The phase of Jewish mysticism conventionally referred to as “early Kabbalah” begins with Sefer ha-Bahir (ca. 1180) and ends with the Zohar (1270-1300). The major features and figures of this span can be outlined thus:¹

A. Early Kabbalah
   1. Formative Period
      a. Sefer ha-Bahir (1180)
      b. Provence (ca. 1200)
         i. Isaac the Blind (d. 1235)
         ii. The Iyyun School (early to mid-1200s)
      c. Gerona (ca 1200-1250)
         i. Ezra ben Solomon
         ii. Azriel
         iii. Nahmanides
         iv. Jacob ben Sheshet
         v. Sefer ha-Temunah
         vi. Sefer ha-Yashar
      d. Castile (active 1260-80)
         i. R. Jacob ha-Cohen
         ii. R Isaac ha-Cohen
   2. Developmental Period
      a. Abraham Abulafia (1240-ca 1292)
      b. Joseph Gikatilla (1248-1325)
      c. Isaac of Acre, or Acco (1250-1340)
      d. Moses de Leon (1240-1305)

¹ This outline is offered with full awareness that it gives an oversimplified picture of the development of early Kabbalah. The outline on page 13 is similarly convenient.
Three books cover the formative period; they should be the basis of any study of early Kabbalah in English.

  
  OK is a translation of *Ursprung und Anfange der Kabbala* (1962), translated by Allan Arkush, edited by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky; *Ursprung…* is an expansion of the Hebrew work, *Reshith ha-Qabbalah* (1948).

- Dan, Joseph; and Keiner, Ronald C. *The Early Kabbalah* [THE CLASSICS IN WESTERN SPIRITUALITY]. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986. *(hereafter EK)*
  
  EK is an anthology of texts which serves as an excellent complement to OK.

  
  JMII is a collection of Dan’s articles covering early Kabbalah (concentrating on *Sefer ha-Bahir*) and the Ashkenazi Hasidim (see below, *Pre-Kabbalistic Streams of Jewish Mysticism*, #5).

To the above books, add the following dissertations:


Formative Period

1.a. *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Brightness): The earliest work considered “kabbalistic” is *Sefer ha-Bahir*. There are substantial discussions of this text in OK (pp. 35-48, 49-198) and JMII (xiv-lvii, 1-18); translated excerpts are given in EK (pp. 57-69). Using Scholem’s observations as a starting point, Ronit Meroz has presented her conclusions regarding the three distinct strata of *Sefer ha-Bahir* in several lectures (including “A Bright Light in the East—The Babylonian Stratum in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” Session: HERMENEUTICAL REFLECTIONS ON EARLY KABBALAH at the Association for Jewish Studies Thirty-fourth Annual Conference, Los Angeles: December 17, 2002) and an article in *Da’at* 49:

- about half was written in Provence in the 12th or 13th century
- most of the rest was written in the Jewish Babylonian congregation which lived in the 9th and 10th centuries; this strata has several layers within it and includes *Raza Rabba*
- a few paragraphs were written earlier in the land of Israel, some time before the Babylonian strata

There are two complete—or near complete—English translations:


Other references:

1.b. Provence: *Sefer ha-Bahir* made its way to Provence where it fed the development of a mystical school, ca. 1200. This school’s second generation was headed by R. Isaac the Blind (d. 1235), “…the first Jewish scholar whom we know by name that dedicated all his creative powers to the field of Kabbalah” (Dan’s introduction to EK, p. 31). On Isaac the Blind see EK (pp. 31-4, translations on pp. 71-86), and OK (pp. 248-309).

R. Isaac’s major work, *Commentary on SEFER YEZIRAH*, “the first systematic treatise of Kabbalah,” is fully analyzed and translated by Mark Brian Sendor in *The Emergence of Provencal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind’s Commentary on SEFER YEZIRAH*, Volumes I and II (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994). Further, in *Mystical Union, Individuality, and Individuation in Provencal and Catalanian Kabbalah* (noted above), Yechiel Shalom Goldberg analyzes key passages from R. Isaac the Blind’s *Commentary on SEFER YEZIRAH* as well as from the works of R. Isaac’s nephew, R. Asher ben David, and R. Azriel of Gerona (see below).


Also circulating in Provence in the early-to-mid 1200s were the writings of the *Iyyun* (Contemplation) school. The Kabbalah of these strange texts is quite different from the doctrines which developed into classical Kabbalah. See EK (p. 26, translations on pp. 43-56) and OK (pp. 309-363), and especially Mark Verman’s study, *The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), which includes translations of several major texts of this group.
On the Iyyun school, see

- Dan, Joseph. The ‘Unique Cherub’ Circle: A School of Mystics and Esoterics in Medieval Germany [TEXTS AND STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN JUDAISM, 15], Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999: comments regarding the Iyyun school, or “circle,” throughout.

1.c. Gerona (Catalonia): The most prolific circle of Kabbalists from the period before the Zohar was that of Gerona, which followed up on the teachings of R. Isaac the Blind. The primary figures of this group were (1) R. Ezra ben Solomon and (2) R. Azriel, who established a school which included (3) R. Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides) and (4) R. Jacob ben Sheshet.

On the Gerona circle, see EK (pp. 34-36), OK (pp. 365-475), and Moshe Idel’s article, “Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism in Geronese Kabbalah,” in The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, vol. 3, issue 1 (1993).

Other references:

1. R. Ezra ben Solomon:
     Includes excerpts from R. Ezra ben Solomon’s Perush ‘al Shir ha-Shirim and a letter to R. Abraham on God’s garments—in English.
     Along with R. Ezra’s commentary are the “Hidden Midrash to the Book of Lamentations” from the Zohar Hadash and R. Bahya ben Asher of Sargossa’s commentary on Genesis 1:1-2 (composed 1291).
     A passage attributed to R. Ezra, on pp. 65-8.

A detailed kabbalistic commentary on the meanings of the *mizvot*.

2. R. Azriel:
- EK pp. 87-108.
- Goldberg, Joel R. (= Yecheil Shalom Goldberg) “Azriel of Gerona: A Phenomenology of Individuality” = CHAPTER 6 of Mystical Union, Individuality, and Individuation in Provencal and Catalanian.

3. Nahmanides:

4. R. Jacob ben Sheshet
• EK pp. 109-50.

5. Sefer ha-Temurah [ShT]
A treatise often cited by the Gerona circle, ShT expounds upon the doctrine of the shemittot (cosmic cycles). References: OK pp. 460-75; and G. Scholem, On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism, pp. 77-86.

6. Sefer ha-Yashar [ShY]
Scholem placed this tract “in the circle of the Kabbalists of Gerona in approximately 1260.” Indeed, it is generally believed that ShY was written by a Kabbalist who attempted to render his kabbalistic ideas more acceptable—and accessible—by using the language of ethics and philosophy. Shimon Shokek argues for Rabbi Jonah Gerondi (13th century) as the possible, if not probable, author. Some traditions attribute ShY to Rabbenu Tam from the end of the 14th century.

References:
1.d. Castile: In the second half of the 13th century, there grew a circle of Kabbalists around the brothers R. Jacob and R. Isaac ha-Cohen (or Kohen). Scholem refers to their developments as “the Gnostic reaction”—reaction, that is, to the philosophic leanings of the Gerona mystics (ref. Scholem, *Kabbalah* [1974], pp. 55-6).

References to the Cohens:
- EK pp. 36-7; translations 151-182; OK pp. 355-64

Further, see

Developmental Period

2.a. Abraham Abulafia: We are now beyond the scope of OK and EK. Abulafia is the focus of Scholem’s 4th lecture in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Further:
- __________. *The Path of the Names*. Berkeley: Trigram/Tree, 1976.
• __________. “The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia’s Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism,” in Gershom Scholem’s MAJOR TRENDS IN JEWISH MYSTICISM 50 Years After (1993).

Kiener, Ronald. “From Ba’al ha-Zohar to Prophet to Ecstatic: The Vicissitudes of Abulafia in Contemporary Scholarship,” in Gershom Scholem’s MAJOR TRENDS IN JEWISH MYSTICISM 50 Years After (1993).
Wolfson, Elliot R. Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy [SOURCES AND STUDIES IN THE LITERATURE OF JEWISH MYSTICISM, 7]. Culver City: Cherub Press, 2000. This work incorporates the following two articles:

2.b. Joseph Gikatilla

• Bokser, Ben Zion. The Jewish Mystical Tradition. Section 10: “Joseph Gikatilla.”
• Kaplan, Aryeh. *Meditation and Kabbalah*. Chapter 4, Section 2: “Gates of Light.”

3. c. Isaac of Acre (or Acco): Isaac of Acre is of particular interest given that he drew from both the Abulafian ecstatic school and the Catalanian/Castilian theosophic school, which included Nahmanides and the *Zohar*.

• __________. *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*. See especially Chapter 7, “Hitbodedut as Concentration in Ecstatic Kabbalah.”

2.d. Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon: Listed here are items which fall distinctly outside the discussion of the *Zohar* and take up de Leon’s other works.


Wolfson prepared a critical edition of *Sefer ha Rimmon: The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de Leon’s SEFER HA-RIMMON* [BROWN JUDAIC STUDIES, no. 144], Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988—a revised version of Wolfson’s Ph.D. dissertation (Waltham: Brandeis University, 1986). The text is given only in Hebrew. The 71-page introduction, which is in English, is certainly worth reading through.
Other books, chapters, and articles on Early Kabbalah

- __________. “Samael and the Problem of Jewish Gnosticism,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, edited by Alfred L. Ivry, Elliot R. Wolfson, and Allan Arkush (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998); also in Dan’s JMIII.


Addendum: Pre-Kabbalistic Streams of Jewish Mysticism

To fill the span between the close of the Old Testament and early Kabbalah, a much-simplified selection of streams representative of—or having influence upon—Jewish mysticism can be outlined thus:

1. Early beginnings
   a. Pseudepigrapha (ca. 200 BCE onward)
   b. Philo (ca. 20 BCE to 50 CE)
   c. Qumran (= Dead Sea Scrolls: 100 BCE onward)
   d. Rabbinic and synagogue traditions (100 CE onward)
   e. Miscellaneous magic texts and other “occult” works
2. Merkabah and hekhalot (200 CE onward)
3. Sefer Yezirah (between 200 and 500 CE)
4. Transition
   a. Geonic period (600-1000)
   b. Early commentaries on Sefer Yezirah
   c. Religious philosophers
      i. Solomon ibn Gebirol (1020-1070)
      ii. Judah Halevi (1075-1141)
      iii. Abrahaim ibn Ezra (1089-1164)
5. Hasidei Ashkenaz (German Hasidism: ca 1170-1240)

1. Early beginnings
   Since Jewish mysticism is ultimately based on the Hebrew Bible, the beginning, really, is the Tanakh, parts of which are more “mystical” than others. More important to our line of inquiry is that certain themes were developed more than others for a variety of mystical purposes. By Talmudic times, two branches of the mysteries were well known and defined: the work of creation, i.e. developments of the first chapters of Genesis, and the work of the chariot, developments of Ezekiel and, to a lesser extent, Isaiah.

   a. Apocalyptic, Wisdom Literature, Pseudepigrapha
      Radicalizations of Bible themes appeared in the intertestamental apocalypses, which, when grouped together with a somewhat irregular splay of wisdom literature, psalms, testaments, prayers, and other material, are referred to as the pseudepigrapha. Two fine introductions to apocalyptic are


2. Refer to my “Kabbalah Study: Jewish Mysticism in English” (1996-8), appended below, where there is a section offering suggestions for a survey of Jewish mysticism, one segment of which parallels the outline presented here. Alternative titles are discussed.
Another strand begun in the Bible, including Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and certain of the Psalms, is *wisdom literature*, which traces its way through the standard extra-canonical set called The Apocrypha (Ecclesiasticus), through the Pseudepigrapha, and on into the Talmudic Sayings of the Fathers (*Pirqe Aboth*). An enduring treatment of all this is O.S. Rankin’s *Israel’s Wisdom Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1936; rpt 1954 and 1964; rpt New York: Schocken Books, 1969.)


b. Philo

Philo, who has a somewhat anticlimactic relationship with Jewish mysticism, was the most important Jewish philosopher of the first century. Thoroughly Hellenized, he begins for us the long, and rather strained, counterpoint between Neoplatonism and Judaism (and, indeed, Jewish mysticism) which simmers right on up to Spinoza and beyond. Of particular use in the present context are the following:

On Philo:

On Neoplatonism:


c. Qumran

Since so much has been written on the Dead Sea Scrolls, let me suggest just three books to make short work of getting a reliable impression of the Qumran material:*


d. Rabbinic and synagogue traditions

Bits and pieces of the “mystery” are scattered throughout the rabbinic writings following the themes mentioned (*creation* and *chariot*), along with others (angels and demons, mystical exegesis on various topics, etc.) Some material might be cast more into the category of “legend,” but here the allusions can often be suggestive and significant. It is difficult to pin down a few books to represent this phase of development; what with recent publications on *midrashim* and other rabbinic literature, a full list might have dozens of titles. Given our track, however, see the following:


Chernus presents a series of essays on the relationship between *merkabah* mysticism and rabbinic *midrashim*.

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4. Three other works on the Qumran materials are of great interest in the present context, especially the third:


e. Miscellaneous magic texts and other “occult” works
For a full bibliography on Jewish magic, see the one prepared by Alex Jassen and Scott Noegel at [http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/jmbtoc.htm](http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/jmbtoc.htm) (University of Washington) or the appendix to my “Notes on the Study of *Merkabah* Mysticism and *Hekhalot* Literature in English.” For starters, though, refer to the following survey articles:


• __________. “Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism,” in *Envisioning Magic*.

2. *Merkabah* and *hekhalot* material, AND 3. *Sefer Yezirah*
On these, see my papers, “Notes on the Study of *Merkabah* Mysticism and *Hekhalot* Literature in English” and “Notes on *Sefer Yezirah* in English.”

4. Transition
a. Geonic period
It is generally thought that the Geonic period left little by way of evidence of theosophical development. Apocalyptic, *merkabah*, and rabbinic writings continued to exercise authority, this material being compiled and redacted with little being added to the existing traditions. In this period, however, magical works circulated and grew. Joseph Dan writes, “The Geonic period, from the sixth to tenth centuries, is a period which seems to be outside the realm of the history of Jewish thought. … [I]t still retains the image of being a half-millennium almost completely devoid of any Hebrew works on theology or ethics. This image is not completely true.”5 See Klaus Herrmann, “Jewish Mysticism in the Geonic Period: The Prayer of Rav Hamnuna Sava,” in *Jewish Studies between the Disciplines*:
Papers in Honor of Peter Schafer on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2003). Refer also to Scholem’s Kabbalah, pp. 30-5: “Mysticism in the Geonic Period.” An example of a work from this period is Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer), which has been translated and annotated by Gerald Friedlander (London: 1916; rpt. New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981 [4th ed]).

b. Commentaries on Sefer Yezirah

See my “Notes on Sefer Yezirah in English” for a review of English sources on these commentaries.

c. Religious philosophers


In Spain the Cabbalah assumed a more philosophical form, due to the influence of the religious philosophy which was already fully developed in that country. There are numerous points of contact between it and the work of the three great thinkers Jehudah Halevi, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, and Abraham Ibn Ezra. The first-named devoted some space to the Sefer Yezirah in his great work Cuzari. Gabirol as a neo-Platonist has many resemblances with the Cabbalah. … Finally Abraham Ibn Ezra made mystical numerical and literal analyses of the Name of God, particularly in his writings Yesod Mora…

5. The ‘Unique Cherub’ Circle (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), page 17.
Refer to Raphael Loewe’s *Ibn Gabirol* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), an analysis of ibn Gabirol’s life and writings. Included is a full translation of *Keter Malkut* (Royal Crown), which Muller calls Gebirol’s great “cosmological hymn.”

Also see


i. Judah Halevi’s principal work, *Kuzari* (or *Cuzari*), has been put into English a few times, but not all versions include the commentary on Sefer Yezirah. Two that do are


Also see

ii. Some works of Abraham ibn Ezra have been translated into English:


Also see


5. *Hasidei Ashkenaz*

While not considered part of the early Kabbalah in the strictest sense, the German Hasidim must be seen as a bridge between the earlier merkabah/hekhalot mysticism and the Kabbalah which as to follow—or certain aspects of it. A whole paper could be devoted to the German Hasidim; until such time that a full bibliography is developed, the following preliminary list is offered.

- Abrams, Daniel. “The Literary Emergence of Esotericism in German Pietism,” in *Shofar*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Lafayette: Purdue University, 1994).
• Cohn-Sherbok, Dan. Jewish Mysticism: An Anthology. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995. Passages: from Eleazer of Worms’ Secret of Secrets (pp. 90-95); from Sefer Hasidim (pp. 95-98); a prayer from the Ashkenazi liturgy (pp. 98-100).
• __________. “The Emergence of Mystical Prayer,” = JMII: Chapter 10. Also in Studies in Jewish Mysticism (1982).
• __________. Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History: Chapter 4. “The Ashkenazi Hasidic Movement.”
• __________. Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics: Chapter 3, “Mysticism and Ethics in the Ashkenazi Hasidim.”
• __________. The ‘Unique Cherub’ Circle. A School of Mystics and Esoterics in Medieval Germany [TEXTS AND STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN JUDAISM, 15]. Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999.
  Dan distinguishes four major mystical circles from this period (12th and 13th centuries): (i) the Iyyun circle, (ii) the Kalonymus family (i.e. what we generally think of as the Hasidei Ashkenaz), (iii) Sefer ha-Bahir, and (iv) the ‘Unique Cherub’ Circle.
  1. The Book of Prophecy
  2. The Book of the Word
  3. selections from Hokhmah ha-Egoz


  The first eight articles (of twenty) treat the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*; among these is Dan’s “The Language of the Mystics in Medieval Germany.”


• __________. “The ‘Song of Songs’ in German Hasidism and the School of Rashi: A Preliminary Comparison,” in *Rashi 1040-1990* (1993)
• Van Uchelen, Nikolaas A. “*Ma’aseh Merkabah in Sefer Hasidim*,” in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. VI (3-4) [proceedings of the Second International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: THE BEGINNINGS OF JEWISH MYSTICISM IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE], edited by Joseph Dan (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1987).
• __________. “The Mystical Significance of Torah Study in German Pietism,” in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 84, no. 1 (July 1993).
A.

In an article reviewing the then-current (1970s) state of scholarship on the history of early rabbinic Judaism, 1 Jacob Neusner complained, in particular, about E. E. Urbach’s study 2 concerning “the sages, their concepts and beliefs” (Neusner’s italics) as revealing “remarkably little variation, development or even movement,” where “[d]ifferentiation among the stages” and “among schools and circles within a given period” was all but neglected.

More recently, similar complaints have been leveled against “establishment” historians of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah: In the last fifteen-or-so years, the neat linear history offered by Gershom Scholem 3 and those following his lead has been seriously challenged.

In the proceedings of a conference marking the fiftieth year since the publication of Scholem’s landmark book, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (1941), 4 Ithamar Gruenwald argues 5 that this work (i.e., Major Trends...) “appears to be too limited in its conceptual framework, as well as in its actual treatment of the subject matter.” Scholem saw certain developments in antique Judaism as a mystical phase which followed well after the writing of the Hebrew Bible; he also saw expressions of mysticism, once present, as separate and distinct not just from the scriptural phase but from normal (common or popular) expressions of religion. Gruenwald makes a case for tracing “mystical, or quasi-mystical, elements in Scripture itself.” Further, he states that there are mystical elements in rabbinic literature to which Scholem did not give due attention.

Critical analyses focusing on Scholem’s treatment of ancient Jewish mysticism (i.e. merkabah mysticism and hekhalot literature) have also been offered in recent years. 6 For the moment, our concern is with those developments which, by one rationale or another,
claim the title “Kabbalah,” conventionally agreed to be a phenomenon begun in medieval times (though traditionally thought to be from antiquity). Our approach may at first appear to be at cross purposes, for, while there is a case supporting a definition for Kabbalah which is more inclusive (as in Gruenwald’s comments noted above or in the suggestions in Moshe Idel’s article noted below), there are those of us who would like to see Kabbalah circumscribed sufficiently to salvage it from the excessive, near-generic use of the term, primarily in Christian and occult circles, to refer to mysticism and magic of all sorts. (The term kabbalah is itself a coinage with problems not unlike those of related words as “mysticism,” “magic,” “myth,” and “gnosis/gnosticism.”)

The issue of defining—or redefining—Kabbalah has been addressed by Moshe Idel. He critiques the “prevailing assumption in the academic field” that Kabbalah is “a relatively homogeneous mystical phenomenon, more theoretical than practical.” Idel’s primary target is, of course, Scholem and his notion that Kabbalah is defined, and thus unified, by a certain “core question,” namely, the mystery of the Godhead—which question is “answered” by the doctrine of the sefirot. Idel discusses the various mystical uses of divine names as an alternative kabbalistic channel.

In the introduction to Essential Papers on Kabbalah, Lawrence Fine attempts to set up a working definition for kabbalah starting with a rejection of the “popular, noncritical use of the term” as referring to all “esoteric and occult phenomena, past and present.” Fine prefers to limit Kabbalah to “a discrete body of literature that became clearly identifiable beginning in Provence in the late twelfth century and northern Spain in the thirteenth.” However, in a book which has heated up the discussion on the origins of Kabbalah (and other topics), Moshe Idel has argued that there is not such a definite separation between rabbinic literature and the conventionally circumscribed Kabbalah. Idel’s view suggests a more continuous, less neat development which gradually coalesced into a proto-Kabbalah. The medieval Jewish mystics referred to as “Kabbalists” did not abandon the mysticism—or any other part of the vast rabbinic literature—which came before them. The hekhalot writings, German hasidic material, Sefer Yezirah and the various commentaries on it, etc., along with the Talmud, midrashim, and the rest of the rabbinic writings, were all considered authoritative—all part of the same chain of tradition (kabbalah) of which the medieval and later Kabbalists considered themselves links.

Kabbalah did not spring up ex nihilo. It seems prudent to open channels for the origins and growth of Kabbalah back into the depths of ancient Judaism. Determining a starting line at Sefer ha-Bahir and the mystic circles at Languedoc does not match the facts. To begin with, the Bahir is itself a compilation, with sources and references to earlier material, which immediately begins our search into the time before its appearance.
B.

To investigate Jewish mysticism, how is one to begin at the beginning? The documentary evidence is sprawling, yet incomplete. We cannot commence with Genesis 1:1 and travel a nice straight line to *Kabbalah today*. However, to set a broad stage for subsequent mystical endeavor, a fine first book is *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*, by Norman Cohn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), the second part of which charts the primal swirlings of the path which eventually leads to Jewish (and Christian) mysticism, beginning with Zoroastrian concepts, tracing their development in Jewish apocalyptic, finally landing in the Book of Revelation. This last turn may seem to veer off track unless one keeps in mind the fundamentally Jewish character of this mystical apocalypse.

For grounding in the theme (the ascension to heaven) taken up by the ancient Jewish mystics associated with the *merkabah* and *hekhalot*, a most informative source is Martha Himmelfarb’s *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). On a somewhat different tack, though holding onto the thread begun with the last two selections, is Markus N.A. Bockmuehl’s *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* [WISSENSCHAFTLICHE UNTERSUCHUNGEN ZUM NEUEN TESTAMENT – 2. Reihe 36] (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1990).

Assuming that the reader is reasonably familiar with the Hebrew Bible, the next step would be to acquire some knowledge of early rabbinic thought and method. *The Sages* by E. E. Urbach (see note 2) is an excellent start. Three anthologies serve as introductions to their respective texts:


At this juncture, it would be a good idea to read some of the more general books on Jewish mysticism in order to get an impression of its history and concepts. My recommendation is to study the following books—in the order in which they are listed:

1. Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (see note 3), some comments on which have already been noted.
A weakness of *Major Trends* is the absence of a chapter on the early Kabbalah. Two books nicely fill this void:


Paulist Press has provided two more titles which help round out our short list:


The final development of Jewish mysticism covered in Scholem’s *Major Trends* is Hasidism, on which I have not developed an extended bibliography. However, I can suggest three works to provide a foundation:


Three of the books listed above (Dan and Kiener’s *Early Kabbalah*, Matt’s *Zohar*, and Fine’s *Safed Spirituality*) offer texts as well as introductions. There are some other anthologies:


There is a bit of redundancy among these titles; fortunately, all are available in low-cost paperback editions.

There are some collections of articles which can be recommended:


*Haredi* students of the Kabbalah might sneer at many of the works suggested here. For an overview, they would instead urge Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s *Inner Space: Introduction to Kabbalah, Meditation and Prophecy* (Brooklyn: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1990)
or Rabbi Yechiel Bar-Lev’s *Song of the Soul* (Petach Tikva, 1994). Both, especially the latter, are serviceable introductions to Lurianic Kabbalah, which is somewhat thinly handled in our entry on Safed Kabbalah, though covered well in Scholem’s *Major Trends*.

For further advice on readings in Judaism, see *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, edited by Barry Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984). There, one is guided by specialists through the issues and literature of the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, medieval commentaries and philosophy, kabbalistic texts, hasidic teachings and prayer books.

Another good overview of the literature of Judaism is *The Sacred Books of the Jews* by Harry Gersh (New York: Stein and Day, 1968).


A very instructive set of anthologies (if you can get past the lame illustrations) is Louis Jacobs’ *CHAIN OF TRADITION SERIES* published by Behrman House (New York):

1. *Jewish Law* (1968)

To these could be added Jacobs’ *Jewish Mystical Testimonies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).
For full bibliographic information on various stages of Jewish mysticism, refer to my series on sources in English:

- “Notes on the Study of Merkabah Mysticism and Hekhalot Literature in English”—with an appendix on Jewish magic
- “Sefer Yeziarah in English”
- “Notes on the Study of Early Kabbalah in English” [the current paper]
- “Notes on the Zohar in English”
- “Notes on the Study if Later Kabbalah in English: The Safed Period and Lurianic Kabbalah”
- “The Study of Christian Cabala in English”


“Popular” books on Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism are numerous and quite varied in their quality and purpose. For readable, well-researched accounts, see


Notes:


4. Gershom Scholem’s MAJOR TRENDS IN JEWISH MYSTICISM 50 YEARS AFTER: *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish


In several of Schaefer’s discussions (Gershom Scholem Reconsidered for one) and in David Halperin’s The Faces of the Chariot (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 1988), questions are raised about the titles and contents of hekhalot texts. The notion of fixed bodies of content forming a canon of “books” representing a coherent school of hekhalot mysticism appears unsupportable. A similar problem exists with the very term kabbalah (see note 7). A partial solution is suggested in such subheadings as the early Kabbalah of the Provence and Gerona circles, the ’Iyyun school, prophetic Kabbalah (of Abraham Abulafia), or Lurianic Kabbalah. However, should the German Hasidism be excluded so definitely from Kabbalah?

7. Until the thirteenth century, kabbalah referred to the whole body of oral religious teachings: the Talmud, the midrashim, etc. Indeed, anyone who picked up a copy of Sefer ha-Kabbalah (Book of Tradition) expecting it to expound upon kabbalistic mysteries would be sorely disappointed. See The Book of Tradition, translated by Gerson D. Cohen (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968).

8. On the terms “mysticism,” “symbol,” and “myth,” see Gil Anidjar’s article, mentioned in note 6. Words causing particular difficulty in the field of Jewish mysticism are “gnostic” and “gnosticism”; examples of discussions on these terms are


10. If one were to pick up any of a number of popular books on Kabbalah, one might come away with the impression that Kabbalah was primarily, if not solely, the doctrine of the *sefirot*, or divine emanations. In fact, Kabbalah involves a rich array of concepts and techniques, not the least of which are various types of letter and name mysticism (though many of the hermeneutic conventions concerning words and letters, such as *gematria*, are more accurately considered rabbinic, not kabbalistic). Topics are diverse: the progression of cosmic cycles, mystical explanations of the *mitzvot*, the interplay of humankind with the ultimate God, the source and reason behind evil, creation and the end, the mystical significance of the holidays, angels and demons, the transmigration of souls—indeed, a ranging literature full of unpredictable interpretations of scripture.


12. On considering the German *Hasidim* an important source for non-*sefirotic* Kabbalah, see Daniel Abrams, “From Germany to Spain: Numerology as a Mystical Technique,” in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. XLVI, no. 1 (Spring 1996).

13. See the various discussions of the *Bahir*:
   • Gershom Scholem. *Origins of the Kabbalah*.
   • Joseph Dan. *The Early Kabbalah*.


15. The more comprehensive English edition of the Mishnah by Herbert Danby (1933) is still available from Oxford University Press.


17. In Essential Papers, Arthur Green’s article, “The Zohar: Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Spain,” is a gem; it’s worth getting the book just for this. This fine article also appears in An Introduction to the Mystics of Medieval Europe, edited by Paul Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), which also contains David Biale’s article on the Safed Period, “Jewish Mysticism in the Sixteenth Century.”

18. Be careful with the Meltzer. It is full of sloppy mistakes.