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Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occultist Kabbalah

Abstract: The article examines the complex and ambivalent relations between Kabbalah scholarship and western esotericism. It shows that in the late 19 and early 20th century, several scholars of Kabbalah found interest in the occult and had connections with western esoteric movements. It analyses the complicated and nuanced attitude toward western esotericism of Gershom Scholem and shows that although he disparaged occult Kabbalists, he had a more positive appreciation of Christian Kabbalah and early modern western esoteric currents. Furthermore, the article argues that Kabbalah academic scholarship and western esoteric and occult circles share some significant terms, presuppositions, and theological perspectives. The article claims that Kabbalah scholarship and Occult Kabbalah have common genealogies, significant connections, and shared ideas and that the recognition, and study, of these complex relations, may contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of both Kabbalah scholarship and modern western esotericism.

1 Introduction

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, two new types of discourse on Kabbalah became prevalent in the western world – academic scholarship of Kabbalah, and occult Kabbalah. These two approaches to Kabbalah differ both in their assumptions concerning the nature and significance of Kabbalah, as well as in the methods for its study. Academic scholars approach Kabbalah as a historical contingent religious phenomenon and use philological historical methods for its study. Occult Kabbalists perceive Kabbalah as an inspired, perennial teaching that cannot be understood only through detached academic studies, but rather, through experiential study and practice.

Many times, the two groups were antagonistic to each other. Occult Kabbalists did not accept the hostile view of some academic scholars to Kabbalah, as well as their assumptions concerning the later dating of the Kabbalah, and especially of the Zohar. Academic scholars of Kabbalah rejected the perennial ideas of occult Kabbalists, and disparaged their insufficient knowledge of primary Jewish Kabbalistic sources. The negative stance of academic scholars of Kabbalah comes to the fore in Gershom Scholem's depiction of occultists as charlatans and pseudo—kabbalists.

Yet, the relations between Kabbalah scholarship and occult Kabbalah were more complex than seen at first sight. The works of academic scholars of Kabbalah were a major source for the knowledge and understanding of Kabbalah by many occult Kabbalists, and some of the occult Kabbalist used philological and historical methods in their writings. On the other hand, some of the academic scholars of Kabbalah were familiar with the writing of occult Kabbalists. Some of them had connections with western esoteric movements and did not see a contradiction between the scholarly and occult interest in Kabbalah. Furthermore, notwithstanding their different approaches and understanding of Kabbalah, academic scholars and occult Kabbalists shared several assumptions concerning the nature and significance of Kabbalah.

In this article, I would like to elaborate on the complex and ambivalent relations between Kabbalah scholarship and Western esotericism. I will show that in the late 19th and early 20th century, several scholars found interest in the occult and had connections with western esoteric movements. I will further demonstrate that Scholem's attitude toward Western esotericism was complicated and nuanced. Although he disparaged occult Kabbalists, he had a more positive appreciation of Christian Kabbalah and early modern western esoteric currents. Furthermore, I will argue that Kabbalah academic scholarship and western esoteric and occult circles share some significant terms, presuppositions, and theological perspectives.

Before turning to discuss the relations between Kabbalah scholarship and western esotericism, I will offer a short overview of the academic scholarship of Kabbalah, and of occult Kabbalah.

2 The Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occult Kabbalah

The academic approach to Kabbalah and occult interpretation and practice of Kabbalah became prevalent in the western world during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Both forms of discourse on Kabbalah had their roots in Hebraism and Christian Kabbalah.

Since the late 16th century, some Christian historians and Hebraists, such as Johannes Buxtorf (1564–1629), Jean Morin (1591–1659) and Jacques Basnage (1653–1723), used historical and philological methods in their discussion of Kabbalah and the Zohar. Several Jewish scholars, such as Leon Modena

(1571–1648) and Jacob Emden (1697–1776), also used philological and historical arguments in the context of the controversy over the antiquity of the Zohar.¹

During the 19th century, many Jewish scholars, most of them affiliated with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (science of Judaism) movement, studied Kabbalah from a modern academic perspective, using historical and philological methods.² Some of these scholars researched Kabbalah from a critical, negative stance, which was prevalent in the Jewish enlightenment movement and amongst scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. The negative stance towards Kabbalah was especially prominent in the scholarship of Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), the most important Jewish historian of the time, who described Kabbalah as “an ugly crust, a mushroom like structure, a fungus coating”.³ Other Jewish scholars, such as Adolphe Franck (1810–1893), Adolf Jellinek (1821–1893) and Meyer Heinrich Hirsch Landauer (1808–1841), expressed a more positive stance towards Kabbalah, and saw it as a legitimate and important trend in Jewish history. Since the late 19th century, under the impact of neo-romanticism, orientalism, and Jewish nationalism, a much more sympathetic and enthusiastic approach to Kabbalah and Hassidism emerged amongst western Jewish intellectuals and scholars, such as Samuel Abba Horodezky (1871–1957), Martin Buber (1878–1965), and Gershom Scholem (1897–1982).

Scholem, who was born in Berlin in 1882, became an enthusiastic Zionist, and decided at a young age to pursue the study of Kabbalah. After he submitted his PhD thesis to the Munich University in 1922, he immigrated to Palestine. In 1925, the newly established Institute of Jewish Studies of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem appointed him as a lecturer on Kabbalah. Gradually he established his status as the leading academic expert on Kabbalah and instituted the research of Jewish Mysticism as an academic discipline within the framework of Jewish Studies. Scholem rejected the negative stance of 19th century scholars to Kabbalah, and regarded Jewish Mysticism as a central component of Judaism, which enabled the national existence of the Jewish people during the exilic period.

1 Boaz Huss, *The Zohar: Reception and Impact* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016), 255–257.

2 On Kabbalah scholarship in the 19th century, see David Biale, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), 13–32; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah, New Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 7–10; George Y. Kohler, *Kabbalah Research in the Wissenschaft des Judentums (1820–1880)* (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 2019).

3 “einer häßlichen Kruste, einem pilzartigen Gebilde, einem Schimmelüberzug” Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, vol. 10 (Leipzig: Oscar Leiner, 1868), 124. See: Peter Schäfer, “‘Adversum Cabbalam’ oder: Heinrich Graetz und die Jüdische Mystik”, in *Reuchlin und seine Erben: Forscher, Denker, Ideologen und Spinner* ed. Peter Schäfer and Irina Wandrey (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke, 2005), 204; Kohler, *Kabbalah Research*, 202.

At the same period in which the academic study of Kabbalah developed in Western Europe, a new form of non-Jewish Kabbalah emerged within occult and western esoteric movements. This form of Kabbalah, described by Wouter Hanegraaff as “occultist Kabbalah”,⁴ is dependent to a large degree on Christian Kabbalah, which first appeared the late fifteenth-century. Christian Kabbalists, such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522), Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–1689), presented different interpretations to Kabbalah. Yet, common to all of them was the belief in the antiquity of the Kabbalah (especially, the Zohar), and the assumption that Kabbalah was part of the perennial wisdom that contained Christological doctrines. Many Christian Kabbalists aspired to use the Kabbalah for missionary purposes. Occult Kabbalah developed out of Christian Kabbalah. Yet, it did not emphasize so much the compatibility of Kabbalah with Christianity, but rather regarded Kabbalah as an ancient, universal mystical-magical secret doctrine.

The first prominent occult Kabbalist was Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810–1875), known by name Eliphas Lévi. His follower, Gérard Encausse (1865–1916), known as Papus, was also very much interested in Kabbalah. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the founder of the Theosophical Society, was also interested in the Kabbalah, and claimed that the original, oriental Kabbalah, was distorted by Jewish and Christian Kabbalists. Kabbalah was central to the doctrines and practices of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. One of the founders of the Order, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918), translated parts of the Zohar into English, and another member of the Order, Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942), wrote several works on Kabbalah and the Zohar. Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), as well as many other modern occultists offered innovative interpretations of Kabbalah. The occultist perceptions of Kabbalah as a perennial, universal magical and mystical doctrine, which is similar, compatible and essentially identical with other ancient mystical schools, was adopted by many New Age movements, as well as by some of the modern Jewish neo-Kabbalistic movements.

⁴ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Jewish Influences V: Occultist Kabbalah,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 644–647; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Beginnings of Occultist Kabbalah: Adolph Franck and Eliphas Levi,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 107–127.

3 Gershom Scholem's Rejection of Occultist Kabbalah

Gershom Scholem, the founder of the modern academic studies of Jewish Mysticism, was well acquainted with western esoteric and occultist writings, especially, those concerning Kabbalah. He has also met several contemporary occultists, such as the famous author and occultist, Gustav Meyrink and the Jewish occultist, Oskar Goldberg.⁵ Scholem rejected and disparaged occultist and their writing on Kabbalah. In the entry Kabbalah, written for the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Scholem summarized his opinion of western esoteric interpretations of Kabbalah:

The many books written on the subject in the 19th and 20th centuries by various theosophists and mystics lacked any basic knowledge of the sources and very rarely contributed to the field, while at times they even hindered the development of a historical approach. Similarly, the activities of French and English occultists contributed nothing and only served to create considerable confusion between the teachings of the Kabbalah and their own totally unrelated inventions, such as the alleged kabbalistic origins of Tarot-cards. To this category of supreme charlatanism belong the many and widely read books of Eliphas Lévi (actually Alphonse Louis Constant; 1810–1875), Papus (Gérard Encausse; 1868–1919), and Frater Perdurabo (Aleister Crowley; 1875–1946), all of whom had an infinitesimal knowledge of Kabbalah that did not prevent them from drawing freely on their imaginations instead. The comprehensive works of A. E. Waite (*The Holy Kabbalah*, 1929) and P. Vulliaud, on the other hand, were essentially rather confused compilations made from secondhand sources.⁶

Many similar disparaging comments against occultists who were interested in Kabbalah can be found in Scholem's writings as well and in the comments he scribbled in the copies of western esoteric writers, which are found in his library, and in his references to writers interested in Western esotericism that he met.⁷

5 Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memoires of My Youth* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), 129–130, 132–134, 146–149; Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: New York Review Books, 2003), 117–121, 129, 132–133.

6 Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 203.

7 Gershom Scholem, *Alchemie and Kabbala*, engl. ed., trans. Klaus Ottmann (1925 Putnam, Connecticut: Spring Publications, 2006), 8; Gershom Scholem, *Bibliographia Kabbalistica* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin 1927), xiii–xiv; Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 2; Gershom Scholem, *Explication and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance*, vol. 2 [Od Davar] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1986), 319 [Hebrew]; Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 133; Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 120. On Scholem's negative attitude to occult Kabbalah, see: Konstantin Burmistrov, "Gershom Scholem und das Okulte," *Gnostika* 33 (2006): 23–34; Hanegraaff, "Occultist Kabbalah," 108–109; Boaz Huss, "'Authorized Guardians': The Polemics of Academic Scholars of Jewish Mysticism against Kabbalah Practitioners," in

Scholem denigrated occult Kabbalist for their “supreme charlatanism”, and described their writings as presenting “pseudo-Kabbalah.” In his article “Alchemy and Kabbalah”, he wrote: “Many books that flaunt the word Kabbalah on their title page have nothing or practically nothing to do with it”.⁸ As Wouter Hanegraaff observed: “[T]his final sentence . . . implies that there is such a thing as the true or correctly-understood Kabbalah and that it can be distinguished from a false or pseudo-kabbalah, which misunderstands, and therefore distorts the truth”.⁹

What were Scholem’s criteria for authentic Kabbalah? In his lecture “Kabbalah Research from Reuchlin up to the Present,” Scholem claimed that the writing of Eliphas Lévi, Papus and Crowley do not contain even an inkling of what characterizes “the religious historical phenomenon of Jewish Kabbalah.”¹⁰ This indicates that Scholem denied the authenticity of occult Kabbalah primarily because it did not belong to a Jewish Kabbalistic tradition. Indeed, as far as I know Scholem used the term “pseudo-Kabbalah” only in reference to non-Jewish Kabbalists. Scholem criticized western esoteric Kabbalists also for their lack of sufficient knowledge of Kabbalistic sources and inadequate representations and interpretations of Kabbalah. In a passage cited above, he sneered at the occult Kabbalists “infinitesimal knowledge” of Kabbalah. In his introduction to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, he referred to Eliphas Lévi’s “brilliant misrepresentations” of Kabbalah, and blamed him and his followers, as well as other occult Kabbalists, of presenting eccentric and fantastic statements, which are not “legitimate” interpretations of Kabbalah.¹¹

Scholem criticized modern, occult Kabbalists because they do not belong to the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition, for their insufficient knowledge of the sources, and lack of philological-historical expertise. These traits, which the “charlatan”, “pseudo-kabbalists” lack, are exactly those that characterize the school of Kabbalah research that Scholem established. The academic research of Kabbalah, practiced by Scholem and his students, studied primary Jewish Kabbalistic texts, from a Jewish-national perspective, using historical-philological methods. Scholem perceived the school of Kabbalah scholarship that he established in the land of Israel, as the “authorized guardian” of Kabbalah, and

Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and its Others, ed. Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 93–94

⁸ Scholem, *Alchemie and Kabbala*, 11.

⁹ Hanegraaff, “Occultist Kabbalah,” 108.

¹⁰ Scholem, *Explication and Implication*, 319.

¹¹ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 2.

as the modern, authentic continuation of the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition.¹² The occult Kabbalist, on the other hand, represent the complete Other, or if you like, the *Sitra Achra*, of Scholem's school – a fake form of Kabbalah, practiced by non-Jews who were not familiar with primary Jewish Kabbalistic sources, and who lacked academic credentials and expertise.

Scholem became the most authoritative scholar of Kabbalah in the 20th century, and his disciples adopted his approach to occultist Kabbalah. Occult Kabbalah, as well as other forms of non-Jewish Kabbalah were excluded from the field of study of Jewish Mysticism that Scholem established.

Yet, some other Jewish scholars of Kabbalah, who were active before Scholem, and during his time, such as Adolph Franck (1810–1893), Moses Gaster (1856–1939), Joshua Abelson (1873–1940) and Ernst Müller (1880–1954), did not share Scholem's dismissive attitude to occultism and to occultist Kabbalah, and were affiliated with western esoteric circles of their time. I would like to turn now and examine these scholars and their attitudes to Kabbalah and occultism.

4 Adolphe Franck

One of the first Jewish scholars, who researched Kabbalah within a modern, academic framework, was Adolphe Franck. Franck, who was born in Liocourt in 1810, first studied for the rabbinate, but then turned to academic studies, and studied Philosophy with the renowned French philosopher, Victor Cousin (1792–1867). He embarked on a very successful academic career: at the age of 36, he was elected to the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques*, and later became a Professor of law at the *Institute de France*. Franck was also interested in Jewish Studies, and served as the president of the *Société des Etudes Juives*.¹³ In 1843, he published *La Kabbale ou La Philosophie Religieuse des Hébreux*.¹⁴ According to Moshe Idel, this book contributed to the knowledge of Kabbalah

¹² Huss, “Authorized Guardians”; Andreas Kilcher, “Philology as Kabbalah,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi and Kocku von Stuckrad. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 13–26.

¹³ See: Paul B. Fenton, “Qabbalah and Academia: The Critical Study of Jewish Mysticism in France,” *Shofar*, 18(2) (2000): 49; Paul B. Fenton, “La Contribution d'Adolph Franck à l'étude de la Kabbale”, in *Adolph Franck, Philosophe Juif, Spiritualiste et Libéral Dans La France Du XIX Siècle*, ed. Jean-Pierre Rothschild et Jérôme Grondeux (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 81–97; Hanegraaff, “Occultist Kabbalah”, 111.

¹⁴ Adolphe Franck, *La Kabbale, ou La Philosophie Religieuse des Hébreux* (Paris: L. Hachette, 1843).

in modern Europe more than any other work prior to the studies of Gershom Scholem.¹⁵ Although this may be somewhat exaggerated, there is no doubt that the book, which was translated into German a year after its publication, and later, to Hebrew and English,¹⁶ had a great influence of modern knowledge and perception of Kabbalah amongst scholars and the wide public.

Franck based his knowledge of Kabbalah mostly on Christian Kabbalah, and on the scholarship of Christian Hebraists.¹⁷ His knowledge of Jewish Kabbalistic sources was limited. Franck expressed a more positive attitude to Kabbalah than other Jewish scholars of his time did. He described it as the heart and soul (“la vie et la Coeur”) of Judaism:

We cannot possibly consider the Kabbalah as an isolated fact, accidental in Judaism; on the contrary, it is its heart and soul. For, while the Talmud took over all that relates to the outward practice and performance of the Law, the Kabbalah reserved for itself the domain of speculation and the most formidable problems of natural and revealed theology. It was able to arouse the veneration of the people [. . .] teaching them that their entire faith and religion rested upon a sublime mystery.¹⁸

Franck adopted the stance of Christian Kabbalists, who regarded Kabbalah as the positive, spiritual element of Judaism, which stands in opposition to the “dead letter” of Rabbinic Judaism. Kabbalah, according to Franck, is “a profoundly venerated science which could be distinguished from the Mishna, the Talmud and the Sacred Books – a mystic doctrine evidently engendered by the need for reflection and independence as well as philosophy”.¹⁹ Franck regarded the Zohar and Sefer Yetzira as the most important texts of Kabbalah, and dedicated most of his book to the antiquity and authenticity of these texts, and to an analysis of their doctrines. Although Franck dedicated the third part of his book to the resemblance of Kabbalah to the teachings of Plato, Neoplatonism, Philo and early Christianity, he denied the possibility that such teachings influenced Kabbalah. According to Franck, Kabbalah “necessarily must have its cradle in Asia. Judaism must have brought it forth through its own efforts; or, it

¹⁵ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah, New Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 8. See also Fenton, “Qabbalah and Academia”, 48; Hanegraaff, “Occultist Kabbalah”, 111.

¹⁶ Adolphe Franck, *Die Kabbalah, oder die Religions-Philosophie der Hebräer* (Leipzig: H. Hunger, 1844). Later, the book was published in English translation: *Adolph Franck, The Kabbalah or, The Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews* (New York: Kabbalah Publishing Company, 1926).

¹⁷ Fenton, “Qabbalah and Academia,” 48; Fenton, “La Contribution d’Adolphe Franck”, 87.

¹⁸ Franck, *The Kabbalah*, 219. (For the original French, see Franck, *La Kabbale*, 382).

¹⁹ Franck, *The Kabbalah*, 24.

must have sprung from some other Oriental religion”.²⁰ In the last chapter of the book, Franck argues that the Kabbalah was derived from the Chaldean and Zoroastrian sources. Yet, he emphasized, the borrowing from the theology of the ancient Persians, did not destroy the originality of the Kabbalah.²¹

In the framework of his interest and positive regard of mysticism (which, following his teacher Victor Cousin, he regarded as one the four basic modes of human thought), Franck was also interested in non-Jewish western esoteric currents. In 1853, he gave a lecture on Paracelsus and 16th century Alchemy, and in 1866, he published a book on Martinez de Pasqually and Louis-Claude de Saint Martin.²² As Wouter Hanegraaff has shown, towards the end of his life, Franck became interested in the current theosophical and occult circles, and applauded their interest in Kabbalah.²³ In the forward to the second addition of *La Kabbale ou La Philosophie Religieuse des Hébreux*, which was published in 1889, Franck mentions favorably that many people “turn toward the East, the cradle of religions, the original fatherland of mystical ideas, and among the doctrines that they try to bring back to honor, the Kabbalah in not forgotten.”²⁴ As examples for the revival of interest in Kabbalah, Franck mentions the Theosophical Society (and especially, the French Theosophical Journals *Lotus* and *L’aurore*), the recent translation to French of *Sefer Yetzirah*, and the French occult review, *l’Initiation*, edited by Papus, whose first issue just appeared.²⁵ Franck befriended Papus, and wrote a preface to the latter *Traité méthodique de science occulte*, published in 1891. Franck praises Papus and his collaborators in the publication of the occult journal, *l’Initiation*, for “calling upon all kinds of mysticism, both from the East and from the West, from India and from Europe”. He asserts that although these doctrines have their shadows and their dangers, he much prefers “these audacious speculations over the blindness of positivism, the nothingness of atheist science and the more or less hypocritical despair of pessimism. In my eyes they

²⁰ Franck, *The Kabbalah*, 192.

²¹ Franck, *The Kabbalah*, 221–224. For further discussion of Franck’s perception and depiction of Kabbalah, see: Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). 8; Fenton, “Qabbalah and Academia”, 50; Fenton, “La Contribution d’ Adolph Franck”, 86–87; Hanegraaff, “Occultist Kabbalah”, 114–118.

²² Adolphe Franck, “Paracelse et l’alchimie au XVI^e siècle”, in *Collections d’ouvrages relatifs aux sciences hermétiques*, ed. Jules Lermina (Paris: Charconac, 1889), 1–32. Adolphe Franck, *La philosophie mystique en France à la fin du XVIII^{ième} siècle: Saint-Martin et son maître Martinès de Pasqually* (Paris: Germer Ballière, 1866). See Hanegraaff, “Occultist Kabbalah”, 112.

²³ See Hanegraaff, “Occultist Kabbalah”, 112–114.

²⁴ I follow Hanegraaff’s translation, Hanegraaff, “Occultist Kabbalah”, 113.

²⁵ Adolphe Franck “Preface”, in Papus, *Traité Méthodique de Science Occulte* (Paris: Geroges Carré 1891), ii–iv, See Hanegraaff, “Occultist Kabbalah”, 113–114.

are like an energetic appeal to the seriousness of life, to the re-awakening of the sense of the divine.”²⁶

5 Moses Gaster

Another Jewish scholar of Kabbalah, who had connections with western esoteric circles, was Moses Gaster. Gaster, who was born in Bucharest in 1856, studied in Germany, at the Jewish seminary in Breslau and received a PhD from the University of Leipzig. After he returned to Romania, the University of Bucharest appointed him a lecturer of Romanian languages and literature. In 1885, the Romanian authorities expelled him from Romania because of his Jewish nationalist activities. He moved to England, where he was invited to give the Ilchester lectures in Oxford. He was appointed the Hacham (chief rabbi), of the Sephardic and Portuguese Congregation and served as the head of the rabbinic training seminar, the Lady Judith Montefiore College. Gaster was active in the Zionist movement. The Balfour Declaration, that granted the Jews a national home in Palestine, was first drafted in his home, in February 1917. Gaster was a prominent scholar of Romanian Folklore and Jewish Studies, as well as a collector of books and manuscripts. He engaged in diverse fields of study, which included Romanian language and literature, Apocrypha and Pseudoepigrapha, Jewish magic, Samaritan studies, Karaism and Kabbalah.²⁷

Gaster became interested in Kabbalah early in his career, and continued to be interested in it throughout his life. His publication on Kabbalah include a study about the origins and development of Kabbalah (published in Rumanian) in 1884, another article on the origins of the Kabbalah, published in the annual report of the Judith Montefiore College in 1894, an article on the *Zohar* published in *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* in 1921, and the article “A Gnostic Fragment from the *Zohar*” published in 1923 in *The Quest*.²⁸ Apart from his studies of Kabbalah, Gaster published a study of the ancient Jewish text *The*

²⁶ Franck “Preface”, ix. I follow Hanegraaff’s translation, “Occultist Kabbalah”, 113.

²⁷ On Gaster, see: Maria (Cioata) Haralambakis, “Representations of Moses Gaster (1856–1939) in Anglophone and Romanian Scholarship”, *New Europe College Yearbook* 2012–2013: 90–91; Simon Rabinovitch, “Jews, Englishmen, and Folklorists: The Scholarship of Joseph Jacobs and Moses Gaster” in *The Jew in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Culture: Between the East End and East Africa*, ed. Eitan Bar-Yosef and Nadia Valman (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 121–122.

²⁸ Moses Gaster, “Cabbala: origenea si dezvoltarea di” *Anuar Pentru Israeliti* 6 (1883/4): 25–36; Moses Gaster, “The Kabbalah” in *Judith Montefiore College, Report for the Year 1893–1894* (Ramsgate: The Judith Montefiore College, 1894), 15–28; Moses Gaster, “Zohar”, in *Hastings*

measure of [God`s] Height, (*Shiur Komah*) and prepared an edition of the late antiquity Jewish magical text *The Sword of Moses*.²⁹

Gaster was a student of Heinrich Graetz, and the views of the 19th century Jewish scholarship on Kabbalah shaped his attitude to the Kabbalah. Yet he presented some original (although not always consistent) theories and had a much more positive stance towards Kabbalah than his mentor, and other western Jewish scholars of his time.³⁰

Gaster asserted that the Jewish mystical tradition originated in ancient times, in the land of Israel: “[O]lder schools and mystic circles [. . .] continued to flourish unobserved in the mountains and caverns of the Galilee, and also on the banks of the Jordan, where from immemorial times schools of prophets, of ascetics and recluses, of Essenes and Hasidim, have continued their mystical speculation and contemplative life.”³¹ He asserted the continuity of the “secret doctrine” and “theosophic speculations” of the oral mystic tradition of Kabbalah: “. . . the continuity was not broken and the secret doctrine was handed down from generation to generation as Kabbalah i.e., oral mystic tradition. Thus old and new were constantly blended; to old systems of theosophic speculations newer were added, until it was found necessary to fix them in writing”.³² Gaster rejected the position of Graetz and other scholars of his time that attributed the *Zohar* to the thirteenth-century Kabbalist Moses de Leon, and argued that the *Zohar* was based on an ancient, oriental Jewish source: “To my mind it is almost beyond doubt, that a mystical commentary composed in Babylon or elsewhere in the East, written in the language of that place and those times and ascribed to one of the heroes of the Mishna, may have reached also Spain and this commentary forms the basis of the *Zohar*”.³³

Similar to Franck, Gaster argued that Kabbalah was originally a “purely philosophical system”.³⁴ Later, he claimed, a superstitious element crept it, and speculative Kabbalah deteriorated into practical magic.³⁵ Nonetheless, Gaster did not share the vehement rejection and disparagement of the Kabbalah, expressed by

Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 1908–1927. vol. 12, 858–862; Moses Gaster, “A Gnostic Fragment from the Zohar,” *The Quest XIV* (1923): 452–469.

²⁹ Moses Gaster, “Das Shiur Komah,” *MGWJ* 37 (1893): 213–320; Moses Gaster, *The Sword of Moses* (London: D. Nutt, 1896).

³⁰ Moshe Idel, “Moses Gaster, Jewish Mysticism and the Book of the Zohar”, in *New Developments of Zohar Studies*, ed. Ronit Meroz (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2007), 118–123 [Hebrew].

³¹ Gaster, “Zohar”, 861.

³² Gaster, “Zohar”, 860.

³³ Gaster, “The Kabbalah,” 27.

³⁴ Gaster, “The Kabbalah,” 16.

³⁵ Gaster, “The Kabbalah,” 20.

his teacher Heinrich Graetz, and other Jewish scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. He claimed that that Kabbalah “obtained [. . .] paramount importance influencing deeply the religious life of our nation in more than one direction.”³⁶ In his entry on the *Zohar* in the *Hastings Encyclopedia*, he described the influence of the Kabbalah on Jewish culture as a succession of light and shadow: “Through the influence of the *Zohar* and Kabbala, a new mystical force was developed among the Jews. A spiritual love, an immersion in the Divine, was taught by the founder of Hasidism to be of higher value, if possible, than the strict observance of the letter of the Law. Thus, light and shadow, action and reaction, have succeeded one another with the spread of Kabbala, and notably the *Zohar* and the *Zoharic* literature.”³⁷

Gaster regarded the *Zohar* and the Kabbalah not only as important spiritual forces within Jewish culture, but as an important element of universal occultism and Theosophy. In a review of the fourth edition of S.L. MacGregor Mathers’s, *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, Gaster wrote:

Still, for those who are students of the occult philosophy, the Zoharistic writings are of no mean importance. They belong to the category of the literature of the ancient mystics. There is an internal nexus between them, and the Zoharistic writings are an important link in that chain of occult and theosophic speculation that runs through the ages.³⁸

In the last decades of his life, Gaster made connections with contemporary esoteric movements, and published several articles and reviews in journals of the Theosophical Society and the Quest Society. Since the early 1920’s, Gaster became a close friend of the independent scholar and former Theosophist, G. R. S. Mead (1863–1933), who founded the Quest Society after he left the Theosophical Society.³⁹ In 1922, Mead invited Gaster to give a lecture on the “Gnostic piece in the *Zohar*” to the Quest Society.⁴⁰ Gaster accepted the invitation and his lecture was later published in *The Quest*. In 1924, Gaster gave another lecture on “Luria and his System of Kabbala.”⁴¹ In spring of 1925, Gaster delivered the

³⁶ Gaster, “The Kabbalah,” 17.

³⁷ Gaster, “Zohar,” 861.

³⁸ Moses Gaster, “Review of The Kabbalah Unveiled,” *The Theosophical Review* (1926): 53.

³⁹ Many letters from Mead to Gaster are preserved in Gaster’s archives in the special collections at University College London. The first letter from Mead to Gaster found in Gaster’s archives is dated October 1922, and the last is from June 1932, a few months before Mead passed away. The letters reveal the close friendship and shared interests of the two aging scholars. See Boaz Huss, “‘The Quest Universal’: Moses Gaster’s interest in Kabbalah and Western Esotericism,” *Kabbalah* 40 (2018): 255–266.

⁴⁰ Gaster Papers, 36/392.

⁴¹ Gaster Papers, 123/416.

presidential address of the Quest Society, on the topic “The Quest Universal”.⁴² The surrealist painter and occultist Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988), who became a member of the Quest Society in 1928, related in her memoirs that there were “dark hints”, and “whispers about black magic”, concerning certain members of the Quest Society, including “Dr. Moses Gaster, the eminent Hebraist”.⁴³ Moses Gaster’s son, Theodor, wrote in his memoirs: “I remember the regular visits of G. R. S. Mead, the Gnostic scholar, and how, towards the end of his life, he lumbered into psychic research and even inveigled my father into attending a couple of séances.”⁴⁴ In 1932, Gaster delivered a lecture on Jews and spiritualism in the framework of the Jewish Society for Psychical Research.⁴⁵

Gaster also had a connection with the Theosophical Society. Although Gaster never became a fellow of the Theosophical Society, he published several articles and reviews in the *Theosophical Review*, which his friend, the Anglo-Jewish author, Samuel Levi Bensusan (1872–1958), edited. These included articles on “The Divine Name and the Creative Word”, and “The Alchemy of Alphabet”, as well as a book review of S.L MacGregor Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, that was mentioned above. Gaster had connections with the Anglo-Jewish Lodge of Theosophists that was established in 1926,⁴⁶ and was invited by its president, Samuel I. Heiman, to lecture at the lodge.⁴⁷

6 Joshua Abelson

Another Anglo-Jewish scholar, who studied Jewish Mysticism, and was affiliated with the Theosophical Society, was Joshua Abelson. Abelson, who was born in Merthyr Tydfil, Wales, in 1873, studied in UCL and was ordained as a Rabbi at

⁴² Gaster Papers, 97/422.

⁴³ Ithell Colquhoun, *The Sword of Wisdom: MacGregor Mathers and the Golden Dawn* (New York: Putnam 1975), 16.

⁴⁴ Theodor Gaster “Prolegomenon” in Moses Gaster, *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Medieval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha and Samaritan Archaeology* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1971), vol. 1, XXXVII.

⁴⁵ *The Jewish Chronicle*, May 27 1932, 14. I am grateful to Sam Glauber, who informed me about Gaster’s lecture.

⁴⁶ Boaz Huss, “‘Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews’: Jewish Theosophists and their Perceptions of Kabbalah,” in: *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), 142–144.

⁴⁷ Gaster Papers, 56/459. A flyer for the Jewish lodge, announcing its winter 1928 activities, was attached to Heiman’s letter. I do not know whether Gaster accepted the invitation.

Jews College in London. He served as a Rabbi in Cardiff, Bristol, and Leeds, and was the principal of the Rabbinical “Aria” College in Portsmouth (1907–1920).⁴⁸

In 1912, Abelson published a book on *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature*, which was based on his PhD thesis.⁴⁹ A year later, he published, *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction to the Kabbalah*, the first monograph in English to carry the term “Jewish Mysticism” in its title.⁵⁰ He is also the author of the introduction to the first comprehensive translation of the Zohar into English, by Maurice Simon, Harry Sperling and Paul. P. Levertoff, which was published in 1931 by the Soncino press.⁵¹

Abelson followed Adolphe Franck’s positive regard of Kabbalah, and rejected Heinrich Graetz’s negative stance towards it: “. . . it is therefore totally wrong to follow Graetz in regarding Kabbalah as an unnatural child of the darkened intellects of the Jewish middle ages”.⁵² Abelson identifies Kabbalah as Jewish Mysticism, and asserts its antiquity and centrality in Jewish religion:

The medieval Kabbalah is a direct descendant of the Talmudic Kabbalah . . . the Jewish heart has in all ages panted for union with the living God even as the heart panteth after the water streams . . . it is one and the same flowing stream emanating from one common source . . . Kabbalah is really the literature of Jewish mysticism from about the first pre-Christian century until almost recent times.⁵³

Abelson was interested in occultism and its relation to Kabbalah, and had connections with contemporary esoteric movements. He published articles on “Swedenborg and the Zohar” and “Occult Thought in Jewish Literature”,⁵⁴ as well as book reviews on Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabbalah* and Israel Regardie’s *The Tree of Life*.⁵⁵ His *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction to the Kabbalah* was the third volume in the Quest series of G. R. S. Mead, who wrote the introduction to the book. In 1905, Abelson published in the *Theosophical Review* an article about Talmud and Theosophy, which was based on a lecture he gave in the Bristol

48 “Abelson, Joshua” in *The Palgrave Dictionary of Anglo-Jewish History*, ed. William D. Rubinstein (New York: Palgrave Maximillian, 2011); Benjamin J. Elton, “Conservative Judaism’s British Trailblazers”, *Conservative Judaism* 63(4) (2012): 64–65.

49 Joshua Abelson, *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1912).

50 Joshua Abelson, *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction to the Kabbalah* (London: G. Bell & Son, 1913).

51 M. Simon, H. Sperling & P.P. Lavertoff, *The Zohar* (London: Soncino Press, 1931–1934). On the translation and Abelson introduction to it see Boaz Huss, “Translations of the Zohar: Historical Contexts and Ideological Frameworks” *Correspondences* 4 (2016): 108–109.

52 Abelson, *The Immanence of God*, 2.

53 Abelson, *The Immanence of God*, 2–3.

54 *The Jewish Chronicle Supplement* (January 1921): v–vi, (May 1924): vii.

55 *Jewish Chronicle* (12 May 1933), (24 May 1935).

lodge of the TS.⁵⁶ In the article that deals not only with the Talmud, but also with other Jewish sources, especially, Kabbalah, Abelson describes some ideas that he regards as shared by Judaism and Theosophy. In 1912, he published another article in the *Theosophical Review*, on Rabbinical Mysticism.⁵⁷ Abelson had connections with the English branch of the Association of Hebrew Theosophists, and in 1927, he gave a lecture to the Manchester group of the Association.⁵⁸

7 Ernst Müller

Another scholar of Kabbalah, connected to Western esotericism, was Ernst Müller (1880–1954), a Zionist activist from Vienna, a Theosophist, and later, Anthroposophist who wrote two books about the Zohar, as well as a short history of Jewish Mysticism, published in 1946. Müller was born in Misslitz (now Miroslav, Czech Republic) in 1880, and later moved with his family to Vienna. Although his first intention was to become a Rabbi, he turned to academic studies, and studied philosophy, physics and mathematics. In 1897, he met Theodore Herzl, and became an active Zionist. In 1907, Müller traveled to Palestine, where he took a teaching position at the recently founded Hebrew Gymnasium in Jaffa, where he stayed for two years. After his return to Vienna, he found a position as the librarian of the Jewish community of Vienna. He worked there (with an interval during the First World War) until the library was closed by the Nazis. In 1939, he escaped to England and lived in London, in great poverty, until his death in 1954.⁵⁹

Müller became interested in spiritualism and occultism as a student in Vienna, and joined the Theosophical Society after his return from Palestine. In 1910, he met Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), who made a strong impression on him.

⁵⁶ *Theosophical Review* 37 (September 1905): 9–27.

⁵⁷ *Theosophical Review* 13 (May 1912): 503. The article was previously published in *The Hibbert Journal* (1912): 426–443.

⁵⁸ *The Jewish Theosophist* 1(5) (December 1927): 7.

⁵⁹ Andreas Kilcher, “Kabbalah and Anthroposophy: A Spiritual Alliance According to Ernst Müller”, in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), 199–202; Gerold Necker, “Ernst Müller’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism and Gershom Scholem”, *Kabbalah* 40 (2018): 203–224; Nathaneal Riemer, “Ein Wanderer Zwischen den Welten – Zum 50sten Todesjahr von Ernst Müller”, *David: Jüdische Kulturzeitschrift* 62 (2004), available online at <http://david.juden.at/kulturzeitschrift/61-65/62-Riemer.htm>; Dianne Ritchey, “Guide to the Papers of Ernst Müller Biographical Note”, *Ernst Müller Collection, Center For Jewish History*, <http://findingaids.cjh.org/?pID=481725>.

Following Steiner, Müller left the Theosophical Society and became active in the Anthroposophical Society.

Müller became very much interested in Kabbalah. In 1909, during his stay in Palestine, he visited the Kabbalistic town, Safed, together with the author Samuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970).⁶⁰ Later, during his stay in Prague in 1911, he started to study the Zohar, together with Hugo Bergman (1883–1975), the Jewish philosopher and Zionist activist, who had interest in the teaching of Steiner.⁶¹ In 1913, Bergman and Müller published translations of Zohar excerpts in German in the volume *Vom Judentum*, which the Zionist student association in Prague published.⁶² Müller published further translations of Zoharic articles in the journal *Der Jude*, between 1913 and 1920.⁶³ In 1920, he published a book about the Zohar and its teachings and in 1932, he published an anthology of Zoharic articles translated into German.⁶⁴ In 1946, when he lived in England, Müller published a book entitled *A History of Jewish Mysticism*.⁶⁵ The book, in which he presents his ideas concerning the history and nature of Jewish Mysticism, was written originally in German, and translated to English by Maurice Simon, the Anglo-Jewish scholar who took part in the publication of the Soncino English edition of the Zohar, together with Joshua Abelson. In his book (which was published five years after Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*), Müller defines Jewish Mysticism as: "that form of the Jewish religion which like the mysticisms of other religions, seeks especially to cultivate personal communion between the worshipper and God."⁶⁶ He discusses four major periods in the development of Jewish Mysticism: The biblical period, the period of old Jewish esoteric teaching, the period of Kabbalah, and Hassidism. The last chapter of his book is dedicated to "Cabbalistic tendencies outside of Judaism". Müller concludes his book with a short paragraph relating to the Anthroposophy:

To a much greater extent, the Anthroposophy founded by Rudolf Steiner has in many circles turned attention to the hidden meaning of the biblical account of the creation, to

60 Kilcher, "Kabbalah and Anthroposophy", 201.

61 Kilcher, "Kabbalah and Anthroposophy", 209.

62 *Vom Judentum: Ein Sammelbuch* (Leipzig: K. Wolff, 1913), 274–284.

63 Eleonore Lappin, *Der Jude 1916–1928* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 362.

64 Ernst Müller, *Der Sohar und seine Lehre: Einleitung in die Gedankenwelt der Kabbalah* (Wien & Berlin: R. Löwit, 1920); Ernst Müller, *Der Sohar: Das Heilige Buch der Kabbalah. Nach dem Urtext* (Wien: Heinrich Glanz, 1932). See: Kilcher, "Kabbalah and Anthroposophy", 208–211. Huss, "Translations of the Zohar", 104. Müller also wrote a novel entitled *A Kabbalist Master (Ein kabbalistischer Lehrmeister)* about Isaac Luria, which he concluded in 1925, and was never published. See Kilcher, "Kabbalah and Anthroposophy", 207.

65 Ernst Müller, *History of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: East and West Library 1946).

66 Müller, *History of Jewish Mysticism*, 9.

the occult element in the Hebrew language . . . to the historical relations of the Jewish Gnosis with early Christianity, to the connection of Rosicrucianism with the old mystical movements, and to the efforts to place the whole of knowledge on a new basis.⁶⁷

In the introduction to *Der Sohar und seine Lehre*, published in 1920, Müller expressed his gratitude to three personalities who inspired his interest in the Zohar and Jewish Mysticism:

With gratitude I mention specifically Rudolf Steiner, who made me aware of the hidden circumstance of an all-embracing occult science; Martin Buber, who made me suspect the concealed but living pulsation of an underground spiritual Judaism; and finally, Hugo Bergman, with whom, seven years ago, I dared to make the first attempts at reading the *Zohar*.⁶⁸

Müller recognizes the two main sources of influence on his interest in and understanding of the Zohar: the Zionist approach of Martin Buber, and other Jewish thinkers of the period, who recognized Kabbalah as the vital spiritual power of the Jewish nation, and the Theosophical approach of Rudolf Steiner, who regarded Kabbalah as an expression of universal occult science.⁶⁹ Steiner's teaching had a very strong impact on Müller's interpretations of the Zohar and on his understanding of Jewish Mysticism. As Andreas Kilcher showed, Müller recounted in his memoirs that he consulted with Steiner about the truth-value of the Zohar and Kabbalah, and the latter confirmed that their content agrees with that of the spiritual science.⁷⁰ Müller's integration between the Jewish national approach that emphasized the central role of Kabbalah in Judaism, and the Theosophical/Anthroposophical perception of Kabbalah as primordial universal esoteric nature, comes to the fore in his later account of his spiritual quest through Judaism and Christianity. In this autobiographical account, Müller asserts his commitment to an integration between ancient Jewish spirituality and anthroposophy, and says:

And so, quite early, I recognized the *Zohar* text as a source of the Kabbalah, into which I gradually plunged myself. Here I saw – in an “occult revelation” – the primordial esoteric wisdom, however much transmitted in a confused way, but, nevertheless in constant connection with Jewish literature – half mystic, half popular, near-legendary – as well as with the occultism of other peoples and times.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Müller, *History of Jewish Mysticism*, 158–159.

⁶⁸ Müller, *Der Sohar und seine Lehre*, 3. I follow Kilcher's translation, “Kabbalah and Anthroposophy”, 210.

⁶⁹ Kilcher, “Kabbalah and Anthroposophy”, 202–3, 211.

⁷⁰ Kilcher, “Kabbalah and Anthroposophy”, 207.

⁷¹ Ernst Müller, “Mein Weg durch Judentum und Christentum,” *Judaica. Beiträge zum Verständnis des jüdischen Schicksals in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* 4 (8) (1952): 234–235 (and see also *ibid.*, 243). I follow Kilcher's translation, “Kabbalah and Anthroposophy”, 209–10, 214.

8 Gershom Scholem Revisited

As I have shown above, Gershom Scholem's attitude to Western esotericism and occultism was very different from that of Franck, Gaster, Abelson and Müller. Yet, I would like to show, that notwithstanding Scholem's explicit negative statements against occultists and their interpretation of Kabbalah, his attitude to Western esotericism was more complex and nuanced.

Scholem directed the disparaging attacks that I discussed above against Western esoteric circles of his time, and occult Kabbalists of the late 19th and early 20th century. Scholem's attitude to early modern western esoteric currents and to Christian Kabbalah was much more positive. Although Scholem did not regard Christian Kabbalah as authentic Kabbalah, he found much interest in it, and did not disparage Christian Kabbalists as he did the occult Kabbalists.⁷² In a letter he sent to Joseph Blau, in 1945, he wrote: "The subject of Christian Cabalism has interested me for a long time and I have made long notes about it without having published so far anything about it."⁷³ In the following years, he published one article about Christian Kabbalah.⁷⁴ Scholem did not only find interest in Christian Kabbalah, but also felt an affinity to the early Christian Kabbalist and Hebraist Johann Reuchlin, and regarded him as the precursor of his approach to the study of Judaism and Kabbalah. In a lecture he gave in 1969 in Pforzheim, on the occasion of receiving the Reuchlin award,⁷⁵ he declared:

If I would believe in metempsychosis, I could sometimes fancy myself to be, under the new conditions of research, a reincarnation of Johannes Reuchlin, the first explorer of Judaism, its language and its world, and especially of the Kabbalah, the man who, almost five hundred years ago founded the Science of Judaism in Europe.⁷⁶

⁷² Saverio Campanini, "Some Notes on Gershom Scholem and Christian Kabbalah," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 21 (2007): 13–33.

⁷³ Gerhard Scholem, *Briefe I: 1914–1947*, ed. Itta Shedletsky (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1994), 294.

⁷⁴ Gershom Scholem, "Zur Geschichte der Anfänge der christlichen Kabbala", in *Essays Presented to Leo Baeck on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday* (London: East and West Library 1954), 158–193.

⁷⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Die Erforschung der Kabbala von Reuchlin bis zur Gegenwart* (Pforzheim, 1969). The lecture was published in Hebrew translation in Gershom Scholem, *Explication and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance*, vol. 2 [Od Davar], (Tel Aviv: Am Oved [Hebrew]), 309–317.

⁷⁶ I follow the translation of Campanini, "Some Notes on Gershom Scholem and Christian Kabbalah", 14.

Scholem acknowledged the influence of the Catholic Christian Kabbalist and Freemason of the romantic period, Franz Joseph Molitor (1779–1860), on his decision to study Jewish Mysticism. In a letter to Zalman Schocken from 1937, entitled; “A candid word about the true motives of my kabbalistic studies”, Scholem wrote:

At that time, however it was Molitor’s curious book, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition*, which, falling into my hand at Poppelauer’s, fascinated me greatly. As historically unfounded as it may have been, it gave an address where the secret life of Judaism, which I had pondered over in my mediations, seemed once to have dwelt.⁷⁷

Notwithstanding Scholem’s disparagement of occultist Kabbalah, he was well acquainted with western esoteric and occultist writings. He purchased, read, and commented on the works of many occultists, including Antoine Fabre d’Olivet, Eliphas Lévi, Stanislas de Guaita, Papus, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, A. E. Waite, Wynn Westcott, Samuel Liddell McGregor Mathers, Israel Regardie and many others.⁷⁸ He also had met several contemporary occultists, such as the famous author and occultist, Gustav Meyrink and the Jewish occultist, Oskar Goldberg,⁷⁹ and corresponded with the Jewish Theosophist and Sufi from California, Samuel Lewis, who later became known as Sufi Sam.⁸⁰ In Scholem’s response to a letter that the Lewis sent him, he relates to the writing of Fabre d’Olivet, which he is familiar with, but says that he cannot estimate him as highly as Lewis does. He expresses his interest in the California esoteric circles Lewis was affiliated with, and their interest in Kabbalah, especially in the Jewish Theosophist–Kabbalist, Elias Gewurtz (without hiding his disdain for him).⁸¹

⁷⁷ I follow the translation of Biale, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 75 (the original letter, in German, is printed *ibid.*, 215–6.

⁷⁸ Burmistrov, “Gershom Scholem and das Okkulte”, 25–9. It is interesting to note that Scholem had in his possession two rare documents of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn which were written by William Butler Yeats (The pamphlet “is the order of R.R. & A.C. to remain a magical order”, and a machine typed postscript to the pamphlet). The documents are found in Scholem’s Library, 10217.1. See: Amos Goldreich, *Automatic Writing in Zoharic Literature and Modernism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press 2010), 350 [Hebrew].

⁷⁹ Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 129–130, 132–4, 146–9; Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 117–21, 129, 132–3.

⁸⁰ Gershom Scholem response to Lewis, dated April 5, 1948, is published in Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. 2, 1948–1970, ed. Thomas Sparr, München 1995, 5–6. Samuel Lewis letter to Gershom Scholem, dated 14 March 1948, is found in Gershom Scholem papers, The National library in Jerusalem, 4-^o1599, file 234. I am grateful to Jonatan Meir who informed me of the letter and supplied me with a copy of it. On this correspondence, see Jonatan Meir, “The Beginning of Kabbalah in America: The Unpublished Manuscripts of R. Levi Isaac Krakowski”, *Aries* 13 (2013): 268.

⁸¹ Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. 2, 5. Burmistrov, “Gershom Scholem und das Okkulte,” 33–34.

Despite his disdain and criticism, Scholem found some merit in the approach of some occultists to Kabbalah. Thus, for instance, he wrote that the books of Arthur E. Waite (who was a member of many occult groups, including the Theosophical Society and the Order of the Golden Dawn) on Kabbalah, *The Doctrine and Literature of Kabbalah* and *The Secret Doctrine of the Kabbalah* “are some of the best books written on Kabbalah from a theosophical perspective.”⁸² In a review of Waite’s *The Holy Kabbalah*, published in 1931, Scholem expressed his appreciation of Waite’s intuition and his understanding of the central place of sexual symbolism in the Kabbalah.⁸³ In the first chapter of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, he declared that Arthur E. Waite and Franz Molitor were the Christian scholars with mystic tendencies who revealed “real insight into the world of Kabbalism”. Yet, he was disappointed that the “fine philosophical intuition and natural grasp” of Molitor and Waite, “lost their edge because they lacked all critical sense as to historical and philological data in this field”.⁸⁴ Although Scholem dismissed the Theosophical Society as ‘pseudo-religion’⁸⁵ and lamented the ‘misuse or distortion’ of kabbalah in the writings of Madame Blavatsky’s circle,⁸⁶ in 1944 he wrote in a letter to Joseph Blau:

You are certainly too harsh on Madame Blavatsky, it is surely too much to say that the meaning of cabala has been forgotten in the ‘Secret Doctrine’. After all, the Lady has made a very thorough study of Knorr von Rosenroth in his English adaption, and of Franck’s ‘Cabale Juive’. She certainly knew more about cabalism than most of the other people you mention. She did, of course, use the term Cabala in a very large and depraved meaning, and includes Maimonides and the Mishna in the orbit of cabalism, adding a lot of phantastical stuff of her own [. . .] I think it might be rather interesting to investigate the cabalistical ideas in their theosophical development. There is, of course, a big lot of humbug and swindle [!], but, at least in Blavatsky’s writings, yet something more.⁸⁷

Although Scholem distanced himself from occult movements, he published in 1926 a translation of a passage from the Zohar, entitled “*Chiromancy in the Zohar*” in G. R. S. Mead’s *The Quest* journal,⁸⁸ to which A. E. Waite, Evelyn Underhill, and other occultists and Theosophists, as well as scholars such as

⁸² Gerhard Scholem, *Bibliographia Kabbalistica* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1927), 158.

⁸³ Gerhard Scholem, “Review of ‘Waite, A. E.: The Holy Kabbalah’,” *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 7 (1931): 638.

⁸⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 2.

⁸⁵ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 206.

⁸⁶ Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 133.

⁸⁷ Scholem, *Briefe*, 294; Burmistrov, ‘Gershom Scholem und das Okkulte’, 28–30.

⁸⁸ Gershom Scholem, “*Chiromancy in the Zohar*” *The Quest* 17 (1926): 255–56.

Moses Gaster, contributed articles. Robert Eisler (1882–1949), who was a regular contributor to *The Quest*, and who was the person who introduced Scholem to Gustave Myerink, made connection between Scholem and Mead.⁸⁹ As it is well known, Scholem also took part at the famous Eranos meetings in Ascona, and published several articles in the Eranos Yearbook. The wealthy Dutch woman Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, who was interested in Theosophy and other esoteric currents, and became a close follower of Jung, organized the Eranos conferences. The conferences, who initially included esotericists, such as Alice Bailey, developed into a meeting place for scholars of religion with interest in the mysticism and the occult, including luminaries such as Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, Gilles Quispel, D. T. Suzuki, and many others.⁹⁰

9 Theosophy and Mysticism

The ambivalent attitude of Kabbalah scholars to occult movements, and the complex connections between the academic and western esoteric perceptions of Kabbalah, come to the fore in the use and discussions of the term “Theosophy”, a central term in Western esotericism, which became central in the modern academic study of Kabbalah.

Since the early modern period the term Theosophy referred to religious illumination and unmediated knowledge of divine matters. It became associated with the esoteric ideas of Christian theologians, especially in Germany, such as Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), Friedrich Christopher Oetinger (1702–1782) and Franz von Baader (1765–1841). In the late 19th century, the founders of the Theosophical Society chose the term to designate their nascent organization.

Christian theologians in the 18th century were the first to use the term theosophy in connection to Kabbalah. The connection between Kabbalah and

⁸⁹ Goldreich, *Automatic Writing*, 348. In his introduction to Scholem’s article, Mead relates that his translation from the Zohar, was taken from a collection of Zohar physiognomical passages, that Scholem sent to Eisler, for future publication in a series of Jewish mystical texts (see Scholem, “*Chiromancy in the Zohar*”, 255). On Scholem’s connection with Robert Eisler, see Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 126–135.

⁹⁰ On the Eranos Circle, and Scholem’s participation in the conferences, see: Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religions after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy, Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 277–314; Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014).

theosophy comes to the fore in the title of Georg von Welling, *Opus mago-cab-alisticum et theosophicum*, published in 1721. The Christian theologian and freemason, Franz Joseph Molitor adopted the understanding of Kabbalah as theosophy.⁹¹ Several Jewish scholars of Kabbalah in the 19th century adopted the term and referred to Kabbalah as theosophy. Christian Ginsburg accepted the identification of Kabbalah as theosophy in *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development and Literature*, which was first published in London in 1865. Ginsburg, a prominent English scholar of Jewish Eastern European descent, who converted to Christianity, opened his book by defining Kabbalah as “a system of religious philosophy, or more properly of theosophy”.⁹²

Modern occult circles accepted the identification of Kabbalah as theosophy. Possibly, the founders of the Theosophical Society were influenced in the choice of the term by the identification of Kabbalah as Theosophy. It is interesting to note that Madame Blavatsky’s first use of the term theosophy, which appeared in her letter to Hiram Corson, from February 1875, is a paraphrase of Christian David Ginsburg’s description of Kabbalah as theosophy.⁹³

Gershom Scholem and his followers adopted the identification of Kabbalah as a form of theosophy. In his magnum opus, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, published in 1941, Scholem suggested that the best way to characterize the book of the *Zohar*, the major text of Kabbalah, is “Jewish theosophy”: “If I were asked to characterize in one word the essential traits of this world of Kabbalistic thought, those which set it apart from other forms of Jewish mysticism, I would say that the *Zohar* represents Jewish theosophy, i.e., Jewish form of theosophy”.⁹⁴ Scholem identified theosophy as one of the two major elements in Kabbalah, alongside mysticism. According to his definition Kabbalistic theosophy “seeks to reveal the mysteries of the hidden life of God and the relationship between the divine life on the one hand and the life of man and creation on the other.”⁹⁵ The term theosophy became a central term in the scholarship of Kabbalah, and today most scholars use it (sometime together with the term theurgy) to characterize the main forms of Kabbalah that are related to the theory of the Sefirot.

⁹¹ Koch, Katharina, *Franz Joseph Molitor und die jüdische Tradition: Studien zu den kabbalistischen Quellen der ‘Philosophie der Geschichte’*, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 76–8.

⁹² Ginsburg, Christian D., *The Kabbalah, its Doctrines, Development and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1865), 83.

⁹³ See, Huss, “Qabbalah, the Theos-Sophia of the Jews”, 160, note 4.

⁹⁴ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 203–6.

⁹⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 4.

Scholem was aware of the centrality of the term theosophy in Western esotericism, and distinguished between his use of the term, and its “abuse” by the Theosophical Society:

Before proceeding further, I should like to indicate in a few words what I am trying to express by using this much abused term *theosophy*. By theosophy I mean that which was generally meant before the term became a label for a modern pseudo-religion, i.e., theosophy signifies a mystical doctrine, or school of thought, which purports to perceive and to describe the mysterious workings of the Divinity perhaps also believing it possible to become absorbed in its contemplation . . . Theosophists in this sense were Jacob Boehme and William Blake, to mention two famous Christian Mystics.⁹⁶

This short paragraph illustrates the complex relations between the academic study of Kabbalah and Western esotericism. On the one hand, Scholem conveys his contempt to the Theosophical Society – which, following René Guénon, he calls “pseudo religion”.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, he chooses the term theosophy – a key term in early modern and modern Western esotericism, as the best term to characterize the Kabbalah. Furthermore, although Scholem disparages the Theosophical Society, he compares the Zohar to two early modern Christian western esotericists – Jacob Boheme and William Blake.

Finally, before concluding, I would like to mention another central notion, shared both by scholars of Kabbalah and modern occultists – the identification of Kabbalah as mysticism. Although today the identification of Kabbalah as a Jewish form of a universal mystical religious phenomenon is very prevalent, it should be noted that this notion first appeared only in the 19th century. The idea that Kabbalah is an expression of a universal mystical experience is not found amongst traditional Jewish Kabbalists, and it is still contested by many contemporary Kabbalists. As far as I know, the first to characterize Kabbala as Jewish Mysticism was the Christian Kabbalist and Freemason, Franz Molitor. This identification was later accepted both by Jewish scholars of Kabbalah and by western esoteric and occult circles.

The academic scholars of Kabbalah, and the late 19th and early 20th century occultists, used the term mysticism as it became to be understood during that period, that is, as a universal religious phenomenon of direct experience or union with the divine or transcendent reality. Several scholars of religion, some of them affiliated also with western esoteric circles – such as William James,

⁹⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 206.

⁹⁷ René Guénon, *Le Théosophisme – Histoire d’une pseudo-religion* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie nationale, 1921).

Ralph Inge, and Evelyn Underhill, formulated this definition, which is still prevalent in religious studies.

The use of the term mysticism, and its application to Kabbalah, entails several presuppositions, which are shared, and central both to Kabbalah scholarship and modern occultists. The definition of Kabbalah as Jewish Mysticism identifies Kabbalah as a Jewish expression of perennial, universal, trans-historical religious phenomena. It is assumed that Kabbalah as a form of mysticism is similar, and essentially identical with mysticism in other cultures.

Furthermore, the understanding and interpretation of Kabbalah as a form of universal mysticism entails a certain theological stance, which is prevalent, and central to modern esoteric and New Age movements, Kabbalah scholarship, and religious studies. This modern, ecumenical theological stance postulates a divine or transcendent reality – usually perceived as a non-theistic impersonal metaphysical reality – which can be encountered and experienced by human beings in certain, unique states of consciousness.

Samuel Lewis, a.k.a. Sufi Sam, the Jewish occultist from California, who became one of the father figures of the New Age movements, recognized the essential affinity between Scholem's attitude to Jewish Mysticism, and his own, occultist approach. Praising Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, he wrote: "Your work seems both clear and self-explanatory and include what I think is most important – the validity of the inner experience itself." In his response, Scholem distanced himself from esotericism: "I must confess that I have never been initiated into any esoteric circle, and in interpreting Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism at all, I have been relying on my own intuition and that measure of understanding which a careful analysis of difficult texts on a philological basis may afford".⁹⁸

Notwithstanding Scholem's reservations, it seems that Sufi Sam has indeed identified the existence of a fundamental common stance shared by both occult Kabbalists, and modern scholars of Kabbalah – the perception that Kabbalah, as well as practices designated as "mystical" from other cultures, are expressions of a universal mystical, inner, experience of the divine. This modern, liberal, ecumenical stance is prevalent in Kabbalah scholarship as well as in many other disciplines of religious studies. This modern theological stance is also central in occult and western esoteric movements, and stands at the core of New Age and contemporary spiritual movements.

⁹⁸ Scholem, *Briefe*, vol. 2, 1948–1970, 5. See Burmistrov, "Gershom Scholem und das Okkultte," 33–34.

10 To Conclude

Gershom Scholem and his school of academic Kabbalah scholarship expressed a negative, disparaging attitude to the western esoteric and occult circles who studied and practiced Kabbalah. This negative attitude is dependent on the Jewish national perspective and the historical–philological approach of Scholem and his disciples. They denied the authenticity of occult Kabbalah because it was created outside a Jewish framework, and because its practitioners lacked academic expertise.

Yet, the relations between Kabbalah scholarship and Western esotericism are more complicated and nuanced. First, we should note that before Scholem, and during his time, there were other scholars, who found interest in the occult, and who had connections with western esoteric movements. Scholem's attitude to Western esotericism was also more complicated and nuanced. Although he disparaged occult Kabbalists, he had a more positive appreciation of Christian Kabbalah and early modern western esoteric currents. He regarded Johann Reuchlin as the forerunner of Kabbalah scholarship, and acknowledged the great impact that Franz Molitor had on his interest and understanding of Kabbalah. Furthermore, there are also significant terms, presuppositions and theological perspectives, which Kabbalah academic scholarship and western esoteric and occult circles share. These include the definition of Kabbalah as theosophy and mysticism, the recognition of Kabbalah as a Jewish expression of universal religious phenomena, and the modern, ecumenical belief in unmediated encounters of mystics from all cultures with a transcendent reality. Kabbalah scholarship and Occult Kabbalah have shared genealogies, significant connections, and common ideas. The recognition, and study, of these complex relations can contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of both Kabbalah scholarship and modern Western esotericism.

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