

WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE KABBALAH

This mystic philosophy, an offshoot of Judaism, has had an immense influence upon the Jewish people for hundreds of years. It took a firm hold of the people in connection with the Messianic movement * and it spread widely with the rise of Chassidism in the eighteenth century.

*** The Kabbalah had a profound influence on the pseudo-Messianic movement of Shabathai Zvi.**

Today there is little interest left among Jews in the Kabbalah. Yet, because of the indelible imprint it left on Judaism, and because much of its mysticism may be likened to Christian mysticism, it is but fitting to devote to it, at least, a short chapter here. *

*** See also chapter on “Literature: Kabbalistic Books**

The word Kabbalah is derived from the Hebrew root Kabbel, which signifies “*to receive.*”

It has been used in a large sense, as comprehending all the explications, maxims and rituals which the Jews have received from their fathers. But it is more often employed to designate a particular species of theology and philosophy.

It is especially that mystical exposition of the Bible and metaphysical speculations concerning God and other beings (angels, etc.) which are found in many Jewish authors, and which are said to have been handed down by secret tradition from the earliest ages.

It has been pretended by its adherents that Moses received it on Mount Sinai, but for various reasons he revealed it to a select few only. Many of the Kabbalistic books were attributed to ancient venerable authorship; for example, there is the book “Raziel” (a name of an angel — meaning “Mystery of God”). This was supposed to be a gift which Adam, the first man, received from the angel by that name. Another book was attributed to the Patriarch Abraham.

The most celebrated of these books are *Sepher Yetsirah* (Book of Creation), and the *Zohar* (Splendor).

The Book of Creation was supposed to have been written by Abraham. Some attributed its authorship to Rabbi Akivah, while the author of the Zohar was said to be Rabbi Shimeon Bar Yochai, a disciple of R. Akivah. These two rabbis, who lived at the time of the Bar Kochvah uprising in the second century a.d., have been considered as great saints and highly venerated. *

*** Thousands of Jews annually visit their graves in Palestine to pray for their intercession before the throne of mercy.**

Literary critics ascribe the appearance of the “Book of Creation” (by an unknown author) to between the seventh and ninth centuries, while the Zohar (the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Pentateuch) was probably written by Moshe de Leon about 1290 a.d. The rise of the Kabbalah took place at the time of the Maimonidean (Rambam) Philosophical controversy in Judaism, and was caused thereby.

The Zohar has exercised a profound influence on late Judaism. The mystics devoted much of their time to the study of this book. Others, for example the Yemenite Jews, have been “reading” it, just as some Jews were reading or “saying” Thillim.

One may find in this book, and Kabbalah as a whole, much of Christian dogma, such as the Trinity, the fall of angels, original sin, eternal punishment of the wicked, and even of the incarnation and deity of the Messiah.

According to Kabbalah the goal of religion and of union with the Creator can be attained not by obeying the Law, nor by philosophical speculation but only through the contemplation of the mystic tradition which goes back to the origins of mankind. It taught that the Infinite One (En-sof) did not create the world directly but that an emanation from Him created the world. From this first emanation there came others — altogether ten in number, or in the language of the Kabbalah, ten “Sephiroth.” By these emanations God clothes Himself in a body and makes Himself visible. By them He communicates with His creatures, and by them He directs the universe.

These ten “Sephiroth,” which have finite and infinite attributes, serve also as intermediaries between Creator and created. God revealed Himself to Israel selecting it as His people to preserve the world. The laws and ceremonies of Judaism have a profound mystical significance. The earthly Temple at Jerusalem had its counterpart in the heavenly Temple. When it was destroyed prayer took its place. Thus prayer is essential to the existence of the world.

The Kabbalah has much to say about the soul and its transmigration but we do not think it worthwhile to enlarge upon it here.

Kabbalah influenced many Christian theologians who sought and found confirmation of Christian dogmas and doctrines in the teachings of Kabbalah, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation of God in Jesus, the fall of the angels, original sin, eternal punishment. (Pope Sixtus, 1471-84, favored the production of Latin translations of various Kabbalah books, to be used in defending the Catholic faith).

Some mystics used, or rather abused, the Kabbalah for “practical” purposes, by applying certain formulae, composed of names of God and angels and the like (meaningless hocus-pocus) in amulets and charms against evil spirits, to avert illness, or to heal it, as a whole to help the bearer of such a Kabbalah talisman or charm to achieve his desires.

Many of the “wonder-rabbis” of the Chassidim were famed for their miracles which were supposedly also performed by such charms. This may have given impetus to the spread of Chassidism, and this also may have been the main cause of its decline and fall.

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