

# THE LITERATURE OF KABBALAH



Certainly, hundreds of books and thousands of papers have been written on *Kabbalah*. Nonetheless, the essential literature consists of just three fundamental works – the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Bahir*, and the *Zohar*.

Legend has it that the *Sefer Yetzirah* was written by *Abraham*. That, however, is just a myth. The *Sefer Yetzirah*, which is the oldest existing work of Jewish mysticism, talks extensively about the mystical properties of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and this alphabet didn't even exist in the time in the time of *Abraham*. Instead of the text being authored in the time of *Abraham*, linguistic analysis suggests that it was more likely written around 200 CE during the same period that the *Talmud* was being comprised.

The name “*Sefer Yetzirah*” is often translated as “*Book of Creation.*” However, others like to call it the “*Book of Formation.*” This is because “*yetzirah*” comes from the verb “*yatzar*” which refers to “*something from something*” creation as opposed to “*something from nothing*” creation which is represented by the verb “*bara.*” In other words, *yatzar* is the type of creation that focuses on formations or rearrangements made from existing materials.

Even though the name “*Sefer Yetzirah*” implies “*something from something*” creation, the text itself covers both “*something from something*” and “*something from nothing*” creation as well as an ancient technique of Jewish meditation that is reminiscent of Buddhist techniques of mindfulness.

The next major text in Jewish mysticism is the “*Bahir*” or “*Book of Illumination*,” also called the “*Book of Brightness*.” It was published in the 12<sup>th</sup> century almost a thousand years after the likely composition of the *Sefer Yetzira*, and it gives a fascinating portrait of how ideas and concepts in *Kabbalah* evolved over time. Its authorship is often attributed to a 1<sup>st</sup> century sage named *Rabbi Nehunya ben HaKana*, but that attribution is doubtful. When you compare the *Bahir* with the *Sefer Yetzira*, there is a clear development and progression of thought that can easily be discerned.

The *Bahir* is in many ways a *Cliff Notes* version of everything that came before. You find in it not only references to notions from the *Sefer Yetzirah*, but also references to earlier rabbinical writings that touch upon the deeper mysteries of life.

In many ways I think of the text of the *Bahir* as like the writings of a student who took notes in a class in an earlier generation and then passed them on to someone in a later generation. The notes often just paraphrase what was originally said. Sometimes they say it better, and sometimes they may even make a few errors.



The third essential work of Jewish mysticism is known as the “*Zohar*,” the book of “*Splendor*” or “*Radiance*.” Again, while legend attributes the authorship of the *Zohar* to 2<sup>nd</sup> century rabbi named *Shimon bar Yohai*, a critical analysis of the text confirms that it was most likely written and published in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by *Rabbi Moses de Leon*.

Whereas the *Sefer Yetzirah* is a very short work that can be read in a single sitting, the *Bahir*, in contrast, is book length, and the *Zohar* is a work of several volumes.

Because of its length and complexity, many take the *Zohar* to be the starting point of *Kabbalah* and the place where one's studies should begin.

However, I start much earlier with the *Sefer Yetzira*, the oldest text we have on Jewish mysticism. As I say, if you really want to understand a subject, go back to where it all began.