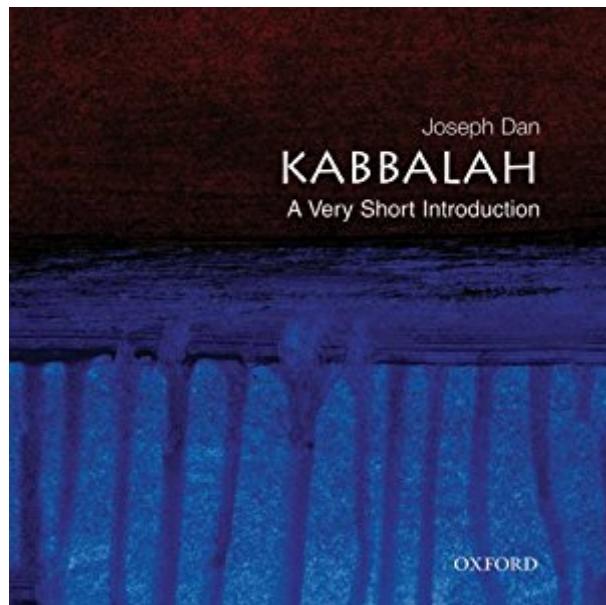


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# Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

In *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction*, Joseph Dan, one of the world's leading authorities on Jewish mysticism, offers a concise and highly accurate look at the history and character of the various systems developed by the adherents of the Kabbalah. Dan sheds light on the many misconceptions about what Kabbalah is and isn't - including its connections to magic, astronomy, alchemy, and numerology - and he illuminates the relationship between Kabbalah and Christianity on the one hand and New Age religion on the other. The book provides fascinating historical background, ranging from the mystical groups that flourished in ancient Judaism in the East, and the medieval schools of Kabbalah in Northern Spain and Southern France, to the widening growth of Kabbalah through the school of Isaac Luria of Safed in the 16th century, to the most potent and influential modern Jewish religious movement, Hasidism, and its use of kabbalistic language in its preaching. The book examines the key ancient texts of this tradition, including the *Sefer Yezira* or "Book of Creation", the book of *Bahir*, and the *Zohar*. Dan explains *Midrash*, the classical Jewish exegesis of scriptures, which assumes an infinity of meanings for every biblical verse, and he concludes with a brief survey of scholarship in the field and a list of books for further listening. Embraced by celebrities and integrated in many contemporary spiritual phenomena, Kabbalah has reaped a wealth of attention in the press. But many critics argue that the form of Kabbalah practiced in Hollywood is more new-age pabulum than authentic tradition. Can there be a positive role for the Kabbalah in the contemporary quest for spirituality? In *Kabbalah*, Joseph Dan debunks the myths surrounding modern Kabbalistic practice, offering an engaging and dependable account of this traditional Jewish religious phenomenon and its impact outside of Judaism. About the series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, *Very Short Introductions* offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts, for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is perhaps the best short introduction to the Kabbalah that I've seen. Unlike many popular introductions to the subject, this book does not pretend to make you a Kabbalist or teach you supposedly Kabbalistic techniques and practices. And, unlike many scholarly treatises, it gets right to the point and makes the subject accessible to the average reader. But don't get me wrong - Joseph Dan - a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem - has impressive scholarly credentials, including his previous works "The Early Kabbalah" and "The Teachings of Hassidism." Dan describes the competing theories of the origins of the Kabbalah, and traces its development through the Middle Ages and on into modern times. There are chapters on the Christian Kabbalah, the Safed school and Lurianic Kabbalism, and on the controversial "false Messiah," Shabbatai Zevi. Dan also explores the impact of the Kabbalah on Hasidism and the Habad movement, and recounts the often hostile attitude towards the Kabbalah within the rabbinical schools. Finally, Dan explores the continuing impact of the Kabbalah in popular culture and the New Age movement. Illustrated with black-and-white woodcuts and illuminations, this book is an excellent introduction to a topic notorious for its obscurity.

Joseph Dan is one of the world's great academic experts on 'Kabbalah'. As he explains in the opening of the book, the word 'Kabbalah' has many meanings in everyday life. It can mean 'the reception' of a hotel, or a 'receipt' for a bill paid. But its meaning in religious terms is 'the reception of religious teaching' of the Torah in its entirety, including the Oral Torah, the Mishna, Gemara and also subsequent mystical texts such as 'The Zohar' and 'The Bahir.' Dan traces the changing meanings of 'Kabbalah' from the second century on down. He provides brief descriptions of its major teachers, from Shimon Bar Yohai to the Ari. He explains how the Lurianic Kabbalah which developed in Safed became a dynamic transformative element in Jewish history when it helped bring about that spiritual revolution in Jewish Life called 'Hasidism'. Dan also relates to contemporary misusings and cheapenings of the whole concept of Kabbalah in so-called 'New

Age' teachings. He above all shows how the teachings of Kabbalah have been a major element in Jewish spiritual development down the centuries. This is an excellent summary, and a very good place to study and begin to learn what 'Kabbalah' is truly about.

Joseph Dan's "Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction" has a number of shortcomings. Nonetheless, it offers a good introduction to the subject. The book takes an approach that is largely historical, beginning with a chapter on key terms that presents some historical background, and then continuing with chapters on ancient Jewish mysticism, medieval Jewish kabbalah, modern Christian kabbalah, and several modern Jewish mystical and kabbalist movements (i.e., Safedian and Lurianic kabbalah, Sabbatianism, Hasidism, and contemporary kabbalah). Some of the chapters are excellent (especially chapters two, three, and six). But all the chapters are good, and the book contains a wealth of useful information. It is impossible to understand kabbalah without some knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic Judaism, which unfortunately cannot be adequately explained in a short introduction. Still, much of Dan's book will be accessible to readers with little previous exposure to the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic Judaism, and I would recommend Dan's book to anyone who is new to kabbalah. Regardless, I have a few complaints, which I will now set forth. First, Dan greatly minimizes the ecstatic tradition of kabbalah associated with Abraham Abulafia. Granted, the ecstatic tradition may not have dominated medieval and modern kabbalah as did the theosophical-theurgical tradition (represented by the Zohar etc.), but the ecstatic tradition nevertheless exerted a significant influence on Safedian kabbalists, Hasidism, and even medieval theosophical-theurgical kabbalah, as Moshe Idel makes clear in his book "Kabbalah: New Perspectives." (See, e.g., Idel's discussion of Moses Cordovero on p. 101 and his discussion of Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazy on pp. 149-50.) Moreover, ecstatic kabbalah is intrinsically interesting apart from its historical importance, and should not be marginalized as Dan has done. Second, although Dan spends a few pages on the subject, he fails to provide an adequate explanation of the theosophical-theurgical interpretation of the mitzvot in terms of the sefirot, which is arguably the heart of the theosophical-theurgical tradition (one of the two main kabbalist traditions, the other being the ecstatic tradition which Dan largely ignores). Some examples, such as those found in Adin Steinsaltz's "The Thirteen Petalled Rose," would have been helpful here. Third, Dan's discussion of the various theosophical-theurgical interpretations of the sefirot is extremely brief - too brief, I believe, for such an introductory text. (For details, see Idel, "Kabbalah: New Perspectives.") Fourth, Dan's discussion of Hasidism is overly brief and confusing. For example, he says little to clarify the role of theurgy in Hasidism or Hasidism's relationship with ecstatic kabbalah.

On page 94, he describes the chief difference between the Hasidim and the mitnagdim ("the Opponents") as follows: "While the Opponents are essentially loyal to the Lurianic kabbalistic concepts, the Hasidim introduced some new concepts, especially concerning mystical leadership and messianism, into their version of the kabbalah." This is a badly inadequate summary of Hasidism, and Dan neglects to mention some of the most important aspects of Hasidism in the pages that follow, though he does provide a good explanation of the roles of the zaddik, dynastic leadership, and messianism in Hasidism. On page 103, Dan says that "Traditional kabbalah exists today mainly within the Hasidic communities." What does he mean by "traditional kabbalah"? He doesn't specify, but whatever he means, it's problematic. Suppose that by "traditional kabbalah" he means Lurianic kabbalah. In this case, it should be pointed out that popular Hasidism rejected much of Lurianic kabbalah, at least initially. (I see Lurianic elements in some contemporary Chabad writings, but I wonder how recent or widely studied such ideas are in Chabad. At any rate, as I have already quoted, Dan himself says on page 94 that the Opponents were much more loyal to Lurianic kabbalah than the Hasidim.) Alternatively, suppose that by "traditional kabbalah" Dan means either the medieval theosophical-theurgical tradition or the medieval ecstatic tradition. In that case, it should be pointed out that Hasidism retained elements of both these traditions but rejected others, while Lurianic kabbalah (and so according to Dan the Opponents) did the same. In conclusion, I cannot make sense of Dan's statement that "Traditional kabbalah exists today mainly within the Hasidic communities." Fifth, I think that Dan's definition of mysticism on pages 10-12 is defective. For a definition that I believe is superior, see page xviii of Idel's "Kabbalah: New Perspectives." Despite these complaints, Dan's book is really quite a good introduction to kabbalah, and I strongly recommend it. Finally, I should mention that most of the shortcomings of the book are almost certainly due to the spatial limits imposed by Oxford's Very Short Introduction series. I look forward to reading Dan's monographs in the future.

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