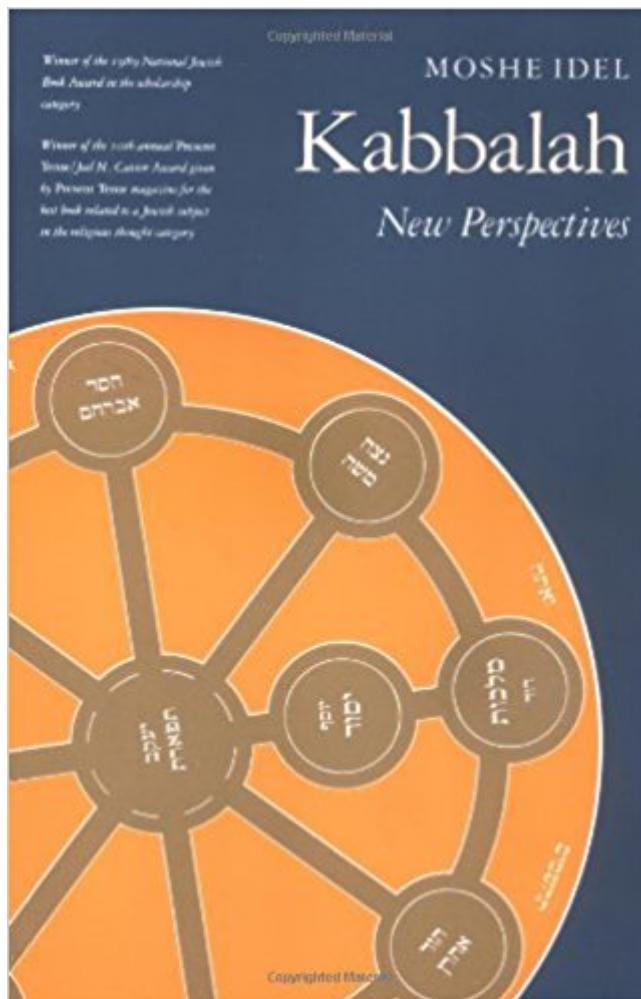


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Kabbalah: New Perspectives



Synopsis

In this prizewinning new interpretation of Jewish mysticism, Moshe Idel emphasizes the need for a comparative and phenomenological approach to Kabbalah and its position in the history of religion. Idel provides fresh insights into the origins of Jewish mysticism, the relation between mystical and historical experience, and the impact of Jewish mysticism on western civilization. Idel's book is studded with major insights, and innovative approaches to the entire history of Judaism, and mastery of it will be essential for all serious students of Jewish thought. Arthur Green, *New York Times Book Review* "Moshe Idel's original, scholarly, and stimulating study of Kabbalah contains the promise of a masterwork." Elie Wiesel "Moshe Idel's book can help the nonspecialized reader to reconsider the whole of Kabbalistic tradition in comparison with many aspects of contemporary thought." Umberto Eco "There can be no dispute about the importance and originality of Idel's work. Offering a wealth of complementary insights to Gershom Scholem and his school, it will command a great deal of attention and serious discussion." Alexander Altmann

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Customer Reviews

In this prizewinning new interpretation of Jewish mysticism, Moshe Idel emphasizes the need for a comparative and phenomenological approach to Kabbalah and its position in the history of religion.

Moshe Idel's "Kabbalah: New Perspectives" may be the greatest academic book on kabbalah that

has yet been written in the English language. I say this for a number of reasons. First, the book is both comprehensive and detailed. Idel analyzes both the theoretical views and spiritual practices of every major kabbalist tradition of the medieval and modern periods (though the contemporary period is largely neglected), and he pays a great deal of attention to the historical development of each tradition. Second, Idel advances a number of important theses concerning these traditions, and many of his theses are strongly supported by extensive textual citations (the book contains dozens - perhaps hundreds - of extended quotations from kabbalist texts, many of which have never been translated into English). Moreover, the level of Idel's argumentation is often quite high, and I was frequently impressed by his acumen when reading the book. Third, Idel repeatedly engages with the work of other scholars of kabbalah (especially Gershom Scholem). Idel is often critical of these scholars, and I cannot be sure that he always presents their views accurately. However, if the book should contain some inaccuracies on that score, which I suspect it might, I would only attribute them to the lack of charity scholars often display when discussing the work of their peers, which is sadly common but not necessarily malicious. At any rate, Idel's engagement with the work of other scholars is often interesting and instructive. These are not the only virtues of the book, but they are its main virtues, and they are more than enough to support a hearty recommendation. Unfortunately, despite its numerous virtues, the book also suffers from a number of problems. First, the book assumes that the reader is already familiar with the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic Judaism, ancient Jewish mysticism, ancient Gnosticism, medieval and modern kabbalah, ancient Greek philosophy, ancient Jewish philosophy (i.e., Philo), medieval Jewish philosophy (e.g., Maimonides and ha-Levi), and to some extent the New Testament. Names of thinkers, texts, and movements are often referenced with no explanation, and the book contains untranslated and unexplained terms from both Jewish and ancient Greek philosophical texts. In short, the book is written for experts, and while this may not be a fault in itself, I think that Idel could have easily included a glossary that would have helped to make the book much more accessible to non-experts. Frankly, despite the high praise the book has received from general readers on the internet, I cannot help but wonder whether many non-experts are able to follow its central arguments. Second, while Idel's argumentation is often quite good, as I mentioned above, I think that he does a rather poor job of defending some of his most important theses. In particular, his attempts to establish an ancient Jewish pedigree for many medieval kabbalist ideas are often weak and unconvincing. Indeed, these attempts often seem rather strained to me, and they mar what would have otherwise been a nearly flawless work. I'm surprised that other reviewers (at least on popular websites) have failed to criticize Idel on this score, though again I wonder how well many general readers have followed the arguments. At any

rate, I don't have the time or space to write a full critique here, and so I'll have to confine myself to a few general observations about a limited number of cases. At the beginning of chapter six, Idel writes as follows: "In the following discussion, I present the thesis that the motif of a divine anthropomorphical decad, instrumental in the creation process, was part of ancient Jewish thought; this decad was presumably the source of the ten Sefirot of *Sefer Yezirah*..." (112). In other words, Idel defends the thesis that the medieval kabbalist notion that God created the world through a divine decade - i.e., the sefirot, which are often depicted anthropomorphically in medieval kabbalah - was significantly influenced by ancient Jewish thought, and that ancient Judaism had already developed (or inherited?) the idea that God created the world through a "divine anthropomorphical decad." (The *Sefer Yezirah* is not a kabbalist text, but it exerted a tremendous amount of influence on medieval kabbalah, as Idel himself notes.) This is a bold thesis, and, if correct, it would be quite significant. So, what evidence does Idel cite on its behalf? None that is very convincing. It would be impossible for me to examine Idel's arguments in detail here, but I can say that he adduces a number of ancient Jewish and Gnostic texts that do not remotely support his thesis. On the one hand, there are rabbinic texts (e.g., *Tractate Avot*) that allude to God creating the world by ten divine attributes or ten "creative logoi," but it is far from clear that these texts should be taken literally (for example, the texts from *Tractate Avot* seem to have an exclusively didactic purpose). However, even if the texts should be taken at face value, they contain no mention of a decad that is anthropomorphic in any way. On the other hand, there are ancient Gnostic texts that allude to a primordial or cosmic man that plays some role in creation and that is somehow associated with a decad, but there is no evidence of such an anthropomorphic decad playing any role in creation in the rabbinic texts. Apparently, Idel wants the reader to infer that there must have been ancient Jewish traditions to the effect that God created the world by means of a divine anthropomorphic decad on the grounds that (a) ancient Jewish mysticism influenced rabbinic thought, ancient Gnostic thought, and medieval kabbalah, (b) rabbinic texts contain allusions to God creating the world by means of a divine (albeit non-anthropomorphic) decad, and (c) there are ancient Gnostic texts that contain allusions to God creating the world by means of a divine (or primordial or cosmic) anthropomorphic decad. However, it is clear that any such inference is purely speculative and completely lacking in logical support. Thus, Idel has failed to provide evidence that supports the existence of such an ancient Jewish tradition. In fact, there is strong reason for doubting the existence of such an ancient Jewish tradition. For suppose that Idel is right, and that there was an ancient Jewish tradition according to which God not only created the world by means of a divine decad, but that the decad was anthropomorphic. What then explains the fact that numerous rabbinic

texts allude to creation by means of a divine decad while none of these texts mention anything about the decad being anthropomorphic? Are we to suppose that the rabbis were moved to embrace an older tradition but couldn't bring themselves to accept the part about the decad being anthropomorphic, or that they accepted this part of the tradition but consciously refused to comment on it in writing even though they were willing to comment in writing about the decad itself? Alternatively, should we suppose that the failure of the rabbis to comment on the anthropomorphic nature of the decad was purely accidental even though the decad itself is mentioned in several rabbinic texts? No such explanation seems terribly plausible, but the omission demands an explanation. Furthermore, the anthropomorphic nature of the Gnostics' decad differs considerably from that of the medieval kabbalists' sefirot, and there is no reason to think that both didn't greatly innovate in different ways on an ancient Jewish mystical or rabbinic decad that was thoroughly non-anthropomorphic. Idel himself seems to appreciate the weakness of his own case, for he later remarks that "the Gnostic ideas of Creation by means of a decad recur in rabbinic sources that do not, however, explicitly mention the anthropomorphic nature of the ten creative logoi. We can nevertheless attempt to reconstruct such a presumably ancient Jewish perception from oblique references..." (121-22). So, after spending some ten pages defending his thesis, Idel admits that no clear textual evidence can be found. And while he asserts that his thesis can be vindicated by hypothesized reconstructions from admittedly oblique references, the evidence just isn't there. (Would it help Idel to drop the thesis that ancient Jewish texts contain clear references to God creating the world by means of an anthropomorphical decade and content himself instead with the thesis that ancient Jewish texts contain clear references to God creating the world by means of a decad, whether anthropomorphic or not? No, because such references cannot always be taken literally, and at any rate there is no evidence whatsoever that the allusion to God creating the world by means of ten creative logoi in Tractate Avot, for example, exerted a substantial influence on medieval kabbalist thinking about the sefirot, as Idel himself would surely agree.) To be honest, I am somewhat astounded by Idel's decision to posit a thesis with so little support and his subsequent refusal to withdraw the thesis even after admitting that the evidence is so weak. Perhaps the reader will feel that I am being unfair to Idel. After all, he acknowledges that there is no direct textual support for his thesis that rabbinic thought contained a tradition according to which God created the world by means of a divine anthropomorphic decad, and that the existence of such a tradition is hypothetical. Nonetheless, Idel clearly has great confidence in the existence of such a tradition, and his rhetoric often suggests that the evidence for the hypothesis is rather strong. Indeed, he describes the hypothesis as a "thesis" and says that the ancient Jewish tradition "was presumably

the source of the ten Sefirot of Sefer Yezirah." What matters is not whether Idel refers to his position as a "thesis" or "hypothesis" - what matters is how strongly he believes his position is supported by the evidence. And again, Idel believes that there is strong evidence for the existence of the ancient Jewish tradition in question. However, the evidence is non-existent, and it seems to me just as bad to assert a thesis with no evidence as to advance an hypothesis with no evidence, especially if one's rhetoric suggests that one views the hypothesis as highly probable. Unfortunately, Idel's book contains many other examples of such problematic claims. For instance, consider Idel's discussion of "augmentation theurgy" in chapter seven. At the end of the discussion, Idel writes: "There is no major difference between midrashic and kabbalistic theurgy. We can conclude that a certain stream of thought about the significance of the commandments, rooted in midrashic and Talmudic texts, was elaborated upon in the theosophical Kabbalah, which regarded theurgical activity as the main *raison d'être* of the commandments." (See p. 166.) As before, this claim is extremely bold, and Idel has utterly failed to vindicate it, as I believe a close study of his arguments will show. Idel has failed to make a decent case that theurgy played a significant role in rabbinic thought, and he has certainly failed to show that mainstream rabbinic thought recognized the possibility of exerting causal influence over the state of the divine essence through the performance of mitzvot, which is central to so much kabbalist theurgy. (Not all kabbalists viewed the sefirot as constituting the divine essence, hence the qualification "so much.") His arguments for the rabbinic origins of kabbalist theurgy in chapter seven suffer from questionable reasoning, inadequate evidence, and a loose approach to the interpretation of texts. Moreover, I think that several attempts by Idel to trace strong forms of medieval and modern kabbalist theurgy to rabbinic literature in other chapters suffer from the same defects. (His discussion of Midrash Haskem in chapter eight seems especially problematic to me.) And there are other examples of poorly defended claims in the book that could be adduced. I am persuaded by Idel's arguments that ancient Gnosticism probably exerted a negligible influence on medieval kabbalah, and that many apparent cases of such influence are better explained by supposing that medieval kabbalah was influenced by ancient Jewish mysticism, and that the latter influenced Gnosticism without Gnosticism influencing much of ancient or medieval Jewish mysticism. Moreover, I am generally sympathetic with Idel's claim that rabbinic thought was more mystical than the texts always suggest on their surface, and that it may be possible to find traces of "hidden" mystical ideas in rabbinic texts through a close comparison of them with medieval kabbalist texts. Still, any such reconstruction is fraught with peril, as Idel himself notes, and I am sorry to report that I think he has often failed to heed his own warning. I should mention that I am not an expert on kabbalah, and that I would welcome any challenge to my criticisms. Nonetheless, I have

read the book carefully, and I must stand by my assessment for the time being. There is one final complaint about the book that I want to register, though the complaint is not directed at Idel alone. Like other scholars of kabbalah such as Joseph Dan, Idel suggests at one point that the rise and success of medieval kabbalah can be explained at least in large part by the fact that kabbalist theurgy invested the faithful Jew's performance of mitzvot with cosmic significance (something I do not dispute), and that this made dedication to the mitzvot more attractive than it otherwise might have been. Perhaps Idel and these other scholars are right. Perhaps the system of mitzvot as presented in rabbinic texts was simply too boring or burdensome to command the loyalty of many Jews over the centuries without the cosmic significance conferred on them by kabbalist theurgy. But I'm not convinced. I am a Christian, not a Jew, but I find the system of mitzvot expounded in the Talmud and other rabbinic texts to be incredibly beautiful and inspiring. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that I see the fingerprints of God all over the Talmud. I realize that this statement will likely concern Christians and Jews alike given my own religious convictions, but I cannot undertake a Christian theology of the Talmud here, and whatever I might write on the subject probably isn't worth anyone's time. Let me just say that I am not at all convinced that the Talmud needed any assistance from medieval kabbalah in order to recommend itself to faithful Jews. Granted, medieval kabbalist theurgy may have enhanced the status of the mitzvot for many Jews, but one should be very hesitant to claim that the Talmud needed the kabbalah. I could say more here, but I'll move on. Idel's book contains so much that is excellent that I am perplexed by the existence of its failings. Still, I have said enough about the vices of the book, and I want to concentrate on its virtues in the remainder of this review. For, it is perfectly natural that a work as ambitious as Idel's should contain some dross as well as much gold, especially in a field such as kabbalah, which in many ways is still so young. And even the dross here can be instructive. Thus, let me emphasize that Idel's book is full of valuable insights into medieval and modern kabbalah. His handling of kabbalist traditions and texts is generally brilliant, he successfully clarifies a wide range of kabbalist concepts and themes (of which mystical union and symbolism are just two examples), and his views on kabbalist history and historiography are often quite rigorous. To cite just one example, Idel makes a convincing case that ancient Gnosticism exerted a negligible influence on medieval kabbalah, as I mentioned earlier. This is a significant result, and the book contains many more such results. Let me be clear: Idel is a great scholar, and he has written what is probably the most important book on kabbalah in English, whatever its shortcomings. If you have a serious interest in kabbalah, then you simply must read this book.

As a Jewish-born mystic-philosopher, I've long been fascinated with the Kabbalah--but, unfortunately, a great book on it has yet to be written (and believe me, I'm aware of what's been written on the subject, including Qabalistic renditions by Crowley, Fortune, and others). Moshe Idel's "Kabbalah: New Perspectives" is a fine historical academic examination of the subject, but in no way does it begin to penetrate to the mystical-spiritual or theurgical-theosophical core of the Kabbalah. As an academic book, "Kabbalah: New Perspectives" is a work of outstanding scholarship and a rewarding read for anyone looking to gain intellectual insight into the emergence and development of Kabbalistic mysticism and occultism--but it will take an electrical guru-thinker to provide the radical (or gone-to-the-root), demystifying exegesis that the Kabbalah so desperately needs.

A must for those interested in Kabalah, but read Gershom Scholem's ORIGINS OF THE KABALAH first, a better introduction to Kabalah than the Kabalah itself, in my informed opinion

THE BOOK ARRIVED IN A PERFECT CONDITION. THE COVER SHOWN IS THE ONE OF THE HARDCOVER EDITION. THIS PAPERBACK EDITION IS IN FINE PRINT, VERY DIFFICULT TO READ.

I think moshe idel is 1 of the best writers on kabbalah I have 2 more of his books he never disappoint me get one of his books and see for yourself

Based on the recommendations, this should prove to be a wonderful and scholarly book, but I have many more books on my list before I can get to it.

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