

# Structural Implications in the Sepherot

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All is number. Pythagoras said it, but Newton also could have, though their meanings would be very different. Yet each of them, the ancient Greek and the founder of the mechanical world-view, found in the tool we call 'number' a profound method for characterizing experience. So did many people of many other cultures and times.<sup>1</sup> While they each may interpret their use of number in wildly different ways there remains the fundamental pattern that lies below the explanation, the technique, of using number to characterize experience. The major difference between the ancient and modern use of number is the difference between its modern *quantitative* application and its ancient *qualitative* application. It is this qualitative use, fallen into disrepute in modern times, that we will concern ourselves with here.

Pythagoras, for the west, expressed a widely held intuition about the general character of experience: All is number. This is to say that there is something about the way numbers are experienced that is found in all experiences of the world. Applying this, it can be said that any experience can be characterized as having the quality of a particular number. This permits the categorization of experience into sets constituted by the relationships experiences have with their associated numbers.

Obviously this use of number is radically different from that used modernly. While we tend to view numbers as summed counters, the ancients saw numbers as divisions of a fundamental Unity. Each number was the number of parts the Whole was divided into and this begets certain relationships among the parts which in turn characterized the quality of that number of divisions.

One great power of this strategy is that it can be used as a 'metaphysic'. Since number could be found in all experience, it provides a way of generalizing about experiences that one has had to those one hasn't yet had. One can then on this basis begin to speculate about those experiences and seek them out by applying the system.<sup>2</sup> Also, as a metaphysic, the use of number to categorize experience provides a means with which to give order to a chaotic world or, conversely, to find what order is available within a chaotic system. Since orderly response to life's challenges is required for an organism to survive, a way of finding order in a chaotic system is survival prone. Numbers suit this purpose admirably by being non-physical but are found in everything physical, thus require nothing but a mind that understands their use.

A consequence of using numbers as divisions of the whole is a tendency towards wholistic thinking. The systems based on this proposition group themselves in whole sets: 'X' process-subject is said to have 'Y' finite-integer parts or degrees of freedom. The result is that anything related to 'X' can be fit into one or more of the 'Y' divisions of 'X' as a whole. Thus anyone who learns the 'Y' parts of 'X' will have acquired a comprehensive knowledge of 'X', and thus be effective in its application. One knows what to expect in a given situation and what else to look for when confronted with part of a situation. When whole systems are built on a numerical basis they are built around the number that constitutes the base of the system, thus in the decimal system it is built on sets of 10, while the sexagesimal system on sets of 60.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. 'Numbers', *Encyc. of Religion*

<sup>2</sup> A modern example of this is the discovery of new elements by seeking the substances that fit in missing slots in the Periodic Table of the Elements.

Besides numbers themselves, another more specialized whole set is available to those cultures that use writing. This is an extension of the same theory as with numbers but now applicable to larger meaning complexes such as words. Some, as in the case of the Tibetan Buddhist, the meanings were associated with the letters (syllables actually) through their being the initials of key words.<sup>1</sup> In those cultures whose lettering systems were also used as numbers (e.g., Hebrew, Greek, Arabic) the ‘meanings’ attributed to the letters were dependent on the associations given to the numbers and transferred by correspondence to the letters and inversely, the sum of the values of combinations of letters added to the meanings associated with numbers. 2

We have in the history Kabbalah documentation of the development of one such system. By tracing the development of the technique we will find a pattern of progressive complexification, each building on the previous layer. Each layer of the process whereby meaning is added to meaning is here termed a meta-narrative. A meta-narrative is a story about a story. It is frequently interpretive, being the explanation of the meaning of a story and becoming a story itself thereby. This notion of story is not limited to dramatic plot-lines, though this is a viable technique and one we will find present in Kabbalah. A ‘story’ in this sense could be any expression about experience, truth-value notwithstanding. The meta-narrative comes into play as an explanation of the original story that exerts a determinant influence upon the relationship the ‘reader’<sup>2</sup> of the original story to that story. It is an explanation about a story that changes its meaning for the ‘reader’ who entertains both the story and the explanation. Adding a meta-narrative to a narrative is therefore adding more structure, as it were a super-structure, to the original story. Here is where the increasing complexity will emerge in Kabbalah. But before we can approach the Kabbalah we must search out its roots.

Pythagoras’ intuition that ‘All is Number’ was a religious intuition. It was a glimpse into the rationality of the universe, an order founded on divisions of the One. That ‘all is number’ showed the ubiquitous nature of this divine principle. It had practical application in music (proportional scales), aesthetics (the Golden Measure or Phi), and in architecture (same). Number therefore was efficacious. This set of doctrines had a profound impact on the West and provided the root for further numerological speculations. The Neoplatonists built on this, developing a doctrine about the One as “the object of religious aspiration. It was conceived as a transcendent, infinite, productive goodness and freedom attainable through mystical experience. The One distributes love (*eros*) to all souls; this love in turn leads each soul back, with the necessary attendant intellectual and moral effort on the part of the soul, toward mystical union with the One.”<sup>3</sup>

In the very least, due to the Hellenization of Palestine, the Jewish mystics came in contact with these ideas. We find them using neoplatonic formula about the nature of the One such as the differences seen among the Sepherot being only from the point of view of the perceiver.<sup>4</sup> However, it should be recognized that the impulse to use numbers is universal and so what we may be seeing here is a convenient phrasing in the common tongue of the learned in that day. In other words they could have come upon this idea on their own. Nonetheless it is the Neoplatonic formulation of the One that found its way into the Kabbalah, no doubt because it was so congenial to Jewish monotheistic theology.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Beyer, *The Cult of Tara: Pam=Padma=Lotus (Compassion) Family of Buddhas, Tam=Tara=Matron of Tibet.*

<sup>2</sup> ‘reader’ here stands for the subject of any process whereby one receives the ‘story’

<sup>3</sup> cf. ‘Neoplatonism’, *Encyc. of Religion*

<sup>4</sup> Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 138.

Another aspect of the neoplatonic formulation that was congenial to the Jews was the way of *unio mystica*.<sup>1</sup> Through the love of the One and through the effort of the soul the individual could attain to mystical experience. At this time there was already present to the Jewish mystics the Heikhalot and Merkabah literature which gave techniques for heavenly ascent.<sup>2</sup> However, as this ascent in the Heikhalot literature does not include actual knowledge of the nature of the Godhead it leaves yet something more to do.<sup>3</sup>

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In effect, the Jewish mystics were challenged with a need to extend their cosmos. The Heikhalot literature corresponds to the ancient world view that the cosmos was composed of a series of concentric spheres, seven of which correspond to the planets and one further to the fixed stars. These the Jewish mystics experienced as the seven Palaces and the chariot. But they were left with the challenge that when you get to the end of the system, you have still not met God, and God must be superior in some manner to the cosmos which He rules. Enter Sepher Yetzirah.

While the Pythagoreans say that all is number, and number is efficacious, and while the Neoplatonists say that the number One is God, the Jews, due to their biblical heritage can say the number One is Our God. The Bible, the Tanak, is the principle narrative of the Jews. The statement that Our God is One is explicitly part of that narrative. But when assimilated to the neoplatonic unity, the unity of God can be interpreted as (Number) One is Our God, a meta-narrative is being formed. The textual expression of this meta-narrative is the Sepher Yetzirah which forms the corner stone of the Kabbalah.

The Sepher Yetzirah accomplishes two tasks on the way to establishing a system of cosmology. On the one side it associates a number set with the process of creation. This is the closed set of the first ten numbers called Sepherot. They are only discussed, and that ambiguously, in the first chapter of Sepher Yetzirah. On the other it attributes cosmic order meanings to the lettering system. It was out of the letters that all things were created. This by implication also addresses number-meanings because of the numerical values of the letters, but this is not explicit in the Yetzirah. Much of the rest of the text discloses the means whereby certain aspects of universe, particularly the Elements, the Planets, and the Zodiacal Signs, are associated with the alphabet. These aspects are further extended into a complete system through their association with a day or month and parts of the human body. This results in the creation of a triform media: Numbers as Sepherot comprise the whole of existence. Letters as creative speech comprise the combinatory parts of that whole. Texts describing the Numbers and the Letters create narrative disclosing their properties. Interestingly this is what is claimed by Sepher Yetzirah itself: "And He created His Universe with three books,/ with text, with number, and with communication."(1:1)

Upon the foundation meta-narrative provided by Sepher Yetzirah later Kabbalists would build, adding more completeness to the system and developing those areas not covered by the original text such as a detailed doctrine of the Sepherot. Methods for doing this are given in the text. As Aryeh Kaplan points out in the Hebrew the grammatical construction for saying "he did such-in-such" could be equally interpreted as saying "you (command form) do such-in-such".<sup>4</sup> Thus the reader is counseled to perform the sealing of the six directions given in S.Y.(1:13), he is told how to meditate in 1:8, he is counseled to perform the combinations of letters (2:4), and other processes as well throughout. The result of this will be insight into the

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<sup>1</sup> Qualified among the Jewish mystics as not including actual union until latter, see below.

<sup>2</sup> Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, p. 92 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p.11

<sup>4</sup> Kaplan, *S. Yetzerah*, p. 90.

nature of creation and its Creator, the *ma'aseh bereshit*. Or, to state this in the terms used above, one who uses this system would harvest an intuition about the general character of experience, a religious intuition. Naturally some would apply these techniques and have experiences. Otherwise there would be no prohibition upon teaching it as one does not hide the trivial. Should these be written down and collected, in spite of the prohibition, they would be very valuable for those attempting to explore such realms. Enter Sepher ha-Bahir. 4

With the Bahir the task of developing the vague notions of the Sepherot first presented in Sepher Yetzirah into more discreet powers comes to the fore. Scholem finds that “in Sepher ha-Bahir [the Sepherot become] divine attributes, lights and powers, each one of which fulfills a particular function in the work of creation.”<sup>1</sup> In the Bahir is the development of a symbolic language based on the Yetzirah and particularly focused on the Sepherot. Scholem describes it as “a Midrash or a collection of sayings without any definite sequence of thought.”<sup>2</sup>

As a collection of sayings the Bahir is a meta-narrative building on the foundation provided by the Yetzirah, expanding it and developing it. It functions as a hyper-text in that every term or idea that it addresses from the Yetzirah it explodes into an abundance of symbols and associations. This is a natural progression from the previous stage represented by the Yetzirah which forms the outline of the system. If the system is to develop, the ambiguous and vague would need to be clarified and explicated. A first step towards this is done by the Bahir.

But the Bahir does not eliminate all ambiguity. As Scholem points out, the question as to whether God is distinguished from the first Sepherot is open, for example. The fact that the Bahir is not clearly organized and that the critical edition is still in fragments shows that it embodies a level of systemic order that simply expands upon the Yetzirah but does not increase the degree of structure in the system. This is the simplest way of adding to the system, just adding to its associations, and many who follow will do this. But for an increase in the actual *degree* of order we must turn to the Zohar.

The Zohar is much like the Bahir in that it is a collection of discourses and stories based on the Sepherotic model founded in the Yetzirah and added to by the Bahir. However, its function as a meta-narrative, an interpretation of the story a people live by, is extremely direct. The Zohar does this by being a Midrash on the Torah, the core story of Israel. While the Yetzirah is an cosmogonic interpretation of the Creation process and the Bahir is a development upon this foundation, the Zohar takes this inheritance and reweaves it back upon the biblical text itself, in the midrashic tradition, finding those Kabbalistic ideas within the text and ordering them by means of the text and prime narrative, the Torah.

Doing so closed the reflexive loop in the system being created, in which the Torah points to Kabbalah, and Kabbalah points to the Torah. This is one place where the degree of order to be found in this number-and-letter cosmology is increased. A potential order at the level of the meta-narrative embodied by the Yetzirah and the Bahir is in the Zohar actualized and given structure by the Torah. By being in a certain sense a story about group of mystics it acquires yet another level of coherence and structure, one that shows how the Kabbalistic life can be embodied. Reflexivity comes in the dynamic interplay of these three kinds of order in the person of the reader and user of the Kabbalistic method. The Torah provides the ground of meaning, the Yetziratic attributions (with Bahiric gloss) provide the technique and medium to be applied to the mystic task, and the Zohar provides still more depth of symbolism and more

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<sup>1</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 314.

<sup>2</sup> Scholem *Kabbalah*, p. 313

importantly a new narrative level showing what can be done with the method. This leads to the next strata of Kabbalah, its practitioners. 5

To keep within the scope of this paper we will examine the doctrines of one practitioner of the Kabbalah in light of our thesis: Isaac Luria. The particular challenge to Luria's era is the reality of Evil, embodied in the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and the human response to it. To address this Luria's system locates the origin of evil in a cosmogonic catastrophe called the Breaking of the Vessels. In brief, for creation to begin, the Divine needed to contract, *tzimtzum*, away from a space in the midst of its infinite Self. Through a complex and variously described series of steps the emanation of the divine was to enter into the vacated space contained in certain vessels which would be the. But, due to some flaw, variously understood, the light pouring into the vessels shattered the vessels and disrupted the original divine order. This caused the demotion of each of the which then descended from its proper place to the station of the one below it. In this disrupted state five new hypostases of the ten Sepherotic powers emerged called *partzufim*, or faces, having a highly anthropomorphic character. The divine light that was to flow into the now shattered vessels was trapped by the shards of the vessels and the repair, *tikkun*, of the entire system to its original state was dependent on freeing those sparks of light from the shards. It fell to humans to perform the task of *tikkun* to liberate the sparks and hasten the restoration of the world.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, this is a new system of order built upon its predecessors.

The character of this system is such that it both embraces, by explanation, evil in the world and also provides something new to do about it. For a people in exile, this is a powerful mode of engagement, as their actions will actually help bring about the messianic age wherein they will be restored to their proper place. In it we again find a new interpretive narrative being layered over the previous strata. What is new about this narrative is that it is a response to a crisis, the Expulsion. It provided a way to understand how the Exile was of mystical and cosmic significance wherein Israel has a pivotal roll to play.<sup>2</sup> Another way of saying this is that Luria and his circle reinterpreted the received Kabbalah in the light of the challenges of their day. Our next step also entails just such a reinterpretation by another group, the Christians.

For the Christians the Kabbalah represented a *pistis sophia*, a wisdom primordial and previous to the Christian revelation. Frances Yeats develops this argument at length.<sup>3</sup> Pico della Mirandola, the first Christian to study the Kabbalah drew such propositions from it as that quoted by Scholem, "no science can better convince us of the divinity of Jesus Christ than magic and the Kabbalah."<sup>4</sup> This startling claim is a combination of heavily interpolated translations and sheer projection. Wirszubski shows that some of the claims made by Pico derive from his translator's inserts into the texts he was reading.<sup>5</sup> Wirszubski also shows Pico hard at work using Kabbalistic *ars combinandi* to 'prove' a Christian interpretation of letter symbolism.<sup>6</sup> He further points out that two different strands emerge when we look seriously at Pico's Christian Kabbalah. The first is the old evangelical program of using "Jewish interpretations of the Scriptures as proofs of Christianity... [through] a Trinitarian or Christological interpretation superimposed as a kind of supercommentary on carefully selected texts."<sup>7</sup> The second is "a mystical interpretation of Christianity by the same methods that

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<sup>1</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah* pp. 128-144.

<sup>2</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 246.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Yeats, *Bruno*.

<sup>4</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 197.

<sup>5</sup> Wirszubski, *Pico*, esp. chpt. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 169.

Jewish Kabbalists use for the discovery of hidden truth in the documents of revelation”<sup>1</sup>  
 It is this latter that Wirszubski claims as the “beginning of truly Christian Kabbalah.”<sup>2</sup>

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The importance of this claim has to do with how the Christians, at first in the person of Pico, appropriated the Kabbalistic structural technique and method for generating insight. In their hands Kabbalah again becomes a categorical system stripped of much of the rabbinic doctrine and reapplied to Christianity. One example of this, albeit barely Christian but of the generation immediately following Pico, is to be found in the fantastic arrays of sciences, arts, letters and images of Giordano Bruno. As documented by Yeats, Bruno studied Pico, as well as the rest of the Florentine Platonic Academy, and from there acquired his Kabbalah. One question Dame Yeats does not answer in her inquiry is what gave Bruno the impetus to create such elaborate systems of correspondence one after another? What would be the purpose of such an elaborate memory system. I speculate that if he was convinced as the efficacy of the letter mysticism of Abulafia, who Pico studied<sup>3</sup>, he was seeking to make a system of letter correspondence that would incorporate all of classical knowledge. Since the classics were his scripture and the Roman-Greco-Egyptian his mythos, he may have been seeking a system that would invoke those forces, as opposed to the potencies of the Bible. Here it is the structure and the method that is being appropriated, and not the content of Kabbalah.

Another peculiar example of this kind of appropriation can be found in Alchemy, which Scholem cites as entering Christian Kabbalah in the late 16th century<sup>4</sup>, to wit, *Cabala: Spigel der Kunst und Natur — in Alchymia*, a set of four etchings attributed to ‘Stephan Michelspacher’ as the designer and ‘Raphael Custodis’, sculpsit or engraver.<sup>5</sup> (Both are probably pseudonyms.) They were first printed in Ausberg by David Francken in 1616, although Adam McLean alludes to evidence that they had been around from the middle of the 1500’s.

On first glance there is little of Kabbalah except in the title and as a word in a banner on the second plate. But when we look at the diagrams for letter mysticism we find in the same diagram with “Cabala” emblazoned upon it, a pair of concentric circles with the German version of the Roman alphabet written in one ring with alchemical substances or signs written in the other. Besides being corresponded by location, each sharing a division of the circle, the letter of the alphabet is also the initial letter of the associated substance or sign. The only justification for making any association with Kabbalah is through the technique of letters associated with the potencies indicated by the ‘featured’ word, which is what the substances and signs symbolized to the alchemist. In the third diagram there is also a hint of the divisions among the letters given in the Sepher Yetzirah. The Elements, the Planets and the Zodiac, are ranked in three separate orbits around the central image, but this would be far fetched without the previous letter associations. The last diagram clearly shows a Christ figure and places this set of images firmly in the camp of Christian Kabbalah, but it can only belong there due to the claim of its title and the use of the letter association technique and structure.

With the next wave of innovation we pass even farther beyond the pale of Hebrew Kabbalah. In 1856, Eliphas Lévi published in *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* a correspondence between the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the twenty-two trumps of the Tarot. As noted by to Lévi’s biographer McIntosh, “Modern occultists take this

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<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Wirszubski, *Pico*, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 200.

<sup>5</sup> published in *The Alchemical Mandala*, ed. Adam McLean.

connection so much for granted that it tends to be forgotten that there is absolutely no historical evidence that the two were in any way related. Court de Gébelin does not mention the Cabala [sic] in his section on the cards; and Etteilla, though he was a practitioner both of the Cabala and the Tarot, did not make any systematic attempt to relate them. Lévi, therefore, appears to have been the first to do so.”<sup>1</sup> That this is not well received by the Jews is exemplified by Scholem’s denouncement of it.<sup>2</sup> As for the occultists, this wove together the last major strand in their armorium in to a single (potentially) coherent system.<sup>3</sup> Many systems of attribution have been developed since that day and are evidenced by the collection of tarot decks in the possession of the present author from all over Europe, employing a variety of arrangements. They can be grouped roughly by linguistic group and by lineage. However alien the tarot may be to the Kabbalah, the attribution of yet another symbol set to it is a completely natural application of the structural technique. One set of twenty-two is configured with another set of twenty-two, little different than Sepher Yetzirah’s lists in its fifth chapter. This time, like with alchemy, and to a certain extent like with Christian symbolism, the associations are being made with symbols outside the Tanak.

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Among non-Jewish English speakers S.L. MacGregor Mathers’ synthesis of the Kabbalah is of preeminent influence. As the English translator of Knorr von Rosenroth’s *Kabbala Denudata*, which, according to Scholem, “served as the principle source for all non-Jewish literature on Kabbalah [and] determined the image of Kabbalah in the eyes of historians of philosophy until the close of the 19th century,”<sup>4</sup> it placed him in a unique position to interpret the Kabbalah. As a co-founder and principle leader of the most influential Hermetic magickal order in modern times, he was in a powerful position to apply the Kabbalah. Both of these he did. Without going into the full impact of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn as it lies beyond the scope of our thesis, suffice it to say that the dominant correspondence system between the Tarot and the Alephbet used by occultists today is that of the Golden Dawn. But where the real innovation lies is in the extensive ritualization of Kabbalistic symbolism and in the extension of that symbolism beyond Judaism and Christianity.

As to the former, Mathers, along with the rest of the Golden Dawn creative core, merely applied the ritual potential available in the Kabbalah seriously. However, instead of building upon the Jewish liturgy, it sought to invoke astrological forces, and others, by means of Hebrew Names of God and the Alephbet through the correspondences of the Sepher Yetzirah.<sup>5</sup> From this basis, compounded with Hermetic doctrines developed by Marcello Ficino<sup>6</sup> and those who followed him, the Golden Dawn, read Mathers, developed an elaborate system of invocations as a process of theurgy and thaumaturgy. The entire system was then harmonized to the Sepherotic system.

As to the latter, here is where *Hermetic* Kabbalah is born. Starting with the classical correspondences to astrological symbolism found in the Yetzirah, the Golden Dawn, in particular Mathers, added both the Greek and Roman pantheons. But why stop there? So he added the Egyptian as well, although not as effectively due to the state of Egyptology of that day<sup>7</sup>, and the door was at last thrown open. What was there to stop any set of symbols from being added to the array of attributions? Only organization.

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<sup>1</sup> McIntosh, *Lévi*, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup> together with astrology, angelology, cosmology, and alchemy.

<sup>4</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 416-7.

<sup>5</sup> cf. *The Golden Dawn*, ed I. Regardie.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Yeats, *Bruno*.

<sup>7</sup> even though he was working with Sir Wallace Budge, also a member of the Golden Dawn.

This organization was provided by the creation of a table of correspondences keyed to the thirty-two paths of the Sepher Yetzirah called '777'. Originally it was compiled by Mathers in scattered tables for the use of the Golden Dawn, and further added to by Alan Bennett.<sup>1</sup> Aleister Crowley later published the work including correspondences from the Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, and Islamic traditions, as well as others. Although slammed by Scholem as ignorant of Kabbalah,<sup>2</sup> we can see that what Crowley inherited was the structural technique embodied in Kabbalah to organize experience.<sup>3</sup> We can find this in his instructions on the use of the Kabbalah: "The student must not expect to be given a cut-and-dried definition of what exactly is meant by any of all this. On the contrary, he must work backwards, putting the whole of his mental and moral outfit into these pigeon-holes. You would not expect to be able to buy a filing cabinet with the names of all your past, present and future correspondents ready indexed: your cabinet has a system of letters and numbers meaningless in themselves, but ready to take on meaning to you, as you fill up the files. As your business increased, each letter and number would receive fresh accessions of meaning for you; and by adopting this orderly arrangement you would be able to have a much more comprehensive grasp of your affairs that would otherwise be the case. By the use of this system the magician is able ultimately to unite the whole of his knowledge—to transmute, even on the Intellectual Plane, the Many into the One."<sup>4</sup>

What we have seen is a process of meaning creation. Meaning is layered on top of meaning, relationship is added to relationship. What permits this to function without degenerating into noise is the simple foundational structural expedient of the numbers and the letters. Since the numbers and the letters are an abstraction, although originally generated and nurtured into a depth of meaning in their nascent context, the Tanak, the structure they embody could be extended to regions beyond their cradle and applied in virtual isolation from their home.

There remains the question as to what would drive humans to create systems of order with increasing complexity like we have seen. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's notion of Flow provides a working hypothesis. 'Flow' is the optimization of experience through the balancing of challenge with skill. When, in a given experience, there is too much challenge and not enough skill, the person feels anxiety. When there is too much skill and not enough challenge, boredom is felt. The result of balancing challenge with skill is the Flow experience which is a species of ecstasy.<sup>5</sup> The desirability of this state is so great that those who have learned to generate it for themselves will be willing to endure hardship the rest of the time for the sake of generating flow when possible. Successful artists and athletes are good examples of practitioners of this technique. Kabbalah can do this for the mystic or the mage.

Since the task outlined by this hypothesis is to be able to match skill with challenge in an experience, by having a system of order with variable and willable degrees of complexity one can at will organize experience with the requisite amount of complex order to engender flow. A number and letter system of order such as provided in the Kabbalah can be used to increase the challenge to bring about requisite degree of order in the most mundane or exalted of tasks. In any given instance, more or less meaning and import can be added to the experience. Prime examples of this process are the mystical interpretations of the *mitsvot*<sup>6</sup> (through proper

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<sup>1</sup> Colquhoun, *Sword of Wisdom*, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> see especially Crowley's preface to 777.

<sup>4</sup> Crowley, *Magick*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Jewish religious laws



*kavvanah*<sup>1</sup>) and the engagement with Torah shown in the Zohar bringing forth insightful and beautiful *midrashim*<sup>2</sup>.

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What the Kabbalah we have examined shows is a profound degree of flexibility in this task. Each level of development increases the degree of order in the system. By being structured with a system of order that permeates the system recursively at all levels one can address many different degrees of complexity at will but still using the same organizational structures. Being a system of information, and thus not physical, it is able to be carried by the user and applied anywhere without dependency on physical objects.

What we are seeing at each stage of the development of the Kabbalah is what happens when the complexity of the challenge of one degree of order has been matched by enough skill. Boredom then results and the only way then to redeem the system back into a state of flow is to increase the complexity in the system, either by expanding the scope of the system (adding new attributions) or by increasing the over all degree of complexity of the system, that is, increasing its overall quantity and quality of relationships (such as the Yetzirah did for the Torah, and as the Zohar did for Kabbalah overall). When at last we see the Christian and Hermetic appropriation of the Kabbalah, we are seeing the application of the system and its strategies being applied outside the original context. Here the degree of overall complexity drops due to being abstracted from the Jewish cultural context and tradition and must be rebuilt to be able to engender the same degree of flow. This is what we are seeing in Bruno's arrays of attributions, in the text '777', and in the various 'channeled' writings from the Hermetic school<sup>3</sup>, which all endeavor to bring more meaning and context back to the borrowed system, increasing its ability to engender flow.

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<sup>1</sup> right union or love

<sup>2</sup> commentary on scripture or experience.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Crowley's Liber AL vel Legis, Fortune's Secret Doctrine, Blavatski's Cosmic Doctrine, &c.

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**Editor's Forum: What makes the Qabalah such a valuable resource for Students?**

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The principle virtue of the Qabalah is that it is a comprehensive system of symbols. It is an excellent, wholistic map of the Cosmos, including realms beyond the physical. This very completeness however, is also its greatest disability.

While its fundamental structure is a description of the whole of existence it is still open enough to embrace other systems into a functional syncretism. "777" is an example of this power. As a comprehensive symbol system it may be used to articulate the will of the practitioner towards almost any conceivable end. The Qabalah also serves well as a common language shared with other practitioners.

Ultimately, however, it is a box and can trap the practitioner. For all of its elegance one must remember that it is a just map and not the territory. For certain experiences the Tree with its implicit assumptions constrains with overbearing order. Too much certainty about the nature of existence can blind one to what is actually happening. While this is a danger with any system it is particularly the problem with one so complete and venerable as the Qabalah. To apply a system to any actual event is to risk a Procrustean interpretation. One's expectations and categories of analysis may not fit the reality and yet the experience is forced to fit. Yet so often, and especially for the beginning student, this is an acceptable risk when weighed against the deficits of inaction. The long term solution is to acquire skill in several, mutually contradictory systems. However the ultimate solution comes only with the ability to lay down all systems and preconceived notions about experience and touch reality immediately.