

# Book Review – The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism

Merriam Webster defines mysticism as “the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics” and “the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (as intuition or insight).”<sup>1</sup> Mysticism has an important if peripheral place in every religion. Sufism is the most famous mystic branch in Islam, and Tantrism is a mystical system that has had profound influence on Hinduism and Buddhism. The Franciscans, Dominicans, and Pietists had mystical offshoots in Christianity. Kabbalah is the Jewish mystical school of thought. The Zohar is the body of literature (canonical texts) upon which Kabbalah is based.

In *The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*, Daniel C. Matt introduces the reader to the Kabbalah, a movement including occult teachings meant to explain the relationship between the finite and mortal universe and the infinite and eternal Ein Sof (The Endless One). Daniel C. Matt served as a professor of Jewish mysticism at the Center for Jewish Studies, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley CA. He also taught at Stanford University and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. As one of the world’s leading experts on the Kabbalah, he is more than qualified to write this book.

*The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* is a collection of the most important teachings from the *Zohar*. The underlying concept is that the Shekinah (divine immanence) blossoms into the feminine half of God. “Every human action here on earth affects the divine realm, either promoting or hindering the union of Shekinah and her partner – the Holy One.”<sup>2</sup> Ein Sof refers to the transcendence of God, and He emanates His ten attributes, the Sefirot, by which He reveals Himself and continuously creates both the physical realm and the chain of higher metaphysical realms.<sup>3</sup> The Sefirot include:

1. Keter - crown, will, Ayin (nothingness)
2. Binah – understanding, palace, womb
3. Hokhmah – wisdom, point, beginning
4. Gevurah – power, din (judgment), rigor, red, left arm
5. Hesed – love, grace, white, right arm
6. Tif’eret – beauty, Rahamim (compassion), blessed holy one, heaven, sun, harmony, king. Green
7. Hod – splendor, prophecy, left leg
8. Netsah – eternity, prophecy, right leg
9. Yesod – foundation, Tsaddiq (righteous one), covenant, phallus
10. Shekinah – presence, Malkhut (kingdom), communion of Israel, earth, moon, queen, apple orchard, rainbow

One tributary of the Kabbalah is the creation account (ma’aseh bereshit) and another tributary is the story of Ezekiel’s chariot (Ezekiel 1, ma’aseh merkavah). In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, robust Jewish communities in southern France and Spain added Neoplatonic mysticism and other factors to form the mystic river known as Kabbalah. The Spanish Jesuit priest, Moses de Leon (1240-1305), was a key composer of the Zohar. When Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews from Spain in 1492, many went to the Ottoman Empire, especially the village of Safed on the Sea of Galilee. Moses Cordovero (1522-1570) was a leader in that movement. In the modern day, Abraham Isaac Kook (1863-1935) was a towering mystic.

After summarizing the themes and history of Kabbalah, Matt covers the Ein Sof and the Sefirot in greater detail. He feels that the Kabbalah is in complete alignment with evolution, and assuming that evolution continually made things better, finds encouragement there. Kabbalah teaches that “You have no independent self and are contained in the Creator.”<sup>4</sup> Even the Creator, however, displays essential nothingness. The emphasis of Kabbalah on Ayin, or

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mysticism>, accessed 2 Sept 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*, Harper Collins Press, 2009, 1.

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sephirot>, accessed 2 Sept 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*, Harper Collins Press, 2009, 72.

nothingness, is similar to the Buddhist concept of Nirvana, which may be a reason that so many Jews migrate to Buddhism.

Kabbalah teaches its adherents to use writing devotionally, combining numbers with the 22 elemental letters in Hebrew in sensical and even “nonsensical” ways to prompt a wide variety of thoughts and feelings. Such writing is supposed to be emotional and even sensual, exciting the hands, the eyes, and the whole body in a divine encounter. In one memorable idea, Kabbalah teaches that God wants an encounter with man – “the divine mind pours upon us constantly, emanating its sacred abundance to us, for more than the calf wants to suck, the cow wants to suckle.”<sup>5</sup>

There is some good teaching for Christians here. Matt relates a story in which a master asks a student if he considers the one who praises him and the one who insults him to be equal. The student replies “no”, and the master replies that this proves that the student has not achieved equanimity. He should humble his heart, attain equanimity, experience aloneness, and find the holy spirit.<sup>6</sup> Another good teaching is that God uses even simple pleasures like eating and sleeping to mend the world. When a follower of God receives such blessings with holiness and gratitude, he glorifies God and his heart becomes more like that of his Creator. The man’s improved heart benefits the whole cosmos. The sexual union, when performed in the proper context and with the right attitude, is another pleasure that can “mend the world.”

*The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* is a short book which is easy to read but hard to grasp. Kabbalah is far from the Bible in many areas, but still has some useful things to teach about God, man, and the universe. Matt does a good job with the anthology, but the summary at the beginning of the book could be clearer for the uninitiated.

#### Questions

1. How is Jewish mysticism similar to Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and other types of mysticism?
2. What can modern evangelical Christians learn about the experience of God from these mystics?
3. How can modern evangelical Christians influence non-Christian mystics to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit?

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*, Harper Collins Press, 2009, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*, Harper Collins Press, 2009, 118.