

THE LITERATURE OF THE BIBLE



As I often say, *Kabbalah* and Jewish mysticism are essentially extensions of the literature of the *Bible* and rabbinic literature.

Some people want to study *Kabbalah* without any reference to the rest of *Judaism*, but for better or worse, it doesn't really work that way.

Thus, the more you know about the *Bible*, the better off you will be in your study of *Kabbalah*.

The Hebrew *Bible* is known as the “*Tanakh*” which is an acronym for its three parts – *Torah* (the five Books of *Moses*), *Nevi'im* (prophets), and *Ketuvim* (writings).

To study the Hebrew *Bible*, it is also good to know a little Hebrew. However, if you don't, then if you at least learn the Hebrew alphabet and possess a good dictionary of Biblical Hebrew, then by itself will enhance your studies quite a bit.

The *Torah*, or the five Books of *Moses*, is often interpreted differently within *Judaism* than without. Much of this is due to the fact that the text contains both many wordplays and interesting numerical patterns.

For example, *Adam* was called “*Adam*” because his body was came from “*adamah*,” the earth. Similarly, if you look at the *Priestly Blessing* (*Numbers 6:24-26*) in Hebrew, you will notice that the first verse contains 3 words, the second verse has 5 words, and the third verse has 7 words. This creates the arithmetic sequence 3, 5, 7, and the sum of these numbers is 15 which is the *gematria* (numerical value) of *Yah*, one of the names for *God* in Hebrew. These patterns are unlikely to be coincidences.

Contrary to *Mosaic* tradition, scholarly analysis suggests that the Hebrew *Bible* originated as a series of oral stories which were later committed to writing. This belief that the *Bible* came from a variety of sources is known as the *Documentary Hypothesis*.

Scholars have detected four main sources for the Biblical narratives that they designate as *J* (from the southern Kingdom of Judah), *E* (from the northern Kingdom of Israel), *D* (from authors in Jerusalem), and *P* (from the priests).

Furthermore, we often find in the *Bible* what appear to be conflicting stories that have been pushed together side by side. For example, in *Genesis* we find two creation stories for humans – one in which man and woman are created together (*Genesis 1:27*), and another in which woman is created from a rib or side of man (*Genesis 2:21-22*).

Given that the stories in the *Bible* were originally oral traditions, I suspect that much of the wordplay and number play found in the *Bible* existed originally as memory devices, to help the storyteller remember the exact tale. However, I am also certain that other verbal and numerical patterns were inserted into the text in order to impart additional meaning. It is those additional patterns that we often seek to uncover by analyzing both the words and their corresponding numbers.

An important subset of the *Bible* is what I know as the *Wisdom Literature*. This term usually refers to the books of *Job*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs*, *Proverbs*, and various *Psalms*.

Notice, for example, that we find in *Torah* the promise that if we do good, then good things will happen, and if we do bad, then bad things will happen. However, our experience suggests that the world is more complex than that, and it often appears that the good suffer while the bad prosper.

This kind of inconsistency demands from us a deeper probing into the nature of reality, and this is what much of the *Wisdom Literature* does. And I believe that this is the true start of Jewish mysticism and *Kabbalah*. Life experience requires that we look for deeper explanation of what the *Torah* teaches, and the result is a greater and more mystical view of the world.

Thus, I particularly recommend not only reading the *Torah*, but also a thorough study of *Job*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *Proverbs* before beginning the study of Jewish mysticism. This won't be time wasted as many of the concepts of Jewish mysticism and *Kabbalah* find their origin within the *Wisdom Literature of Judaism*.

And later on, when we get to the *Zohar*, we'll see that it is *Song of Songs* that it is very important to have some familiarity with. This book is the portion of *Wisdom Literature* that is quoted most often in the *Zohar*, and that is because *Song of Songs* is seen as a metaphor for the love between *God* and the Jewish people.