

# FAQ

**FROM THE MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS ARCHIVES (2000-2018)**

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**MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS**  
messianicapologetics.net

# Frequently Asked Questions

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# Abbreviations and Special Terms

The following is a list of abbreviations for reference works and special terms which are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

- ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*  
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*  
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)  
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament  
Ara: Aramaic  
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)  
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)  
b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)  
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.  
BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)  
BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*  
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.  
CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)  
CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)  
CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)  
CJB: *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998)  
CJSB: *Complete Jewish Study Bible* (2016)  
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition  
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls  
EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*  
EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*  
ESV: *English Standard Version* (2001)  
Ger: German  
GNT: *Greek New Testament*  
Grk: Greek  
HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)  
HCSB: *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (2004)  
Heb: Hebrew  
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible  
IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*  
IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*  
ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*  
IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*  
Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)  
JBK: *New Jerusalem Bible-Koren* (2000)  
JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*  
KJV: *King James Version*  
Lattimore: *The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore* (1996)  
LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)  
LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)  
LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)  
LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)  
LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)  
LXX: *Septuagint*  
m. Mishnah  
MT: *Masoretic Text*  
NASB: *New American Standard Bible* (1977)  
NASU: *New American Standard Update* (1995)  
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*  
NEB: *New English Bible* (1970)  
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*  
NETS: *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (2007)  
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*  
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*  
NIV: *New International Version* (1984)  
NJB: *New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic* (1985)  
NJSB: *Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (1999)  
NKJV: *New King James Version* (1982)  
NRSV: *New Revised Standard Version* (1989)  
NLT: *New Living Translation* (1996)  
NT: *New Testament*  
OT: *Old Testament*  
REB: *Revised English Bible* (1989)  
RSV: *Revised Standard Version* (1952)  
t. Tosefta  
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament  
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*  
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*  
TLV: *Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version* (2014)  
TNIV: *Today's New International Version* (2005)  
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*  
UBSHNT: *United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition*  
v(s). *verse(s)*  
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*  
Vul: *Latin Vulgate*  
YLT: *Young's Literal Translation* (1862/1898)  
WMB: *World Messianic Bible* (2020)

# Kabbalah

## What is your opinion of the Jewish Kabbalah?

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, references to Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, and associated writings like the Zohar or Sefer Yetzirah, largely remained contained to the fringe of the broad Messianic community.<sup>1</sup> This is notably not literature which mainstream Biblical scholars, Jewish or Christian, tend to employ in their research, as representing views and ideas from the Biblical period, or even in the four to five centuries following. In the late 2000s and into the 2010s, though, ideas stemming from either Medieval Jewish mysticism or traditional Kabbalistic literature and later offshoots, have become more “mainstream,” as it were. Whereas earlier, it would not be too common for various Messianic Jewish teachers to refer to Jewish mystical literature from the Middle Ages, as somehow paralleling the words and teachings of Yeshua and the Apostles, it is now has become more commonplace in various quarters. Aside from the obvious historical problem of acting like theological or spiritual views from a millennium or more *after* the period of Yeshua and the Apostles were very close to those of Second Temple Judaism—which would be anachronistic—the roots of such spiritual views have not often been approached with a great deal of discernment or trepidation. When one encounters the Jewish Kabbalah, he or she is going into a very dangerous area, which many persons in Judaism itself feel is either irrational, or just flat off limits.

Ideas and concepts originating from Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages, are beginning to spread in some distinct parts of the Messianic community via various teachers and leaders, who are tickling many unsuspecting ears. Jewish mysticism had existed in various “primitive” forms, as there were fringe elements of influence present in Second Temple Judaism, perhaps associated with the ideas of proto- or incipient-Gnosticism (as would have been particularly confronted in Paul’s letter to the Colossians). But while Gnosticism became relatively dormant by the Fourth Century, Jewish mysticism continued to develop and actually became a formalized area of Judaism by the Twelfth Century. *The Jewish Study Bible* notes how

“Kabbalah taught that God was inaccessible through direct experience, and could only be apprehended through emanations of the Godhead; Torah in kabbalistic teaching had a hidden meaning, and meditation on texts was a method of ascent to a mystical vision.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the primary thrusts of Jewish mysticism was to view the Hebrew Scriptures as esoteric, and try to find a hidden meaning behind almost everything. Consequently, many superstitions morphed into what became Kabbalah. “‘Kabbalah’ is the traditional and most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism, especially the forms which it assumed in the Middle Ages from the 12th century onward” (EJ).<sup>3</sup> *Everyman’s Talmud*, a condensed collection of writings from the Jewish Rabbis over the centuries, summarizes,

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<sup>1</sup> A most poignant example of this would be Avi ben Mordechai, *Messiah Volume 3: Understanding His Identity and Teachings Through the Soul of the Torah* (Millennium 7000 Communications, 2001), which blatantly has on its cover an image of the Kabbalistic sefirotic tree. As a testament to this teacher’s personal inconsistency, though, his later volume *Galatians: A Torah-Based Commentary in First-Century Hebraic Context* (Jerusalem: Millennium 7000 Communications, 2005), endorsed a Karaite perspective of the Torah, a definite flip-flop given the hyper-traditionalism and hyper-Talmudism of *Messiah Volume 3*.

<sup>2</sup> Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2132.

<sup>3</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Kabbalah (J. mysticism),” in Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), 10:489.

“The Talmud reveals very clearly a conflict between the pure, rational doctrines of the Bible and the debased beliefs and superstitions which pervaded the world in which the Jews lived. The Scriptures vehemently denounced every kind of magical practice and all attempts to pierce the veil which conceals the future from human men by means of divination. We see several Rabbis, particularly in the early period, waging a brave fight to stem the tide of sorcery which threatened their community, but in vain. In the later period even Rabbis succumbed, and credulity prevailed over faith.”<sup>4</sup>

At first, the study and practice of Kabbalah in Judaism was not popular. It arose during a time in the Middle Ages when superstition and myth saturated much of Europe. While the formalization of Jewish mysticism, for the most part, began in Muslim Spain—where Jews were not as influenced by Christian European superstitions—Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike were nevertheless infected by superstitious beliefs, and mysticism was by no means limited to just Judaism. During this same period, Muslim mysticism, Sufism, also arose, and superstitious beliefs regarding Biblical saints or Biblical characters were affluent throughout Catholicism. As *EJ* notes, “there are elements common to Kabbalah and both Greek and Christian mysticism, and even historical links between them.”<sup>5</sup> While those often practicing some form of mysticism were trying to seek a deeper and more profound experience with God, the way which many went about doing so was largely not only condemned, but explicitly prohibited by Scripture.

During the Twelfth Century, the primary texts and mythos surrounding Kabbalah were formulated. Many of these texts attest to this form of “communicating with God” going all the way back to Abraham, or perhaps even much farther, to prior to the Noahdic Flood. True communion with God is described as something which is simply unattainable by people, and so humans must use esoteric and mystical methods to commune with Him. These include radical re-interpretations of the Scriptures, taking entire portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, perhaps putting pages of the Bible through some kind of numerical chart to determine one’s future, and even using séance-type techniques to communicate with the Higher Power. Certainly, while the study of Jewish mysticism is very complex, when one with a discerning eye looks at some of its practices, immediately the Holy Spirit inside the person should be convicting him or her that this is wrong. Consider this rather forthright description of Kabbalah from *EJ* regarding its origins:

“From the beginning of its development, the Kabbalah embraced an esotericism closely akin to the spirit of Gnosticism, one which was not restricted to instruction in the mystical path but also included ideas on cosmology, angelology, and magic. Only later, and as a result of the contact with medieval Jewish philosophy, the Kabbalah became a Jewish ‘mystical theology,’ more or less systematically elaborated. This process brought about a separation of the mystical, speculative elements from the occult and especially the magical elements, a divergence that at times was quite distinct but was never total....There is no doubt that some kabbalistic circles (including those in Jerusalem up to modern times) preserved both elements in their secret doctrine, which could be acquired by means of revelation or by way of initiation rites” (*EJ*).<sup>6</sup>

This Jewish source sums up what Kabbalah is all about quite well. It says it came out of an esoteric strain of thought “akin to the spirit of Gnosticism,” which “included ideas on cosmology, angelology, and magic.” It says how there are many elements in Kabbalah which come straight from the occult. Does Kabbalah sound like something which would be supported by Scripture, or condemned by Scripture? Would one practicing Kabbalah be subject to the penalty of practicing divination and witchcraft? Certainly, according to Leviticus 20:27 if a person in Ancient Israel became a medium or spiritist, he or she would be subject to the Torah’s capital punishment.

Interestingly enough, within its entry for “Sorcery,” *EJ* indicates how

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp 274-275.

<sup>5</sup> Scholem, “Kaballah (J. mysticism),” in *EJ*, 10:490.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:493.

“While there is no information about the measure of law enforcement in this field in talmudic and pre-talmudic times, it seems certain that this branch of the law fell into disuse in the Middle Ages. Superstitions of all kinds not only flourished and were tolerated, but found their way even into the positive law (see YD 179, *passim*, for at least eight instances). What became known as ‘practical Kabbalah’ is, legally speaking, sorcery at its worst.”<sup>7</sup>

This same entry goes on and says,

“The penal provisions relating to sorcery are a living illustration of the unenforceability of criminal law (whether divine or human) which is out of tune with the practices and concepts of the people. In modern Israel law, witchcraft and related practices are instances of unlawful false pretenses for obtaining money or credit (Penal Law Amendment (Deceit, Blackmail, and Extortion), Law, 5723–1963) (EJ).<sup>8</sup>

While attesting to the fact that proper punishment upon those practicing Kabbalah was not readily enforced in Judaism, it has nevertheless been illegal, within the jurisprudence of the modern State of Israel, to use witchcraft as a means for advancing oneself.

Unfortunately, as today’s Messianic movement continues to develop and work through an entire host of issues—some will accept the teachings of the Jewish Synagogue without question and without discernment, not understanding some of the complexities and diversity of Jewish history (or for that same matter Christian history), and they will have little understanding that Judaism has had its own internal divisions and theological errors just as Christianity. Many who accept the study and practice of Jewish mysticism and/or the Kabbalah as being valid for their “Biblical faith,” have not recognized its highly esoteric, and even occultic origins in places, which are readily documented by Jewish sources.<sup>9</sup> In fact, few realize that when the Chassidic movement arose in Eastern Europe in the Seventeenth Century, that it was opposed as heretical by many of the Jews in Eastern Europe. One of the reasons why it was opposed by the mainline Orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe, was because some of the early Chassidic leaders practiced magic:

“Some 19th-century scholars described modern Hasidism, founded by Israel Ba’al Shem Tov, as a prime example of magic and superstition...[M]any leaders of the hasidic movement believed in magic and practiced it, especially in giving amulets (the Ba’al Shem Tov himself dealt in magic and probably made his living as a popular healer and magician)...” (EJ).<sup>10</sup>

However, in total fairness, this same entry does note that “the vast homiletic literature which describes its ideology, is devoid of all magic elements.” It goes on to say that “The difference between the ‘practical tradition’ of Hasidism, which practiced magic, and the ‘ideological (theoretical) tradition’ of the movement is probably more pronounced in modern Hasidism than in any other mystic movement” (EJ).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, these sorts of attestations as to what the Chassidic movement and Chabad have included from their beginning, should make many of today’s Messianic people be suspect of considering much of its theology, and whether or not its views should really have a major place within the future development of our faith community.

The presence of Jewish mysticism, and specifically Kabbalah, has not gone unnoticed by various figures within contemporary Messianic Judaism. A brief article appearing in the May 2011 edition of the *Levitt Letter*, published by Zola Levitt Ministries, appeared largely denouncing Kabbalah as a danger to be avoided by contemporary Believers.<sup>12</sup> A somewhat Centrist position, regarding presumed pros and cons of both the Jewish Kabbalah and the Chassidic movement, were summarized by Daniel C. Juster in his 1987 version of *Jewish Roots*:

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<sup>7</sup> Haim H. Cohn, “Sorcery,” in 15:164.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> A rather extensive review is provided by Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton University Press, 1987). Also to be considered is his work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Dan, “Magic,” in EJ, 11:713.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Todd Baker, “Kabbalah and the God of the Bible” *Levitt Letter* May 2011.

“The Kabbalah is an ancient Jewish mystical tradition. This tradition is primarily based in the Zohar, a late Middle-Age compilation of mystical ideas of God and creation, numerology, concepts of redemption and magic. From the Messianic Jewish perspective, the Kabbalistic tradition is truly a mixed-bag. At times, one can find within Kabbalism the most profound and Biblically-valid thoughts on everything from the Messiah’s suffering for sin to even a Triune concept of the unity of God. However, Kabbalism also contains concepts from magic and paganism.

“Gershom Shalom [sic], in his monumental book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, shows that Kabbalism has roots in second and third century gnosticism. Gnosticism was a religious approach from paganism that influenced *heterodox* Christianity and Judaism. Gnosticism was a system that taught salvation by the way of a secret knowledge of spiritual and magical realities which was only to be conveyed to initiates. This secret knowledge assured passage after death unto salvation as well as a means to tap into spiritual powers whereby current events and situations could be manipulated. When the Kabbalah partakes of these magical and gnostic viewpoints, the Messianic Jew judges it to be dangerously occult and to be avoided. Yet not everything in Kabbalism is of this nature. No one but the most spiritually mature should seek to discern the difference between the strands of tradition.

“*The Chasidic Movement* flourished in the eighteenth century and continues to this day. It traces its origins to the Baal Shem Tov, the Lord of the Good Name. Today’s Chasidim are strictly Orthodox Jews; but in the beginning, the Chasidic Movement was considered to be heterodox. Martin Buber has sought to give us an appreciation for this movement.

“Chasidism was a renewal movement within Judaism which brought exuberance, the Chasidic leaders, although greatly interested in Torah and Talmud (traditional Jewish areas of study and practice), also were greatly influenced by and involved in Kabbalism. The Mitnagdeem, the Orthodox establishment of the day, condemned Chasidism. Usually a picture is painted of the Mitnagdeem as dry scholars with no spiritual life who rejected the Chasidim, who were themselves full of love, fervor and energy. It was not so simple. The Mitnagdeem not only recoiled at the untraditional actions in Chasidic life and worship, but at what they considered involvement in magic and heretical concepts!

“In the Chasidic literature, we find many stories of rabbis who lost their minds in Kabbalism. There were many who dabbled in magic. However, there were other leaders who eschewed the magical aspects of Chasidism. Stories in the literature note the extreme dangers for even the most spiritual who became involved in magical means to produce certain ends or to bring the Kingdom of God. Some almost lost their lives. The dangers of Kabbalism are certainly at least reflected in the stories; yet, via the Zohar, the dangers exist even to the present day.

“The Chasidic stories also recount teaching and examples that are closer to New Testament teachings and attitudes. The incredible example of Zusia, who allows himself to be abused for the sake of others, but thoroughly loves his enemies, is a primary example. The love of God and of neighbor, mercy and justice, are reflected in profound yet simple stories of great beauty. These aspects of Chasidism make it a great attraction to the rootless young today.”<sup>13</sup>

Juster is someone who would probably not be too favorable for any of today’s Messianic Jewish congregational leaders to really associate themselves with the Jewish mystical tradition. Yet, some others in Messianic Jewish leadership show a much more favorable approach to it. Messianic Jewish theologian Mark Kinzer, is one, who while legitimately expressing how “Kabbalah remains repugnant to many evangelical Christians and rationalist Jews...[because] Jewish mysticism has often been associated with magic and superstition,” is still tempted to conclude that “Jewish mysticism has much to teach us.”<sup>14</sup> We should expect some Messianic Jewish groups to promote the limited value, of Kabbalistic influence in the thinking of future Messianic Jewish leaders.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel C. Juster, *Jewish Roots* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1995), pp 238-240.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Kinzer, “Hashem (The Name)” *Verge* Vol. 1, Iss. 7, December 2009.

<sup>15</sup> One piece of literature which has circulated throughout the Messianic movement, with a high degree of engagement with the Jewish mystical tradition, is *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary* (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2009). This piece itself is a commentary based on the book Paul Philip Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age* (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2009), a 1923 work of comparative religion produced by an early Hebrew Christian pioneer, who was originally raised in the Chassidic tradition in Belarus.

Concurrent with a growing acceptance for the Jewish mystical tradition and the Kabbalah in various Messianic Jewish quarters, it is likely to be interjected how Biblical literature like the Book of Ezekiel, the Book of Revelation, and the Gospel of John may be regarded as “mystical.” There is no question that a simple survey of Biblical texts like these reveals that they are spiritually deep, complex, and that there are indeed mysteries in them. *Whether Ezekiel, Revelation, or John can be declared to be “mystical,” though, can and should be contested.* The term “mystical” does not appear anywhere in the Holy Scriptures, whereas the term “mystery” does—particularly as God’s unfolding plan for the ages steadily presents itself to mortals in history.

We have to be extremely cautious of teachings circulating in our midst, and if someone is bringing Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah into our assemblies, he or she needs to be approached and silenced. The origins of Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah are not Biblical, and they lie with the occult and practices which are mainly classified in the Bible as being divination (Exodus 22:18; cf. Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10-12). While some of these mystical teachings might sound good, and might even sound intriguing, their origin is not the Holy Scriptures. Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, even historically, come from a much later time than the broad Biblical period. There is too much which the Biblical period has to offer us, and a legitimate window of extra-Biblical literature, which will be overlooked and ignored if the Messianic movement has a wide tolerance for Jewish mysticism.

We as Believers are always called to test the fruit of something, to see if that fruit be good and wholesome, and that the fruit is leading people into a greater and better relationship with the Lord. We also have to be very careful with the company that we keep. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14, NASU). It cannot go overlooked how the study of Kabbalah has actually become quite popular among some Hollywood celebrities. One of the most notable celebrities, who has embraced Kabbalah, has been Madonna. An article entitled “Madonna adopts kabbalah and a new wave of controversy,” appearing in the 26 July, 2004 edition of the Houston Chronicle, reported,

“On a recent news-magazine show, she discussed her interest in kabbalah and how she has adopted a Hebrew name, Esther. She has worn a red string on her wrist to ward off the ‘evil eye,’ and used sacred prayer accessories and symbolic Hebrew letters in music videos and concerts....Madonna is a student of the Kabbalah Centre, a worldwide education organization...The center does not require students to be Jewish, and the study can be incorporated into any faith, said Robin Davis, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles-based organization.”<sup>16</sup>

We know that the influence which this one celebrity has had on modern-day America, and indeed the world, has been anything but positive. The same can easily be said with some of the other celebrities who have likewise investigated Kabbalah. Is this just a passing fad for them, or might it be something more permanent? Regardless of whether it is a passing fad or not, we do know that such celebrities have experimented with various religions, specifically those relating to New Age and the occult, and Kabbalah is of the same spirit as these things are. The Scriptures plainly warn: “examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, NASU).

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<sup>16</sup> Tara Dooley (2004). *Madonna adopts Kabbalah and new wave of controversy*, 27 July, 2004. *Houston Chronicle*. Retrieved 10 October, 2004, from <<http://www.religionnewsblog.com>>.