners of the art in recent times.

Kabbalah today is practised on many levels. There are those for whom it is a real, everyday part of their highly devout lives. There are others who live contemporary lifestyles, yet at times of crisis or moments of life-changing significance may go to one of these devout kabbalists for an amulet or a blessing. Many people who read and study Kabbalah regard it as a tool that helps them to successfully navigate life in the twenty-first century. Kabbalah in the contemporary world can be approached in so many different ways that nobody, even the most conventional of classical kabbalists, can claim their perspective is the real thing, that they have sole rights to Kabbalah's genuine expression. As this book tries to make clear, there have been so many different incarnations of Kabbalah, existing side by side for so long, that it is meaningless to speak of authenticity.

Even before I began to write this book it was clear that the field of Kabbalah is so wide, and that its history has included so many

personalities of note, that it would not be possible to include everything and everyone within the overview I was planning. As a result, many significant kabbalists do not get a mention at all; others only receive a few words. Of course, every thinker makes their mark. But unless that mark has moved the story of Kabbalah forward in some significant way, the chances are that, for reasons of space and readability, I have not been able to include them. If your favourite Kabbalist does not receive a mention in the text I can only apologise. Even deeply profound insights, however uniquely expressed, do not always result in significant historical development.

One of the problems when writing about a subject heavily rooted in a foreign language, as Kabbalah is in Hebrew, is how to deal with the technical jargon. I have tried wherever possible to use English equivalents for Hebrew concepts, names and even book titles. But, remarkably, some ideas are more intelligible when expressed in their original Hebrew than in an English translation. The *sefirot* – a fundamental principle of Kabbalistic theory – are a good example. There is no English word which even comes close to providing an adequate translation. So I have included a glossary for easy reference when a translation has appeared to be inadequate.

Using words in their original language gives rise to the problem of transliteration, how to deal with letters in the original language that have no equivalent in the target tongue. There are two letters in Hebrew which sound like the 'ch' in the Scottish word loch. One is softer than the other and neither is satisfactorily rendered by the letters 'ch', usually pronounced as in cheese. I have chosen to follow a convention that renders the harder pronunciation by 'ch' and the softer by 'ḥ', i.e. with a dot under the 'h'. Unless, that is, the word is commonly used in English, in which case I have followed the usual spelling. For example, Hasid and not Ḥasid.

All Kabbalistic systems are complex and I have not discussed them in any greater detail than is necessary to get across the historic points. Nevertheless, there are times when it has been necessary to refer to basic Kabbalistic ideas, otherwise the topic might make no sense at all. I have therefore included a very short appendix

outlining the key principles of the theory of the *sefirot*, the most fundamental of all Kabbalistic principles. This is not designed to replace any of the excellent guides to Kabbalah that already exist – it is far too short and incomplete. But it may be of some use in understanding some of the discussions in the book.

The Origins of Kabbalah

‘DO NOT CRY “WATER, WATER”’

A story is told of four men who entered the *Pardes*. Nobody knows for sure what the *Pardes* was, but the word in Persian means a garden. The story, however, is not about a visit to a garden; it is an account of a mystical journey to the heavenly spheres. The word *Pardes* is the origin of our word Paradise.

The four men lived at the end of the first century. The most famous was Akiva, best known of all the rabbis of the Talmud, the great Jewish compendium of law and ethics. His companions were ben Azzai, ben Zoma and Elisha ben Abuya. Ben is not a name, it means ‘the son of’.

When they entered the *Pardes*, ben Azzai looked (at what, we do not know) and died. Ben Zoma looked and was ‘afflicted’. Elisha ben Abuya looked and ‘cut the shoots’, meaning he abandoned his faith.¹ Only Akiva entered in peace and came out in peace.² It is a very short story.

It’s likely that Akiva had made the trip before, and that his three companions were novices. He was the only one who took care not to look, and in one version of the story he even warned the others against it. His warning, however, was too opaque: ‘When you get to the stones of pure marble,’ he said, ‘do not cry “water, water”, for one who speaks falsehood will not endure’³. Clearly his companions didn’t understand what he meant.

This tale is well known because it is one of a very small number of episodes in early mainstream Jewish literature that deal with the occult. Death and madness befalling travellers in a mysterious place give it a sort of malign appeal, a fascination not unlike that of a ghost story told around the campfire. The story appears in the Talmud as a justification for the religious ban on occult speculation.⁴ It is a cautionary tale, to warn people of the dangers of dabbling in things they don't understand.

Akiva's warning 'do not cry "water, water"' is puzzling. The Talmud doesn't explain it, but there is no reason why it should; it is only reciting the story as a cautionary tale. But Akiva's exclamation starts to make sense when we step away from the Talmud and examine alternative versions of the legend that appear elsewhere. Notably, in a collection of little-known, often incomprehensible and frequently confused mystical texts which discuss the very things the Talmud is warning against.

Composed between the third and ninth centuries, these texts describe the experiences of Jewish mystics trying to undertake journeys to the palaces of heaven. We don't know what sort of people these mystics were, nor are we ever told why they were prepared to go through the rigorous mental training and physical deprivation necessary for these journeys of the soul. What we are told is that once they are temporarily freed from the constraints of their physical bodies, they become endowed with profound, prophetic insight; an insight which disappears when they return to their natural state. Prompted by curiosity, their journeys are a quest for understanding what lies beyond. And a scientific experiment to test the powers of the human soul.

Invariably men and always anonymous, the voyagers' only memorial is contained in these texts, many of which were hidden away and lay undiscovered for over a thousand years. In one document we read that when a seeker arrives at the gate to the sixth heavenly palace – there are seven altogether – he is deluged by an overpowering sensation, as if thousands, millions and billions of waves of water are crashing into him, submerging him, sweeping him away. Yet in reality there is not even one drop of liquid there.

It's all an illusion caused by the shimmering, shining marble slabs with which the palace is tiled. Crystal-clear and shimmering to the point of fluidity, the marble has the appearance of rushing water.⁵ Yet, as Akiva warns, don't be fooled; the slabs are not water. Falsehood, even when just the result of a misunderstanding, cannot endure in heaven, where all is Truth.

THE WORK OF THE CHARIOT

The texts containing these accounts of heavenward voyages are known today as *hechalot*, or Palace, literature. They are a hotchpotch of many different texts, composed over several centuries, many of which have only survived in incomplete or even garbled form. They are Jewish mystical texts, but they are not yet what we would call Kabbalah; it will be several centuries before that name comes into use. Neither are they the earliest example of Jewish mystical writing; starting in the third century BCE seers had composed descriptions of heaven and hell, terrified their readers with apocalyptic visions and forewarned them of the events due to take place at the end of time. The book of Revelation in the New Testament, although a Christian text, is among the last of the genre, and, of course, the best known.

Although the Palace texts are not Kabbalah, they are the beginning of its history, marking the first significant step in the three-thousand-year evolution of Kabbalistic thought. Up to this point, from the earliest books of the Bible onwards, all mystical revelations had been granted by God and the angels to humans of their choosing, even if they hadn't asked to be chosen. The Palace literature marks the moment when people stopped hoping for a revelation from above and set out for themselves to snatch a glimpse of heaven. It signals the moment they began constructing esoteric rituals, often involving severe ascetic deprivation, with the intention of discovering what goes on within the celestial spheres.⁶

It is in the Bible, of course, that the first divine visions are granted. The early books of the Old Testament frequently speak of encounters between people and God. Adam and Eve, Cain,

Noah, Abraham, Moses and many others have conversations with their Creator. Even the serpent in the Garden of Eden is spoken to, though considering the punishment he received he would probably rather have been ignored. Still, he was no ordinary snake, as the later Kabbalah will make clear. But for all the visions, and the many descriptions of God, the Bible is remarkably coy about where, if anywhere, he dwells. Yes, it tells us that there is a place called heaven, and that it is in the sky. The builders of the Tower of Babel try unsuccessfully to reach it. Moses ascends the mountain to meet God, who has descended from above towards him. Together with the elders, Moses sees a sapphire pavement beneath the Almighty's feet.⁷ But neither Moses nor indeed anyone else in the early parts of the Bible gets a look inside heaven; or at least they don't tell us if they do.

The first descriptions of heaven occur in the books of the Prophets. Isaiah, who lived some time before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 BCE, has a vision of God sitting on a throne, dressed apparently in a flowing robe, the train of which 'filled the Temple'. Six-winged, fiery angels, known as seraphim, stood in attendance; when they proclaimed God's holiness their voices were so loud that the doorposts shook and the building filled with smoke.⁸

Isaiah's description of his vision was the earliest recorded glimpse of what the inside of heaven looked like. But it was the later prophet Ezekiel who provided much more detail of what a visitor was likely to see upon arrival at the heavenly gates.

Unlike Isaiah, Ezekiel lived after the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. With his compatriots he lived as a refugee by the rivers of Babylon, where they dreamed of their return to Zion and the reconstruction of their Temple. The latter part of Ezekiel's book is taken up with a detailed description of what he believed the rebuilt Temple would look like. His blueprint for the building was based upon what he saw in prophetic visions. In the very first chapter of his book he tells us that while he was sitting by the river, the skies opened, a whirlwind raged from the north and in the midst of cloud, flame and lightning, heaven appeared.

Ezekiel saw four winged creatures, flashing with fire and crackling with ionic charge. Each creature had four faces: of a human, an ox, an eagle and a lion. The creatures moved on wheels turning within other wheels, the circumference of their rims studded with eyes. The whole construction was joined together as one piece; its life force was in its wheels and whichever direction it proceeded, it was always heading forwards. When it moved, the beat of the creatures' wings sounded like a tempest of rushing waters, like the tumult of an army swelling to an almighty crescendo. When it paused, the wings subsided. Linked by their wings, the four creatures and their wheels formed the base of a sapphire throne, or Chariot, above which Ezekiel perceived an indescribable presence that he called Divine Glory.⁹

Later, Ezekiel had another vision. This time God lifted him up by his hair, suspended him between earth and heaven, and showed him the Jerusalem Temple in a state of desecration. Ezekiel referred to the Temple by the name *hechal*, the same word that Isaiah used for the heavenly palace in his vision. Isaiah's vision of heaven and Ezekiel's of the desecrated Jerusalem Temple are connected by the word *hechal*, or palace. The idea of a heavenly Jerusalem, or of the Temple as a representation of heaven on earth, which figures so prominently in later Christian and Jewish thought, begins in the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel.

Although we might consider it odd to associate heaven with a mere palace or even a temple, with all their physical limitations and architectural peculiarities, in the ancient world such a description made complete sense. In ancient times some gods were regarded as little more than superhuman kings; in several cases kings even became gods. Ezekiel quotes the Egyptian Pharaoh, an earthly king if ever there was one, as claiming to have created the river Nile.¹⁰ Neither Isaiah nor Ezekiel thought of Israel's God in this way. But it was natural for them to speak of him in royal terms.

The Jerusalem Temple was soon rebuilt, though Ezekiel did not live to see it. It survived for half a millennium, until the year 70 CE, when once again it was reduced to rubble, on this occasion by the Romans. This time it was not speedily rebuilt. All that remained of

it for the Jews was a yearning, a longing for its restoration at some unspecified time in the future.

Most people expressed their yearning through prayer and repentance. But some went further. Yearning with as much passion as anyone else, they metaphorically rebuilt the Jerusalem Temple. Since circumstances demanded that it could no longer be built on earth, and as they were familiar by now with the idea of a heavenly Temple, they thrust the Jerusalem Sanctuary, so to speak, into the skies and subsumed it into its ineffable counterpart. Unable to make a pilgrimage to the Temple on earth, the mystically inclined sought a route by which they could ascend to its heavenly paradigm.

Ezekiel's experience provided the impetus for their journey to heaven. Although the indescribable, divine presence which the prophet saw in his vision was beyond all contemplation, what captured the imagination of those aspiring to ascend to the empyrean regions was his vision of the heavenly Chariot. The *hechalot* texts repeatedly describe attempted ascents to the Chariot. But, as if to protect themselves from the malign attention of evil spirits, who are always on the lookout for unsuspecting, questing travellers, those who tried to reach the Chariot never called it an ascent. The upwards journey to the heavenly Chariot is always referred to as a descent. Demons, as we all know, can be fooled by the simplest of tricks.

Descent to the Chariot could only be achieved in a state of the utmost purity. One text prescribes a regime far beyond anything we are likely to want to try today. The adept was required to fast for 40 days (perhaps eating at night, this isn't made clear). Each day he immersed himself 24 times in a river, lake or ritual bath. For all this time he was to sit in a dark house and not look at a woman.¹¹ Only when he had been through all that was he ready to lay his head between his knees, as Elijah had done when conjuring up rain,¹² and recite the incantations that would allow him to pass through the seven heavens that lay between him and the Chariot.

The journey was fraught with danger; it was never taken in isolation. Before a voyager attempted a mystical ascent, his colleagues would attend his physical body, to record his experiences

and haul him back to safety if something went wrong. On one occasion a well-travelled voyager was giving an account to his students of the perils that may befall those who were not worthy. But he was unable to explain why some travellers were attacked and not others. The students implored him to call back his own teacher, the venerable sage Neḥunyah ben Hakannah, who was at the time on his own journey to the Chariot, so that he could throw light on the matter.

They brought Neḥunyah back by the simple device of exposing his body to a ritually unclean rag, making him too impure to remain in heaven. Such a technique may well have been used as a safety net for anyone whose introspection had gone on dangerously long. On his return Neḥunyah told them that an attack may happen to a worthy traveller if his entourage, the scribes and companions who sat by him to record his experiences, was not of an acceptable standard. It seems that, rather like an astronaut today, travellers to the Chariot needed a home-based support team of worthy people.

But even with the best backup in place, passing through the heavens was never easy. Every heavenly palace was zealously guarded by gatekeepers, charged with keeping out unworthy intruders. To get past each gatekeeper, the voyager needed to present the appropriate set of magical seals. Constructed from secret names and stacked, like pillars of fire, at the base of the Chariot, the seals could only be acquired by a voyager who, before setting off on his travels, had familiarised himself with the multiplicity of divine and angelic names. When hoping to obtain a seal, the mystic had to recite the correct names for the one he wanted, interspersing his recitation with the corresponding incantations and hymns.

These angelic names, which occur in endless lists in the Palace literature, are often unpronounceable. Sometimes they look like meaningless, random strings of consonants. But they were packed with meaning for the mystical initiate. Every letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value and the complex names bear some sort of mathematical relationship to the occult power to which they relate. The nature of these relationships and their associated powers

would have been obvious to a heavenly wayfarer, even if they are completely opaque to us.

Collecting the seals consumed a vast amount of spiritual energy, a commodity which the voyager had amassed during his weeks of mental preparation, but which was rapidly consumed as the journey progressed. As the journey proceeded, so the required energy increased. The route became increasingly dangerous. It was all too easy to fail. We have already seen what happened to Akiva's companions who mistook marble for water at the gateway to the sixth heaven. The entrance to the seventh palace was even more terrifying:

And at the door of the seventh palace arise and stand angry all the warriors, strong, mighty, powerful, harsh, fearful, terrifying, taller than mountains and sharper than hills. Their bows are ready and aimed; swords sharpened and in their hands. Lightning flashes and streams from the balls of their eyes, and balls of fire from their nostrils and torches of burning coals from their mouths. They are girded with helmets and armour, and javelins and spears are hung upon their arms. Their horses are horses of darkness, horses of the shadow of death, horses of deep gloom, horses of fire, horses of hail, horses of iron, horses of fog ...¹³

This passage comes from *Hechalot Rabbati*, or Great Palaces, a book written in the fifth or sixth century, which describes a series of journeys through the seven heavens. Its principal hero is the second-century Rabbi Ishmael. *Hechalot Rabbati* makes constant use of his name, but in fact the book has nothing to do with him. One of the most frustrating aspects of ancient Near Eastern literature is that its authors often concealed their identity, and that of their heroes. Instead they attributed their works and deeds to well-known, but long-dead, personalities. They may have done so from modesty, or perhaps to enhance the prestige or credibility of their new composition, or simply because that was what an author was expected to do. The result is that we can never be

certain who the authors of the early Chariot texts were, nor do we know anything about the actual people who undertook these perilous, supernatural (or, depending on how you look at it, hallucinatory) adventures. We are fortunate that some of their texts have survived. However, the true identities and lives of those who descended to the Chariot are a complete mystery to us. This is particularly unusual because in many other respects we are fairly well informed about Jewish life during the first 500 years of the Common Era.

Hiding their identities behind earlier rabbinic giants, and leaving only their language and style as a clue to the provenance of their texts, means that we cannot even say with certainty whether these mystics were active members of mainstream society, or whether they had withdrawn into obscure, isolated sects, the sort of oddball communities with which the history of all religions is dotted. All we can say is that, despite being unknown for several hundred years, eventually Chariot mysticism broke out of its shell. The ninth-century Aharon of Baghdad, of whom we shall hear more shortly, was familiar with it, as was the tenth-century historian Sherira Gaon.¹⁴ We can push the dates back even earlier; some of the Jewish liturgical poetry composed in the seventh and eighth centuries contains motifs which are clearly drawn from the Chariot texts.¹⁵ By the end of the first millennium, people in the principal centres of Jewish life had certainly heard of Chariot mysticism. But it is mentioned so infrequently in the wider religious literature of the time that it was almost certainly a minority activity. As mysticism has always been.

The principal heroes of the Palace literature are two of the Talmud's most prominent rabbis, Ishmael and Akiva. They both lived centuries before the Palace texts were composed and there is no clear indication from their own time that they really did engage in ecstatic adventuring. Even the story about Akiva's entry into the *Pardes* was first written down a century after his death. There must have been something about Akiva's personality that encouraged later generations to treat him as a mystical role model. But, at this distance, it is not easy to explain what that was.

Ishmael's presence in the Palace legends is just as hard to explain. Some sources confuse him with another Ishmael, a High Priest who did have mystical experiences.¹⁶ It is this confusion which led our Ishmael to be regarded as a mystical voyager par excellence. But there is no contemporaneous evidence at all that Ishmael of the Talmud, Akiva's colleague, had mystical proclivities.

Indeed, far from regarding them as mystical companions, the Talmud presents Akiva and Ishmael as intellectual opponents. They differed markedly regarding the nature of the Torah. As far as Akiva was concerned, every word, letter, jot and tittle in the sacred text is of religious significance; no ink of holy writ was ever wasted. This expansive view allowed him to read far more into the text than the less romantic Ishmael, whose mantra was 'the Torah speaks in human language'.¹⁷ Akiva was a visionary idealist, Ishmael a common-sense realist. Notwithstanding the *Pardes* story, neither appears in the Talmud as a mystic; their trade was the application of logical principles to biblical interpretation. A time would come, many centuries later, when there would be no conflict between logic and mysticism; when a Talmudic sage could switch between rational analysis and mystical speculation with little more than a tug of his beard. But at this early stage, the chances are that their presence in the Palace literature is mythical. In legend even the rationalist can be transformed into a mystic.

Hechalot Rabbati, the text that contains most of the Akiva and Ishmael legends, is a very obscure book, known only to devotees of ancient mysticism. But one passage from it has surfaced in contemporary discography. It is the original version of 'Who By Fire', the song made famous by Leonard Cohen, the great Canadian songwriter-poet who died in 2016. Cohen didn't base his song directly on *Hechalot Rabbati*; his is a rewrite of a later version, a synagogue hymn that anticipates the coming New Year. *Who will live*, asks the hymn, *and who will die? Who in their due time and who not in their due time? Who by water and who by fire? ...* The poem continues in this vein, ending with the couplet *Who will be brought low, and who will be made high?*

Hechalot Rabbati's older version, which Leonard Cohen may also have known, begins with the couplet that concluded the hymn. *Who will be brought low, and who will be made high?* The book's author, pretending to be Rabbi Ishmael, continues, *Who will be weakened and who will be strong? Who will be impoverished and who will be rich?* ... His final pair of opposites is *Who will inherit Torah, and to whom will be given Wisdom?* Wisdom, according to this view, is the elite property of the mystic. Torah, meaning religious study, which traditionally is considered the highest form of learning, comes a poor second. For the author of *Hechalot Rabbati* the acquisition of Wisdom is the only fitting consequence of the difficult and dangerous journey through the seven heavens to the Chariot.

THE PRINCE OF THE PRESENCE

Of the numerous angelic names recorded in the various books of Palace literature, the best known was that of Metatron. Prince of the Divine Presence, he was the senior angel in the entire empyrean constellation and of a wholly different nature from all his colleagues. For, uniquely among the divine beings, Metatron had once been human. His earthly name had been Enoch; he is recorded in the book of Genesis as the son of Jared and the father of Methuselah, the man famous in the Bible for living longer than anyone else. Unlike his father and his son, however, Enoch did not die. The Bible says as much: 'Enoch walked with God and was not, for God took him'¹⁸. This intriguing sentence was enough to spawn dozens of myths and legends about the immortal Enoch. It even gave rise to its own genre of literature. At least three books ascribed to (but not actually composed by) Enoch were written between the second century B C E and the sixth C E. The third book, naturally entitled 3 Enoch, is a classic of the Palace literature.

The angels grumbled when Enoch was brought into heaven and transformed into Metatron. According to 3 Enoch, Metatron himself told Rabbi Ishmael that Prince Anapiel had been sent to fetch him from the midst of humanity. When he was still 3,650 million parasangs¹⁹ away from heaven (about ten million

miles), the heavenly beings smelled his odour. ‘What is this smell of one born of woman?’ they demanded. ‘Why does a white drop²⁰ ascend on high and serve amongst those who cleave amongst the flames?’

God pacified the rebellion. ‘Do not be displeased at this,’ he commanded, ‘for all mankind has rejected me and my great kingdom and gone off and worshipped idols. This one whom I have removed from them is the choicest of them all. This one whom I have taken is my sole reward from my whole world under heaven.’²¹ The legend is concise and direct. Enoch, to whom the Hebrew Bible devotes just nine words, and of whose actions it says nothing, has been transformed into the most righteous of all people, by sole virtue of the fact that he ‘walked with God and God took him’. This tendency to mythologise, to construct narratives behind the façade of people long departed, or who perhaps never lived at all, is an indispensable feature of Chariot mysticism.

Metatron’s role in heaven was to act as an intermediary between God and humanity. Like all heavenly beings he has many names and titles, depending upon the particular power he is tasked with using.

Huge chunks of the Palace literature are taken up with dialogues between Rabbi Ishmael and Metatron, in one of his various guises. In one encounter, in which Metatron is ministering under the name Suriyel, Ishmael complains that the Romans had sentenced ten leading rabbis to death and were holding four others for ransom. (Confusingly, Ishmael himself is listed as one of the four hostages.) Suriyel hears Ishmael’s complaint and reassures him that the Almighty has decreed vengeance against Rome; clouds will overhang the city, infecting the inhabitants with a variety of unpleasant skin diseases: scabs, leprosy, pox and scalls. Then, when the plague has fully run its course, the city’s ruler Lupinus Caesar (an emperor only known to the Jewish mystical literature) will be destroyed, together with his palace and all the city’s inhabitants.²²

The story goes on. On the evening before the rabbis are due to be executed, Suriyel snatched Emperor Lupinus from his bed and put him to sleep in a pigsty. He then took one of the condemned rabbis and placed him in Lupinus’s bed. He swapped their appearances so

that the emperor, still in his pigsty, looked like the rabbi. When the time set for the execution arrived, the emperor's servants, unaware of the switch, walked into the pigsty, grabbed their master and executed him instead of the rabbi.²³

The Metatron myth is more than just the product of a fertile imagination. Concealed beneath the surface are traces of a foreign, Dualist influence that found its way into early Jewish mysticism. In the simplest version of this belief, the universe was created by a supreme god who then handed over executive control to a minor deity.

Some Dualists believed that the minor deity had actually seized power from the supreme god, and used it to introduce evil into the world. These Dualists, whom we call *gnostics*, saw their task as gaining the mystical knowledge, or *gnosis*, that would defeat the lesser god and restore the Supreme Being to his pre-eminent status. Some scholars, notably Gershom Scholem, the outstanding twentieth-century pioneer of Kabbalah studies, suggest a close connection between Gnosticism and ancient Jewish mysticism.

The Dualist influence shows itself clearly in this passage from *Hechalot Rabbati*.

Said Rabbi Akiva: I heard a voice issuing from beneath the Throne of Glory. And what did it say? 'I have recognised him, I have taken him, I have appointed him – this is Enoch son of Jared whose name is Metatron. I have taken him from among the children of men, and I made a throne for him opposite my throne. And what is the size of that throne? 40,000 myriads of parasangs of fire. I handed him seventy angels, corresponding to the seventy nations, and I put him in charge of all my servants in the world above and all my servants in the world below, and I called him the Lesser Lord²⁴'.

Rationalists are horrified by passages like this. The idea that Metatron had been elevated beyond any conventional angelic rank, to a dangerously high, quasi-divine status, reeks of Dualism. It lends credence to Scholem's theory.

To hedge against the possibility that Metatron might be considered a divine being, the Talmudic rabbis constructed a counter-narrative. They composed a postscript to the story about the four who entered the *Pardes*. It was just as fanciful as the vision attributed to Rabbi Akiva, but it served to put Metatron in his place.

The postscript concerns Elisha ben Abuye, one of Akiva's companions on the journey to the *Pardes*. As he wandered through the heavenly halls Elisha saw Metatron, in all his archangelic glory, sitting and writing. Like all rabbinic scholars, Elisha was familiar with the long-held belief that angels did not sit; to do so would be unseemly in the divine presence. Since this radiant being was sitting, it could only mean, to Elisha's mind, that Metatron was a sovereign of far greater importance than a mere angel. Perhaps, he thought, there are two divinities in heaven.

Even to contemplate this Dualist possibility was untarnished heresy. But in the eyes of the heavenly host the guilty party was not Elisha. By allowing himself to be seen sitting in heaven, Metatron had committed a cardinal offence: he had caused Elisha to stumble in error. The heavenly militia seized Metatron. 'Why did you not stand when you saw him?' they demanded. They flayed him with 60 lashes of fire.²⁵ Metatron, like everybody else in the divine retinue, was obliged to play by heaven's rules; he too was a servant. The rationalist rabbis who composed the story could just about tolerate his presence in heaven. They could never allow him to acquire quasi-divine status.

THE DIVINE BODY

Those mystics who descended to the Chariot assumed that heaven was a physical place. They had no difficulty in thinking of God as having an actual body. After all, the Bible referred to God in corporeal terms; time and again in biblical narratives God saw, spoke and heard, he even stretched out his arm or smote with his finger. His right hand was 'mighty in power'.²⁶ Rabbinic literature from the same era as the Palace texts described God physically, although

generally suggesting that such descriptions were metaphors and not to be taken literally.²⁷

Not everyone was comfortable with these physical descriptions. In one strand of the tradition, the insistence that God had no physical form began taking root as early as the second century; the Aramaic translations of the Bible always found alternative, non-physical ways of expressing terms such as 'God spoke'.²⁸ By the end of the fifth century Augustine had all but won the battle in Christianity against anthropomorphic belief. In Judaism the dispute rumbled on for another 700 years. Even in the twelfth century, the talmudist Moses of Taku was still insisting that biblical descriptions of God's body should be taken literally.²⁹ In the opposing camp, Moses Maimonides, the outstanding Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, ruled in his legal code that anyone who believed God had a body or a form was a heretic.³⁰ And although his ceaseless critic, Abraham ben David, complained that Maimonides had no right to call such a person a heretic, since greater and better people than he had genuinely held anthropomorphic views, over the course of time Maimonides's view prevailed. Belief in God's corporeality was eliminated from Jewish thought.³¹ But it always remained something of an issue in mystical speculation.

The Palace literature of the fifth to seventh centuries certainly had no misgivings about the physicality of heaven, or of God. Akiva heard a voice announce that Metatron had been given a throne as large as 70,000 parasangs of fire. A parasang is the distance that a person can walk in an hour. Presumably, a parasang of fire is the distance that a conflagration will travel in the same time, a concept similar to that of a light year. The speed that fire travels on earth depends on what is burning, and in what circumstances, but in heaven such considerations do not apply. Heavenly fire is bound to be fast and a celestial parasang will be far further than a person might walk. Metatron's throne occupies billions, perhaps even trillions of miles.

Big numbers occur frequently in the ancient world. The seventy thousand myriads of Metatron's throne is small fry compared to some of the numbers in Vedic, Mahayana and even Greek computations,

which at times exceed 10 to the power of 80, the number of atoms in the universe.³² It is also small compared to some of the numbers in one of the strangest books in the corpus of early Jewish mystical literature. Known as the *Shiur Komah*, or the Measure of Stature, the book describes the dimensions and proportions of God's body.

Like nearly all mystical literature of the period, *Shiur Komah* has not been preserved in a single authoritative version. Manuscripts, in the age before printing, were copied and recopied. Each time a manuscript was copied, errors and inaccuracies crept in. Sometimes the scribe was clumsy and missed out bits, or was careless and jumbled up the order of sentences and paragraphs. Sometimes manuscripts were 'corrected' by people who thought they knew better, or had their own ideas they wanted to add; these 'corrections' might then be inadvertently included as part of the main text in subsequent copies. At other times, readers might scribble notes in the margins; these, too, could be mistaken by a later scribe as part of the text. For one reason or another, the various texts of *Shiur Komah* differ considerably from each other and, although it has been suggested that a particular manuscript in the British Library represents the original text,³³ the only thing about which we can be certain is that, whichever version we look at, *Shiur Komah* is not a scintillating read.

The book presents itself as a revelation from Metatron. At times he addresses Ishmael, on other occasions he speaks to Akiva. Metatron announces the secret, mystical names for each of God's limbs and gives colossal measurements for each one. The names are obscure, unpronounceable and incomprehensible. The measurements, expressed in millions and billions of divine parasangs, which, as we have seen, are themselves impossibly larger than human parasangs, suggest divine limbs far exceeding the size of the universe. In one text the soles of God's feet alone are thirty million parasangs high and one parasang is described as ninety thousand times as large as the world.³⁴ Clearly, one is not expected even to contemplate these dimensions. God's height, according to one *Shiur Komah* text, is 236 thousand million parasangs, a number based on the numerical value of the words 'great in strength' in Psalm 147.5.³⁵

It has been suggested that the purpose of *Shiur Komah* may be to obfuscate a passage in the biblical book Song of Songs, in which the heroine describes her lover in affectionate terms: *His head is as the finest gold, his locks are curled, and black as a raven ... His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as banks of sweet herbs; his lips are as lilies, dropping with flowing myrrh.*³⁶ In both Jewish and Christian tradition, the erotic Song of Songs is regarded as an allegory for the love between God and his worshippers. Joseph Dan argues that *Shiur Komah* may well be a rebuke against those who understand the physical description in this allegory too literally;³⁷ don't try to think of God as a beautiful young man, implies the book's author, think of him as an unimaginable being of impossibly large size with an incomprehensible shape and limbs.

Another view is that *Shiur Komah* is not an extraordinary text at all; it simply reflects a trend in ancient Near Eastern literature to aggrandise mystical visions by adducing mathematical data. Howard Jackson quotes an assertion by the fourth-century Syrian philosopher Iamblichus that the size of a divine being is in direct proportion to its power: the bigger it is, the greater its authority. The Alexandrian poet Callimachus, commenting on the size of the statue of Zeus at Olympia, remarks that the size of the god is five cubits higher than the seat of his throne. The author of *Shiur Komah* may well have been influenced by similar ways of thinking. Like Callimachus he is interested in overall height, for this conveys the impression of divine grandeur.³⁸

Whatever its origins, *Shiur Komah* has proved to be the most controversial of all Jewish mystical texts. It is not just that it projects God as a physical being: it has the temerity to reduce his physicality to a set of numbers and seemingly meaningless names. Maimonides regarded it as a Greek forgery, an idolatrous work which should be destroyed and forgotten. Moses of Taku strongly disagreed.³⁹ With hindsight, they were probably both wrong, although, when all is said and done, it is a bizarre document. But at least we understand what it is trying to tell us, even if we don't know why. Which cannot be said with certainty about another early Jewish mystical

book, perhaps the oldest of them all. This one is known as the *Sefer Yetsirah*, or Book of Formation.

THE WORK OF CREATION

Ezekiel's vision of the heavenly throne was the inspiration for those who craved an ecstatic, mystical experience. Here was biblical proof, validated by the words of a prophet, that a human soul could ascend to the ultimate spiritual heights. But, of course, such activity could only be accomplished by souls of profound spiritual status; voyagers to the *merkavah* may not have been prophets of the calibre of Ezekiel, but necessarily they were persons of deep piety and profound sanctity. The heavenly palaces were surely open only to a very few.

Another route was open to those who sought truth but eschewed ascetic discipline. Subject to different passions, they did not yearn for ecstasy. Rather, they were looking for answers. Today we would call them scientists. What captured their imagination was how the world worked and the manner of its formation. The biblical passage that fascinated them was the very first chapter of Genesis, the story of creation. And whereas the vast majority of Jewish mystical texts during the first millennium concentrated on what the Talmud calls the Work of the Chariot, just one document, the *Sefer Yetsirah*, or Book of Formation, focused esoterically on the Work of Creation. It has left people scratching their heads ever since.

A passing remark in the Babylonian Talmud states that two rabbis created and ate a three-year-old calf.⁴⁰ They did this by studying the *Sefer Yetsirah*. One might wonder why, having gone to the trouble of performing such a feat, the two rabbis simply ate the calf. But the Talmud tells us nothing more about it.

This brief reference is the earliest mention of *Sefer Yetsirah*. Several hundred years were to pass before it was mentioned again. When it did resurface, in the tenth century, it was presented by its commentators as a scientific treatise on the creation of the world. Joseph Dan calls it 'the most important work of Hebrew language

and cosmology of the High Middle Ages, influencing centuries of scientists, philosophers and mystics'.⁴⁴

There is little agreement on when the book was written. The *Sefer Yetsirah* mentioned in the Talmud may not be the same as the one which appeared in the tenth century. The book's style is so unique that it does not slot neatly into any other known genre. Its concepts and terminology were adapted and expanded upon by later Kabbalah, but whether or not it can be classed as a mystical book is largely a question of definition.

Opinions on the date of the book's authorship range from the first century to the tenth, with most authorities placing it at the beginning of that range. There are no scholarly views on who wrote it. The only thing that the academics agree on is that traditionalists, who attribute it to Abraham, are incorrect. But traditionalists will argue that the book itself says that Abraham referred to it, and that academics have been wrong before.

The book starts with an explanation of how the world was created, in which it expands the biblical narrative. In the biblical account of creation, in the book of Genesis, God commanded things into existence. Each time he spoke something new was created. The first creation was light, the tenth was humanity. The whole of creation was accomplished in ten acts of speech. We still regard speech as a creative activity; the magical invocation *abracadabra*, a word of Aramaic origin, means 'I create as I speak'.

Speech is the instrument that creates, but speech is made up of words and words are comprised of letters. Letters therefore are the building blocks of creation. The Hebrew alphabet, the biblical language of creation, contains 22 letters. So the world was created through 22 letters and ten acts of speech, 32 elements altogether. The *Sefer Yetsirah* calls each element a path of wisdom. Most of the book is devoted to explaining, in enigmatic language, how these different paths of wisdom combine to ensure the proper functioning of the universe.

Crucially the book makes no distinction between words and numbers. This is because numbers and letters in the Hebrew alphabet are represented by the same symbol. The symbol for the

first letter is also the symbol for the number one, the tenth letter represents number ten. The subsequent letters represent 20 to 90; the count then ascends in hundreds. Every letter has a numerical value, each word aggregates to the sum of its letters and one can perform arithmetical calculations with words, just as with numbers.

The ten commands that God issues at creation are given a special identity in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Rather than calling them commands or sayings, it calls them ‘countings’. Speaking and counting are connected in English, too; the word recount means to count again, or to tell. Someone who counts money in a bank is called a teller.

The Hebrew word that *Sefer Yetzirah* uses for ‘counting’ is *sefira*, plural *sefirot*. It is a word we will come across a lot in this book, as it will eventually become a key term in later Kabbalah, although it will refer to concepts apparently very different from acts of divine speech. But that is for a later chapter. The *Sefer Yetzirah* just wants us to contemplate the idea of *sefirot* as verbal and mathematical commands issued by God to bring the world into being. Not that it provides clear instructions, or makes our task easy:

Ten *sefirot* without substance,⁴² ten and not nine, ten and not eleven, understand in wisdom and be wise in understanding, examine within them and search in them and place each word upon its base and set the Creator on his foundation.⁴³

Understanding these *sefirot* with wisdom, or being wise in them with understanding, is no mean challenge:

Ten *sefirot* without substance, their end is pierced into their beginning and their beginning into their end, as a flame is connected to a coal, for the Master is singular, and he has no second, and before One what can you say?⁴⁴

Later in the book the author introduces the secret properties of each letter, variously attributing powers to them. These powers encompass the whole of the physical and metaphysical worlds,

from the planets in the sky to the orifices of the human face, from the passage of time to human emotion.

He made the letter *Resh* king over Peace and bound a crown to it and joined them one to another, and with them formed Saturn in the universe, Friday in the year and the left nostril in the soul, male and female.⁴⁵

Sefer Yetsirah is completely different from any other Jewish mystical work known to us from the first millennium. The Palace literature is devoted exclusively to ecstatic adventuring, describing journeys through the seven heavens to the divine Chariot, experiencing the mysteries of the heavens and explaining historical events in cosmic terms. In contrast, *Sefer Yetsirah* concerned itself with the mechanics of the creation, how the universe was brought into being. It foreshadowed later Kabbalah, which took over many of its concepts, redefining them as it did so. For, although the quest to experience the mysteries of heaven never fully disappeared, increasingly mystics began to concern themselves with the 'how' rather than the 'what' of the cosmos. In Jewish mysticism, *Sefer Yetsirah* represents the first step on this journey.

One man in particular stands out in this journey. We know very little about him, for he left no great mystical or philosophical works behind. If he had descendants, history has forgotten who they were. He may not even have existed, he may just be a legend. But that doesn't matter, the point is that he *could* have been real. His importance lies in the fact that he was considered to be a transmitter of traditions, a link in the chain. But a supremely significant one as far as the future history of Kabbalah is concerned. His name was Aaron of Baghdad, *Abu Aharon* to his friends.