

Mysticism Historicized: Historical Figures and Movements

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The word *mysticism* derives from the Greek verb *muo*, “to hide” or “to close.” The adjectival form *mystikos*, which means “hidden” or “clandestine,” was originally used in relation to Greek mystery religions, which involved specific initiation rituals (Bouyer 1981, 43). These religions were not open, and initiates who joined had to be formally admitted through a process of secret rites. The term then changed meaning, and from the early first-century Jewish philosophy of Philo of Alexandria (who was Hellenistic, or culturally Greek) and also early Christian texts, *mystikos* came to represent “mysterious” interpretations of scriptures. These were mainly allegorical understandings “hidden” just beneath the surface: that is, interpreters understood the stories of the Bible to be figurative representations of abstract philosophical concepts.

Both these definitions—of secret groups with initiation rituals and of mysterious scriptural interpretations—have persisted throughout history and are still important today. But the term has also come to denote a certain experience and/or sublime cognition of that which is beyond mundane, everyday life. Some scholars have defined mysticism as “the direct and immediate experience of ultimate reality” (DeConick 2010, 300) or as “direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence” (Scholem [1961] 1995, 4; McGinn 2002, xiii). Some have seen this direct experience or consciousness as purely subjective and internal, never fully open or accessible to the outside observer (James [1902] 2002), whereas others have seen it as a social practice in which those who have left the sensory world return, eager to tell others of their visions and experiences (Certeau 1992). As one scholar has summarized the discussion, “Even a cursory survey of scholarly literature on mysticism reveals a rich diversity of definitional strategies, theoretical agendas, and methodological concerns” (Parsons 1999, 4).

How, then, can mysticism possibly be studied? One way is through the approach of history. Discussing historical figures and movements in mysticism allows for inclusive definitions that incorporate ideas of mystery and initiation, interpretive strategies, and direct experience and/or consciousness. This discussion begins with the premise that whether mysticism is purely a subjective experience or a social practice, it has a recorded aspect that is open to analysis and explanation. This is what makes it part of history. The historical approach recognizes that mysticism is not merely an abstract or otherworldly theological

notion, but that it has left temporal and empirical traces within human society. By “temporal” we mean that the records of the great mystics were written at specific times, and by empirical we mean that they were written under specific contexts and circumstances. It is the task of the historian of mysticism to examine those times and circumstances to shed light on the historical and phenomenal processes that make up mysticism and to consider whether certain phenomena can be classified as mystical.

Although the historical approach to mysticism can certainly be applied to a host of religious expressions deriving from many of the traditions of the world, this chapter discusses only representative examples from Judaism and Christianity, for two reasons. First, this focus allows for case studies that are connected to one another through time and in context. Second, it allows the historian to make a comparative analysis of mysticism in two separate religious traditions. In this second regard, what follows is not an exhaustive account and only includes select, representative movements and figures that are subject to historical comparison. Sometimes the movements and thinkers discussed were in direct contact, sometimes they were influencing one another, and sometimes they were influenced by common sources.

THE HEBREW BIBLE

This historical survey begins with the Hebrew Bible, the main common source of influence for Christian and Jewish forms of mysticism. The term *Hebrew Bible* denotes the collection of texts considered to be canonical, or authoritative, by both Judaism and Christianity: this corresponds to the *Tanakh* of Judaism and the Old Testament of Christianity. It includes the Pentateuch, or the five books of Moses, and what are known as the Prophets and the Writings.

Within the narratives of these texts is a wealth of material that could be considered mystical. For example, in Genesis 17:11 a figure known as Abraham is initiated into a communal covenant with God through the ritual process of circumcision. In Nehemiah 8:8 the priests interpret the Torah, or the book of teaching, for the common people. The existence of this interpretation gives a sense that the priests are possibly revealing an underlying, hidden meaning. Finally, biblical prophets continually have direct and immediate experiences of God. In a famous passage in Exodus 3, for example, Moses, who is considered by both Judaism and Christianity to be the greatest prophet of the Hebrew Bible, has a direct and immediate experience of God through a bush that is set aflame but is not consumed.

Such episodes have been interpreted in a mystical manner in contemporary film. In the 1998 animated feature *Prince of Egypt*, Moses’s experience at the burning bush is a direct experience of the Divine that initiates him into the secret realm of cosmic consciousness. God speaks to Moses from a bush that is burning but is mysteriously not consumed, and the flame actually envelops Moses in an initiatory manner. Moses’s eyes show a sense of fear but also of sudden understanding, and alongside the booming voice of God are heard the voices of Moses and his siblings, from both the past and the future. This is all a cinematic deviation from the strict word of the biblical text that casts the story in a mystical light.

Regardless of such modern mystical interpretations and the many examples from within the Bible itself, scholars have questioned whether biblical prophecy and mysticism are



Moses and the Burning Bush, Israel Museum. *In a famous passage in Exodus 3, Moses, who is considered by both Judaism and Christianity to be the greatest prophet of the Hebrew Bible, has a direct and immediate experience of God through a bush that is set aflame but is not consumed. This episode was interpreted in a mystical manner in The Prince of Egypt, a 1998 animated feature in which Moses, through the burning bush, directly experiences the Divine, undergoing an initiation into the secret realm of cosmic consciousness.* UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES.

indeed the same. One train of thought coming from scholarship on Jewish mysticism is that mysticism is a later stage in the historical development of religion that attempts to recapture the direct experiences of earlier prophetic encounters (Scholem [1961] 1995, 7). This view is problematic given the fact that some later Jewish mystics saw themselves as true prophets. Another train of thought coming from Christian scholarship is that mysticism is silent and contemplative whereas prophecy is passionate and vocal (Heiler [1932] 1997, 142). This opinion is questionable as well because there are a multitude of counterexamples of “Christian mystics [who] also seem to behave like prophets” (Egan 2002, 94).

Whatever the relationship between prophecy and mysticism is, the Hebrew Bible undoubtedly acts as a historical backbone for both Jewish and Christian mysticism, in several ways. First, it provides the common narrative from which both Jewish and Christian mystics have worked throughout the ages. As the perceived word of God, it provides the common symbols of initiation into the realm of God for later seekers of direct experience. Second, as the common canonical text, it acts as the base for later interpretations that seek out hidden meanings. It is often through an engagement with the text that Jewish and

Christian mystics attempt to have a direct experience of God. Finally, even if biblical prophets were not themselves mystics, they were certainly perceived as mystical forebears by later mystics. As such, they were perceived as setting precedents and examples to be emulated, which led to comparable, even if divergent, paths to mystical enlightenment.

MERKAVAH AND HEKHALOT LITERATURE

Perhaps the earliest group of mystical adepts to take its cue from the Hebrew Bible was made up of those known as *yordei ha-merkavah* (descenders to the chariot). This is paradoxically the epithet used within extant texts from this group, even though their goal was not to descend, but to ascend through various levels of heaven. These early Jewish mystics took inspiration, in part, from the first chapter of the book of Ezekiel. There, the prophet Ezekiel seems to tell of an extravagant experience of a *merkavah*, or a divine chariot, and he says, “The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God” (Ezek 1:1). Descenders to the chariot seem to want to emulate Ezekiel and, in their own words, “to descend and gaze at the King in His beauty” (Geniza Fragment 8, cited in Arbel 2003, 22). They are also known as *hekhalot* (palace) mystics because one of their goals is to journey through seven celestial palaces to stand in front of the throne of God. This goal seems, in part, to be an attempt to emulate the biblical prophet Isaiah, who writes: “I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Palace. Seraphs stood in attendance on Him. Each of them had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly” (Isa 6:1–2).

Although the dating of this literature remains unclear, some scholars have claimed that it is as early as the first century BCE (Arbel 2003, 10). The identity of the mystics is also unclear. About twenty-five extant treatises in Hebrew and Aramaic seem to have come into existence over an extensive period of time. They appear to be the product of a group that began in the land of Israel and eventually spread to an area in Babylonia known as Pumbedita, close to the modern-day city of Fallujah, and to Baghdad.

The literature of this group includes descriptions of magical initiation rites and mystical interpretations of the biblical Song of Songs as containing hidden references to the physical dimensions of God. The idea of direct and immediate experience of divine reality is expressed in discussions of the heavenly journeys and the descent to the chariot. These are primarily contained within tracts known as *Hekhalot Rabbati* (The Greater Palaces) and *Hekhalot Zutarti* (The Lesser Palaces).

The mystical goal is to ascend through seven heavens and seven palaces to reach the “Heaven of Heavens,” the transcendent realm that contains the chambers of God. Adepts are tested by angelic figures at every twist and turn, and every new stage requires a new magical seal for passage. At the gate of the seventh palace sits the angel Metatron, a seraph like the angels in Isaiah’s vision. Metatron is a transformed human who was named Enoch; he is mentioned in Genesis 5:21–24 and seems to have been a righteous man. As transformed into the seraph Metatron, he is semidivine and God’s right-hand man. In the 1999 blockbuster film *Dogma*, Metatron (played by Alan Rickman) is the “herald of the Almighty, and voice of the one true God.” In that film, he shows his seraphic nature by appearing in a flame. Within the *hekhalot* literature, if one can get past Metatron unscathed in the seventh heaven, then he can behold God seated upon his throne. This seems to be the ultimate mystical goal.

EARLY CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

One prominent historian of religion has convincingly argued that the Apostle Paul was a *merkavah* mystic (Segal 1992). Paul was indeed originally an anti-Christian Jew whose entrance into Christianity was by way of a vision of Christ on his way to Damascus. The provocative parallel between Paul's conversion as recounted in Acts 9 and Ezekiel's vision, which was important to *merkavah* mystics, is one of the pieces of evidence used to show Paul's affinity with the Jewish descenders to the chariot. For example, in Paul's experience, "a light from heaven flashed around him" (Acts 9:3), and "he fell to the ground and heard a voice" (Acts 9:4). In Ezekiel's vision as well, there was "a great cloud, with a fire flashing up, so that a brightness was round about it" (Ezek 1:4), and he recounts: "I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spoke" (Ezek 1:28). The parallels are suggestive of an emulation, which was important to the *merkavah* mystics.

Another piece of evidence is Paul's own account: "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise ... and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (2 Cor 12:1–4). It is generally believed that this passage refers to Paul himself, and the mystical journey into levels of heaven seems clearly parallel to the *hekhalot* structure.

Paul calls his heavenly experience an apocalypse, an uncovering or a revelation of knowledge that is concealed. This meaning certainly relates to mysticism as initiation into that which is hidden. One eminent scholar of early Christian mysticism has taught that "the first Christians call their direct immediate premortem experiences of God 'apocalypses' (*apocalypseis*) or 'revelations'" (DeConick 2010, 301). Paul's experience is thus mysticism on all levels. It involves subtle scriptural interpretation through engagement with the book of Ezekiel, initiation into the hidden realm, and a direct, immediate experience of God.

Apocalypse as universal revelation to those who are believers seems to be one of the innovations of early Christian mysticism. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus repeatedly declares that the hidden will be revealed to the believers and kept from the unbelievers. This idea leads to a democratization of mysticism in early Christianity that is not seen in *hekhalot* and *merkavah* mysticism; through established sacraments, or religious rites such as baptism and the Eucharist, all believers are initiated and can know God's presence (DeConick 2010, 316). Another aspect of early Christian mysticism is the christocentric character of revelation. As with *hekhalot* and *merkavah* trends, God reveals himself through visions of his Glory, but unlike those early Jewish traditions, early Christian mysticism, especially in the Gospel of John, casts that Glory in the person of Jesus.

NEOPLATONISM

Even though Neoplatonism is in itself neither Jewish nor Christian, it should be included in this historically comparative illustration because of the profound influence that it had on various forms of both Jewish and Christian mysticism. Interestingly, much of what is known about early Neoplatonism comes from the anti-Christian thinker Porphyry of Tyre, who lived from 234 CE to 305 CE. In 262 CE, Porphyry traveled to Rome to study with a figure named Plotinus, and in 273 he wrote a treatise titled *On the Life of Plotinus*. He later

organized the lectures of his master and edited them into a tract known as the *Enneads*, which are six books of nine treatises. The *Enneads* are considered by many to be one of the great masterpieces of mystical philosophy.

Plotinus is called the father of Neoplatonism, a mystically philosophical tradition stemming from the thought of the fourth-century BCE Greek philosopher Plato. Plato had posited that the human soul could return to God through purification, which would be followed by contemplative vision and reunification (McGinn 2002, 24). According to Plato's *Phaedrus*, the Soul is uncreated and immortal, and through the process of creation it has become embedded in matter (245c–246a). Through contemplation of the Good, which is the highest Form, or blueprint for existence in the unchanging divine realm, the Soul can re-assimilate with its supernal source.

Plotinus studied these ideas and developed them in novel ways. One of the major ways that impacted later mystical trends is a theory of what he calls the Hypostases, as developed in the fifth *Ennead*. A hypostasis is a foundation or a base, and in philosophy it is the manifestation of an entity or quality. An example in Christianity would be the three persons of the Trinity as three hypostases of the divine. Plotinus also posits three hypostases. For him, however, the three Hypostases are “the One,” which is unity and the grounding principle of all existence; “the Intellect,” which emanates, or issues forth, from the One and is the seat of Platonic Forms; and finally “the Soul,” which is the principle of life within matter.

For Plotinus, the One is beyond nature and beyond all thinking, and therefore it cannot be grasped. “How are we to grasp the first principle?” Plotinus writes, “Take everything away” (*Ennead* V:3). Yet it is the source of all that is, and in itself it is pure and simple unity. This lays the groundwork for a mystically ineffable, or inexpressible, understanding of God. Although the Intellect derives from the One, it falls short, and any individual thinking at best brings one to the level of the Intellect. Nevertheless, it is a universal entity that grasps pure truth.

The Soul is connected to the Intellect but is distinct from it. The Soul puts Forms into matter, thereby mediating between the Intellect and the material world. Whereas the Intellect is the blueprint for creation, the Soul shapes matter in accordance with that blueprint. For Plotinus, the Soul is eternal and turns toward the One, which is its ultimate source. Through contemplation, it can turn from matter, and through the Intellect, it can turn toward the One. Such a return and unification are, for him, the ultimate mystical goal.

SEFER YETZIRAH

The earliest extant Hebrew text that seemingly combines mysticism of the *merkavah* type with Greek, including Neoplatonic, speculation is titled *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Formation). This text is sometimes traditionally attributed to the patriarch Abraham, but scholars date it anywhere between the second and ninth centuries. It is only about 1,600 words in length and is highly enigmatic, and perhaps for this reason more commentaries have been written on it than on any other book in Jewish literature aside from the Hebrew Bible. It thus had a profound effect on later developments in Jewish mysticism.

Merkavah influence is discernible in this text by its repeated allusions to “the Creator on His throne” (*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:4) and to its own hypostases, which “bow down before His

throne” (Sefer Yetzira 1:6). Here, too, God on the throne reigns supreme. Moreover, even though Sefer Yetzira is recounting the formation of the world, there is no reference to the book of Genesis, but there is a direct quotation from the first chapter of Ezekiel, a fact that has led some scholars to place this text squarely within the *merkavah* tradition (Scholem 1987, 27).

Neoplatonic elements in this text are discernible in its language of Oneness and of return. Speaking again of its own hypostases, for example, it states: “Their end is merged with their beginning and their beginning is merged with their end, as a flame is joined to the burning coal. For the Lord is one and there is none like Him, and what can you count before One?” (Sefer Yetzira 1:7). The unity of the hypostases and their emanation and return to the One certainly have a strong Neoplatonic flavor.

Sefer Yetzira is based on Jewish speculation concerning divine wisdom as an agent of creation. The first sentence states that “the Lord ... engraved and created the universe with thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom” (Sefer Yetzira 1:1). These thirty-two paths make up the building blocks of creation: ten entities known as *sefirot* and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. What the *sefirot* are is not entirely clear. Many scholars have taken them to be ten primordial numbers related to the decimal system. The first four, however, emanate from each other and seem to be related to the primordial elements. The last six are the dimensions of space. Whether they are numbers or elements and dimensions (or both), they seem to be hypostatic in nature, a manifestation of the Divine.

The twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet are divided into three groups: (1) three mother-letters related to the three elements (air, water, and fire), the three parts of the body (head, torso, stomach), and the three seasons of the year (presumably in the Near East, where the text was written, there were only three seasons); (2) seven double-letters related to the planets and heavens, the orifices in the human head, and the days of the week; and (3) twelve simple-letters related to the signs of the zodiac, the limbs of the body, and the months of the year. These are variously combined to create and destroy, and along with the *sefirot*, they set the foundations for later forms of Jewish mysticism.

Later Jewish folklore says that one who masters Sefer Yetzira can create a monstrous anthropoid known as a golem. The idea is that by deeply understanding the processes of the creation of the world, one can create a small world, a human. Animation of a formless being is done primarily through the letters, which are among the building blocks of creation as set down in Sefer Yetzira. This idea of the golem has extended beyond Jewish folklore into popular culture. It was the subject of a famous 1920 silent film by Paul Wegener named *Der Golem* and has been featured in popular television shows, such as the season four episode of *The X-Files* titled “Kaddish,” in which Sefer Yetzira is mentioned as the book used to create the golem.

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE

Whereas Sefer Yetzira provides a prime example of an early combination of *merkavah* mysticism and Neoplatonic thought, perhaps no one better represents the combination of early Christian mysticism with Neoplatonism than Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Pseudo-Dionysius claims to be the judge Dionysius, who was converted by Paul at a rocky area in Athens known as the Areopagus (Acts 17:34). In fact, however, Pseudo-Dionysius’s highly Neoplatonic language places him at least two hundred years after Paul. Scholars

surmise that he was probably active in Syria in the late fifth or early sixth century (Corrigan and Harrington 2015), but his adopted identity took hold and gave him the credentials with which to fundamentally transform Christian theology, that is, the study of the nature of the Divine.

Pseudo-Dionysius left behind four treatises and ten epistles outlining his theology. The treatises are *The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and *The Mystical Theology*. Within these works, Pseudo-Dionysius outlines three stages of theology: symbolic theology, the theology of affirmation and negation, and mystical theology. All of these act as different ways of understanding God.

Within symbolic theology, perceptible symbols are objects used to represent abstractions and act as points of access for humans to the divine realm. An example might be the cross, which in itself is simply a geometrical figure but which, as a Christian symbol, has deep historical and metaphysical meaning. According to Pseudo-Dionysius, symbols were originally provided from the hosts of heaven, who “put material on what was immaterial” and “brought the transcendent down to our level” (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.4–5). The point was to allow humans to transcend by infusing matter with meaning, just as the Neoplatonic soul infuses the material realm with Forms from the divine Intellect.

The theology of affirmation and negation asserts that which both can and cannot be said about God. Pseudo-Dionysius’s treatise titled *The Divine Names*, in which the different names of God describe different attributes, is highly affirmative, but Pseudo-Dionysius explains that “what our minds lay hold of is in fact nothing other than certain activities apparent to us” (*Divine Names* 2.7). Thus, when one says that God is Being, one sees that he is the cause of being, or when one says that he is Wise, one sees that he gives wisdom. In contradistinction, according to the theology of negation, Pseudo-Dionysius asserts: “He is described as invisible, infinite, ungraspable, and other things which show not what He is but what in fact He is not” (*Celestial Hierarchy* 2.2). In his pure essence, nothing can be said about him.

The highest stage of theology for Pseudo-Dionysius is the mystical theology, according to which God transcends not only symbols but also both affirmative and negative theology. Like the One of Plotinus, God is truly beyond knowing. This is agnosticism in the truest sense of the word. Yet unlike Plotinus, who invokes Plato, Pseudo-Dionysius turns to the example of Moses: “he did not attain to the Presence of God Himself; he saw not Him (for He cannot be looked upon), but the Place where He dwells.” He goes on to state that Moses, like all mystics, was plunged “into the Darkness of Unknowing, whence all perfection of understanding is excluded” (*Mystical Theology* 1.6). Mysticism for Pseudo-Dionysius, then, does not have a beholding of the Divine as its goal; rather, its goal is to reach the threshold of ignorance.

BONAVENTURE

Just as Pseudo-Dionysius represents Christian mysticism in late antiquity, perhaps no one represents Christian mysticism in its medieval form better than Bonaventure, a Franciscan friar from Tuscany. Bonaventure was born as Giovanni di Fidanza around 1217 in the Italian community of Bagnoregio. He reports of his early relationship to Saint Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226): “When I was a boy, as I still vividly remember, I was snatched from the jaws of death by his invocation and merits” (quoted in Noone and Houser 2014).

He eventually became the minister general of the Franciscan Order and a Catholic cardinal. Already during his lifetime, he became one of the most prominent intellectuals within the Catholic Church, combining philosophical reason with mystical experience.

In 1259, Bonaventure had another miraculous experience involving Saint Francis: “It happened that about the thirty-third anniversary of the Saint’s death, under divine impulse, I withdrew to Mount La Verna seeking a place of quiet and desiring to find there a peace of spirit” (Bonaventure 1978, 54). At this place about thirty-five years prior, Saint Francis had had a mystically transformative vision of Christ in the appearance of a seraph, and at this same spot Bonaventure was inspired to pen his mystical masterpiece, *The Soul’s Journey into God*. This work, considered a comprehensive treatise of medieval Christian mysticism, has resonances with the *merkavah* tradition and was inspired by thinkers such as Pseudo-Dionysius.

Bonaventure was known as “the Seraphic Doctor,” which brings to mind the gatekeeper Metatron of the *merkavah* tradition, who was transformed into a seraph. Moreover, Bonaventure’s journey has seven stages, similar to the seven levels of the heavenly journey of the *merkavah* mystics. Bonaventure notes that “the smaller world of man is led in a most orderly fashion by six successive stages of illumination to the quiet of contemplation” (Bonaventure 1978, 61), which is the seventh, mystical stage. Echoing the likeness of man seated upon the throne in Ezekiel’s vision and adopted by the *merkavah* tradition, for Bonaventure, “Christ is the ladder and the vehicle, like the Mercy Seat placed above the ark of God, and the mystery hidden from eternity” (Bonaventure 1978, 111).

The parallels between Bonaventure and the *merkavah* tradition do not seem coincidental. Though he never mentions the *merkavah* mystics and probably did not have direct knowledge of their works, he may have been indirectly influenced through earlier Christian sources that may have drawn upon *merkavah* traditions, such as followers of Pauline mysticism. Another, more probable explanation is that by drawing on the same sources for his mystical theology as the *merkavah* mystics, such as the heavenly visions within the biblical books of Ezekiel and Isaiah, Bonaventure arrived at mystical patterns similar to those of his ancient Jewish predecessors. Such similarities offer a fine example of the types of information that the historian of mysticism should notice when attempting a comparative analysis.

Another important type of information is clear, namely, direct influence. For Bonaventure, this type of information unambiguously surfaces in relation to Pseudo-Dionysius. Bonaventure relates that there is “knowledge of truth according to the threefold mode of theology: symbolic, literal and mystical, so that through the symbolic we may rightly use sensible things, through the literal we may rightly use intelligible things and through the mystical we may be lifted above to ecstasy” (Bonaventure 1978, 62–63). This statement echoes Pseudo-Dionysius’s threefold theology. At a later point, Bonaventure specifically quotes Pseudo-Dionysius, writing about “a darkness which is super-resplendent and in which everything shines forth” (114). For Pseudo-Dionysius, this was the “Darkness of Unknowing” achieved by Moses. For Bonaventure, out of that Darkness comes Christ in the form of an illuminated seraph that transforms one who beholds it into a Christ-like figure, as, he reports, happened to Saint Francis. It is a highly messianic transformation, meaning that the adept comes to identify directly with Christ, which is a process that enlightens the way into Darkness but simultaneously blinds and darkens through its illumination.

ABRAHAM ABULAFIA

Shortly after the time in which Bonaventure was presenting a christologically (relating to Jesus) messianic form of Franciscan mysticism, an important figure in the southern European Jewish world developed his own brand of Jewish messianic mysticism. This was Abraham Abulafia. Like Bonaventure, Abulafia owes much to thinkers like Pseudo-Dionysius and the letter symbolism of Sefer Yetzirah.

Abulafia was born in 1240 in the city of Saragossa in the kingdom of Aragon. He was taught some Talmud and Bible by his father, who died when Abulafia was eighteen. In 1260, at the age of twenty, Abulafia set off for the land of Israel on a messianic mission to find the ten lost tribes. War caused him to return to Europe, however, and he spent about ten years in Greece and Italy.

He returned to Spain and began an intense study of kabbalah (reception), a form of Jewish mysticism that developed in the Middle Ages and that was based on the sefirot and the Hebrew letters as first outlined in Sefer Yetzirah. There Abulafia received a messianic revelation, in which he saw himself as the redeemer of the Jewish people. In 1280, he made his way to Rome to discuss his mystical vision of Judaism with Pope Nicholas III. The pope died before the meeting, and Abulafia was held for some weeks in a Franciscan prison. Upon his release he made his way to Messina, where he is said to have been in contact with, and influenced by, a messianic group arising from the Franciscans (Hames 2007).

Abulafia is considered the father of Prophetic kabbalah, a brand of mysticism based on language usage and letter manipulation. His form of kabbalah had a profound influence upon both Jewish and Christian mysticism. According to his thought, the human mind, being mired within matter, is isolated from the divine Intellect, as the Neoplatonists had contended. However, unlike Pseudo-Dionysius, Abulafia sees that there is a way to break through the darkness and to achieve a messianic form of prophecy. That way is through the Hebrew letters, which, as he understands from Sefer Yetzirah, are the Divine as manifested within the world.

As with Pseudo-Dionysius's middle stage, which talks about affirmative theology in *Divine Names*, Abulafia writes that the Torah "consists of the names of the Holy One, blessed be He, and it is incumbent to innovate new wonders on each and every letter and on each and every word." He goes on: "It is incumbent to inquire into one word and connect it to another, and then leave the second and look for a third to connect it with the first, and then another, sometimes at their middle, sometimes at their beginning, sometimes at their end, sometimes by their numbers and sometimes by their permutations" (*Gan Na'ul* 327b–328a, cited in Idel 2002, 341). For Abulafia, this is the real *merkavah* mysticism, as *merkavah* in Hebrew can mean "assembling." Here, the assembling is of the Hebrew letters. They can be permuted and combined in an infinite number of patterns, thereby bringing the mind closer to the divine mind. Abulafia develops various forms of controlled meditation through the letters, which lead to ecstatic states in which the human intellect conjoins with the divine Intellect and can then receive prophecy.

There has been much contemporary interest in Abulafia's brand of kabbalah, which was even made into the main subject of the 2005 Hollywood blockbuster *Bee Season*. In that film, which is based on the 2000 novel of the same name by Myla Goldberg, a professor of mysticism named Saul Naumann, played by Richard Gere, states: "Abulafia believed that by concentrating on letters, the mind could be opened up." He also states, "there are people

who believe that letters are expression of a very special primal energy, and when they combine to make words, they hold all the secrets of the universe.” Here is a clear case of thirteenth-century Jewish mysticism coming into direct contact with twenty-first-century popular culture, thanks partly to the lasting allure of Abulafia’s Prophetic kabbalah.

SEFER HA-ZOHAR

Whereas Abulafia represents a certain brand of mysticism called Prophetic kabbalah that is based primarily on the Hebrew language, a textual body known as the Zohar represents a brand of mysticism called Theosophical kabbalah. This type of mysticism attempts to connect to God theosophically, that is, by understanding his secret inner life as represented by the ten sefirot. These are thought to be part of the divine world and they interact with each other on a personal level. Each *sefirah* has a gender and a name that is related to a specific characteristic. For example, Hokhmah, which means “Wisdom,” is the second sefirah and is masculine. It conjoins with Binah, the third sefirah, which is feminine and means “Understanding.” According to Theosophical kabbalists, it is only through the marriage of divine Wisdom and divine Understanding that either can be fully productive. Theosophical kabbalah as represented by the Zohar understands the Torah to be the ultimate book of sefirotic symbolism, with figures like the patriarchs representing the divine sefirot.

The Zohar made its appearance around 1280 in Castile, Spain, which was then ruled by the Catholic Alfonso X. Those who distributed it claimed that it was an ancient text that had been composed in the land of Israel by the second-century rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai and his circle, but critical scholarship has shown that it was composed in Spain shortly before its appearance. Multiple layers of creativity can be detected within the text, and it was most probably penned by several authors. It is thus not really a single book but an entire compendium that is considered a summa of Theosophical kabbalah. It was first printed in 1558, and parts of it were translated into Latin for use by Christian mystics as early as the fifteenth century.

Written in Christian Castile, the Zohar displays a complex relationship to Christianity. On the one hand, it is apologetic, meaning that it often defends Jewish belief and practice, seemingly in the face of Christianity. It is also sometimes polemical in tone, meaning that it critically attacks non-Jewish beliefs and customs. Although it refrains from criticizing Christianity outright, it does assert the superiority of Judaism. For example, it asserts that “God has made Israel, as it were, the heart of all mankind, and as the limbs cannot endure for a moment without the heart, so the other nations cannot endure without Israel” (Zohar III, 221b). It goes on to explain that just as the heart is tender and weak, so too Israel is in a state of oppression; but conversely, just as only the heart draws intelligence from the brain while the other limbs are inane, so too only Israel draws from God.

On the other hand, the Zohar displays some influence from Christianity. The Christian notion of the harrowing of hell, for example, shows up in the text of the Zohar. This is an idea from the Apostles’ Creed, an early statement of Christian belief, and from the early Christian thinkers Tertullian (c. 160–220 CE) and Origen (184–253 CE), who state that Jesus descended into hell to save souls. No such descent into hell shows up in early Jewish literature, but the Zohar clearly states: “Even the completely righteous go down there, but they only go down in order to bring up certain sinners from there, to wit, those who

thought of repenting in this world, but were not able to do so in time before they departed from it” (Zohar III, 220a). It is reasonable to assume that the Zohar is taking this idea from Christianity.

PICO AND CHRISTIAN KABBALAH

This brief comparative sketch of Jewish and Christian mystical movements, individuals, and texts throughout the ages leads to a figure that perhaps did more than any other to promote mystical syncretism, that is, the reconciliation and unification of diverse systems of mystical thought. That figure is the Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), a Christian man from a noble family whose fiefdom included the township of Concordia. Through a play-on-words that reflects both his noble status in regard to the locale and his penchant for syncretic concord, Pico came to be known as the Prince of Concordia.

Both his skill with syncretism and his material wealth propelled Pico to a position of prominence. His financial ability to hire Jewish teachers of kabbalistic lore and translators of otherwise esoteric Hebrew texts created an unprecedented situation in which an important Christian thinker was learning directly with Jewish mystics. Moreover, this is the first time that a massive body of kabbalistic literature, including the works of Abraham Abulafia and parts of the Zohar as filtered through its commentators, was being translated into Latin for Christians. Largely for this reason, Pico came to be known as the father of a syncretic brand of mysticism known as Christian kabbalah.

In 1486, Pico wrote 900 theses that drew upon numerous sources, including pagan, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, in which he sought to join all schools of thought into what one prominent Pico scholar calls “a single symphony of philosophies” (Copenhaver 2012). At the heart of this work was the kabbalah, including seventy-two kabbalistic conclusions that he states are “according to his own opinion, strongly confirming the Christian religion using the Hebrew wisemen’s own principles” (Farmer 1998, 517). Pico planned to host a conference in Rome, for which he agreed to pay anyone’s way from anywhere in the world who wanted to come and to debate him on his newly syncretic mystical philosophy. However, a papal commission found thirteen of his conclusions heretical and did not let the debate take place. These heretical theses include one stating that “there is no science that assures us more of the divinity of Christ than magic and Cabala” (Farmer 1998, 497).

There is no telling what impact Pico’s conference would have had on the development of European mysticism. Nevertheless, Pico did write an *Oration* that was to act as the preamble to the debate, which did have a profound effect on European thought. It was eventually published and later came to be known as the ultimate manifesto of the Renaissance. Within the *Oration*, Pico mentions biblical figures such as Jacob; discusses the angelification of Enoch into Metatron, as discussed in the *bekhalot* and *merkavah* literature; invokes the Apostle Paul and mentions his journey to the third heaven; and specifically cites Pseudo-Dionysius concerning illumination. He makes explicit reference to the ladder of ascent, which is similar to that at the heart of Bonaventure’s journey, and he mentions “the books of the science of the Cabala” (Pico 2012, 265).

In short, Pico’s *Oration* is more than just a manifesto of the Renaissance; it provides a true summa of European mysticism, including elements from all the figures and movements so far discussed. While Pico’s agenda was to Christianize, his project ushered in a whole new

stage in the complex relations between Jewish and Christian thought that opened the floodgates to various corollaries, including reactions that sought to assert the parochialism of particular religious traditions and those that sought a more cosmopolitan, universally inclusive approach.

CONTEMPORARY POPULAR EXPRESSIONS

Mysticism today has been expressed in the entertainment industry. As one leading scholar of modern forms of kabbalah has asserted, a prominent feature of twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural life has been the ever-growing influence of popular entertainment, and “we cannot understand spiritual life in this century without referring to popular culture” (Garb 2009, 2). Today, popular culture bears upon Jewish and Christian mysticism as much as the Bible or Neoplatonism did in earlier eras, and its relevance to this comparative sketch becomes readily apparent through the kabbalistic engagements of the pop singer Madonna.

Madonna’s brand of kabbalah derives from the early-twentieth-century kabbalist Yehuda Ashlag (1885–1954), who was also known as *Ba’al ha-Sulam* (Master of the Ladder), based on the name of his magisterial commentary on the Zohar, the *Sulam* (Ladder). Ashlag felt that the time had come to break from the veil of secrecy and to render kabbalah accessible to all, and he aimed to translate kabbalistic lore into more modern, psychological terminology (Garb 2009, 29–30). One of Ashlag’s students, Yehuda Tzvi Brandwein, continued the popularization process, and in addition to teaching, he finished and edited the *Sulam* upon his teacher’s death. One of Brandwein’s students, Philip Berg, further popularized the kabbalah of Ashlag by opening the doors to non-Jews and by turning his Kabbalah Center into a worldwide economic empire. More than any other figure, Berg legitimized the study of kabbalah without the requirement that one follow or understand its precepts. Berg became the kabbalistic teacher of Madonna.

Madonna is a Catholic-born woman (with an emblematically Catholic name) who has surely strayed from the Catholic mainstream, was condemned by the Vatican for misusing Catholic symbols in her 1989 music video *Like a Prayer*, and has entered into kabbalistic learning without converting to Judaism. Kabbalistic motifs can be detected in her 2002 music video *Die Another Day*, such as creation and destruction as related to Hebrew letter combinations (Huss 2005), an echo of Sefer Yetzirah and the kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia. Like her Catholicism and her use of Catholic symbols, Madonna’s expressions of kabbalah have been steeped in controversy. Many religious leaders and academics alike question the authenticity of her expression, or even the depth of her knowledge. Others claim that authenticity cannot be measured in a multivalent field and that knowledge does not matter, especially in Philip Berg’s Ashlagian kabbalah. For the historian of comparative mysticism, Madonna provides an interesting and important example of the melding of religious cultures and of the popularization and universalization of mystical trends of thought and practice.

Summary

The academic discipline of history provides a powerful tool with which to study mysticism. Mystical phenomena undergo processes of change, and mystical texts and figures influence

one another. Such change is apparent in the move from biblical prophecy to the integration of Neoplatonic thought, and in the move from elite to popular culture. Influence is apparent with Bonaventure, the group that wrote the Zohar, and in the explicit syncretism of a figure like Pico.

This analysis is possible because throughout history mystics have left records, both textual and visual, of their mystical encounters and interpretations. These records are given over to the historian for analysis and explanation, and the historian can and should take into account the various definitions that mysticism has had at different times and in different contexts. These would include ideas of mystery and initiation, the idea of interpretive strategies for both lived life and for canonical texts, and, of course, the idea of a direct experience and/or consciousness of the Divine, or of ultimate reality.

This chapter has shown how the historical method can be used for a comparative analysis of a small, representative selection of thinkers and textual traditions from Jewish and Christian mysticism throughout the ages. It begins with the common core of the Bible and concludes with pop culture to show how history can outline divergence from a common source and can show later convergence and change within popular spiritual expression.

The astute reader will notice that in between the Bible and Madonna, this chapter has not followed a strict pattern of alternating a Jewish thinker or group with a Christian thinker or group but has attempted to maintain a linear chronology. Historicism does not strictly demand this approach, however, because influences and processes are not always linear. The fact that Pseudo-Dionysius pre-dates the Zohar, for example, does not mean that he influenced its way of thinking about the unknowable aspects of God.

Historicism can shed light on processes and influences in various ways. For example, sometimes movements and thinkers were in direct contact, as with Paul, who was a Jew and who may have drawn directly from *merkavah* mysticism. Sometimes the influence was more textual, as with the Zohar, which seems to have been drawing upon earlier Christian creeds. Finally, sometimes the thinkers analyzed were influenced by common sources; Sefer Yetzirah and Pseudo-Dionysius both seem to have been drawing upon common Neoplatonic ideas. The historical approach takes all of these processes into consideration and is a strong tool with which to continually better understand the otherwise convoluted phenomenon known as mysticism.

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