

1 Mystics seek knowledge of God which goes beyond rational thought. This experience of the divine is often part of the mystical goal. They are interested in the experience of the sacred in a direct, intuitive way which is intense.

2 Mystics find in themselves something in common with the Divine. Mysticism is therefore often associated with the development of self-awareness as part of an attempt to reach God.

3 Mystics see in the world of nature an opportunity for discovering the sacred.

4 Mystical religion almost always involves a specially disciplined way of life. Rites and modes of ethical behavior are practiced with the goal of perfecting the self, achieving special levels of awareness, or attaining certain types of experiences.

5 Various techniques of meditation or prayer are often part of the mystic's discipline.

We see evidence of Jewish mystical literature from as early as the first and second centuries. The early strands of this literature contributed to the creation of the **Hekhalot (Palaces) literature**. This is not one book, but early mystical midrashim of the Amoraic and Gaonic period (third century to early middle ages). Simultaneously, the small but extremely influential **Sepher Yetzira** (The Book of Creation) was written. This book was written probably between the 3rd and 6th centuries. It is in this book that the term "sephirot" (spheres) is used, which later became the basis of kabbalistic thought.

Another key book in the development of kabbalistic thought is **Sepher HaBahir** (The Book of Clarity). This book was found in Provence (the south of France) at the end of the twelfth century, although it was actually composed elsewhere. Its date of composition and authorship remain unclear. This brief and poorly organized book is largely a collection of sayings attributed to various Tannaim and Amoraim (Rabbis of the Mishnaic and Talmudic period). Its primary importance lies in the fact that it is the first source to teach the kabbalistic doctrine of the Divine spheres symbolically. According to the doctrine of the spheres, which is later developed to a great extent, the spheres represent different dimensions of God which are manifested in the cosmos. Each sphere represents an attribute and a power of God, and plays a specific role in the world of creation. The Sefer HaBahir reads Biblical and Rabbinic language as symbolic: according to its perspective phrases are not meant to be read literally but as symbols hinting at, and describing the nature of the spheres (which, in turn, are the basis of God and reality).

ZOHAR (The book of Splendor) זוהר

Although, as we have seen, examples of mystical literature existed before the Zohar, and indeed the Zohar adopts several ideas and images used in these earlier works, it is safe to say that the Zohar is the first mystical work that sets forth a complete world view.

The origins of the work, including who wrote it and when, were shrouded in mystery from its very appearance. Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon, a scholar living in Gerona, in the north of Spain, claimed to have 'discovered' an ancient text in 1280. According to him, the manuscript actually dates back to a second century Palestinian Rabbi, Shimon Bar Yochai. It is now generally accepted that it was Moshe de Leon who wrote at least the majority of the work. The supposed ancient authorship of the document lent it a great measure of authenticity and credibility which played a part in making the book extremely influential. Indeed, the Zohar came to be seen as one of the most important Jewish religious classics after the Bible and Talmudic literature. By the sixteenth century the Zohar was treated as holy by Jewish communities throughout the world. Like the other great classics of great Jewish literature, it generated an entire literature of translations and commentaries on it.

Written in Aramaic, the Zohar describes Shimon Bar Yochai travelling around Palestine with a small group of colleagues, stopping every so often to discuss the hidden mysteries of Torah. The Zohar is midrashic in style, as it takes biblical passages and expounds upon them. It is also midrashic in content; it draws on Rabbinic midrashim when discussing any given verse. The Zohar also draws on the Talmud and the medieval commentaries, interpreting these sources in a completely new manner.

The Zohar uses highly symbolic language; the general rule seems to be "Why explain something using literal language when symbols can be used!" The Zohar adopts the general scheme of the ten spheres as put forth in the Sefer HaBahir, and spins an entire web of symbols around it; a whole new vocabulary of images is created. Each of the ten spheres is fleshed out, so that each is associated with a particular name of God, a part of the body, a particular Biblical character, a particular color, etc. Any given biblical verse is explained in accordance with this symbolic vocabulary.

The fact that the Zohar draws on so many traditional sources, as well as its language (Aramaic and highly symbolic) make it a very difficult book. Nevertheless, it has become the cornerstone of mystic literature, and all later kabbalistic works have based themselves on it.