

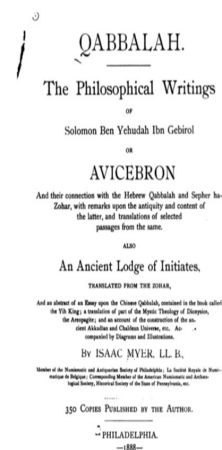
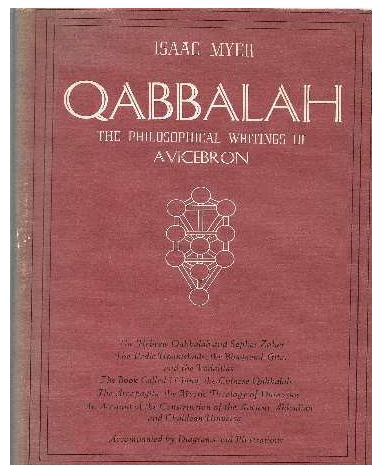
The Qabbalah of the Hebrews and the Ancient Wisdom Religion of Asia:

Isaac Myer and the Kabbalah in America

Boaz Huss, dept. of Jewish Thought, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Paper read at the Kabbalah in America conference, Rice University, October 28th 2018

In 1888, Isaac Myer published, in Philadelphia, a book entitled *Qabbalah – The Philosophical Writings of Solomon Ben Yehuda Ibn Gabirol*. It was the first comprehensive book on Kabbalah printed in the United States, and the most learned and up to date book on Kabbalah in English at the time.

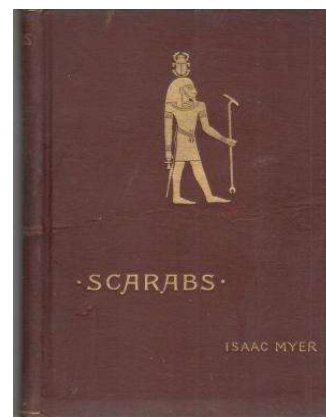
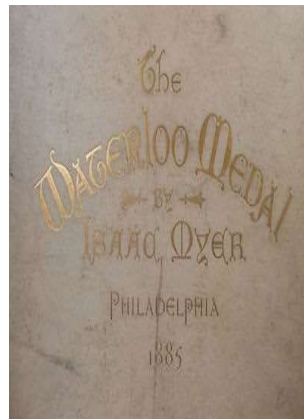
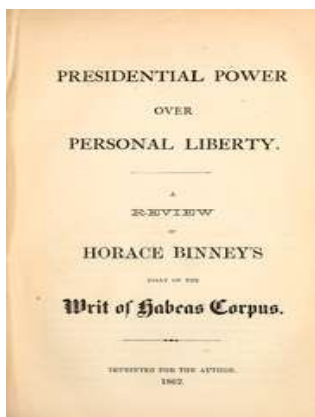


Isaac Myer was born in Philadelphia in 1836. His ancestors, who immigrated to America in the 17th century from England and from Holland, were Puritans and Dutch reform. His father, Isaac Myer senior, was a wealthy businessperson. Isaac Jr. graduated from the law department of the University of Pennsylvania in 1857. He practiced law in Philadelphia and

New-York, and was United States Commissioner of western Pennsylvania. He was a private scholar, a Freemason, and a member of several scholarly and antiquarian associations.

Myer was especially active in the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia. In 1889 he married Mary Sharpsteen, but the marriage did not last long. He died in 1902 and was buried in the family lot at Laurel Hill, Philadelphia. Myer bequeathed his rich library, and many of his own manuscripts, to the Lenox library, which became part of the New York Public Library.

Myer published several books, which can give us an impression of the wide range of his interests. They include: *Presidential Power over Personal Liberty* (1862); *The Waterloo Medal* (1885); *The Qabalah* (1888); *Scarabs* (1894); and his last book *The Oldest Books in the World* (1900).



He also published several articles, which include articles on Hermes Trismegistus and on Hindu Symbolism published in *The Path*, an article on "On Dreams by Synesius," published in *The Platonist*, and an article entitled "Qabalah, Quotations from the Zohar and other writings, treating of the Qabbalistic or Divine Philosophy," published in *The Oriental Review*.

HINDU SYMBOLISM: I — Isaac Myers



We propose to give those interested, a series of illustrations from Hindu drawings with descriptions; in the latter, our study of the Kabbalah has been of great assistance.

ON DREAMS

BY
SAINT SYNESIOS

Translated, With Notes.

ISAAC MYER.

ONE HUNDRED COPIES PUBLISHED BY THE TRANSLATOR

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PHILADELPHIA

QABBALAH

Quotations from the Zohar and Other
Writings, Treating of the Qabbalistic
or Divine Philosophy

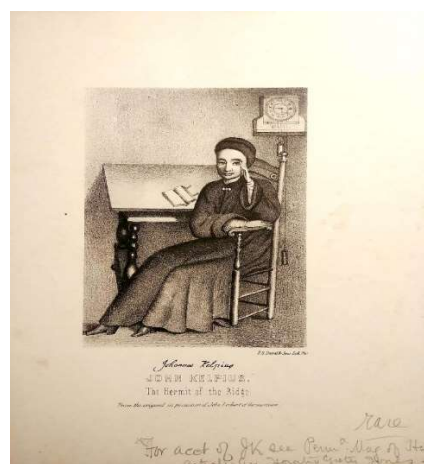
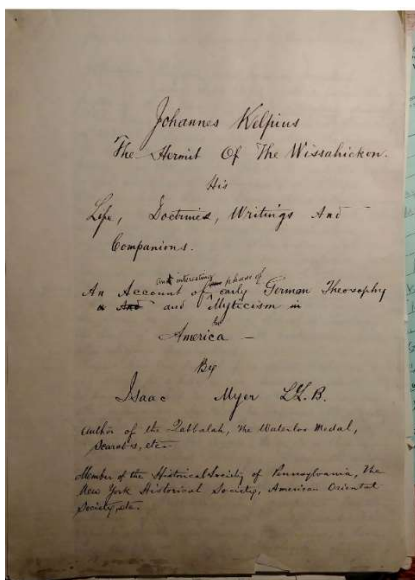
MYER, L.L.S.

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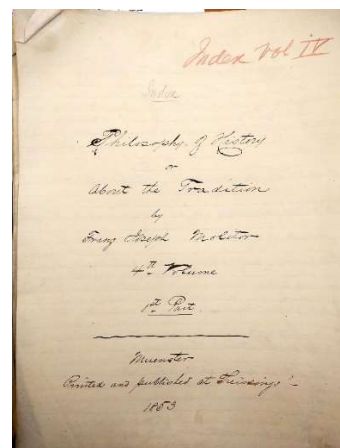
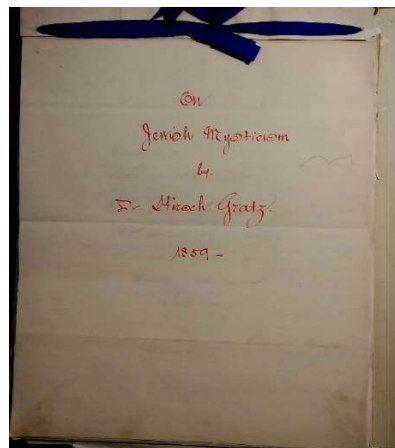
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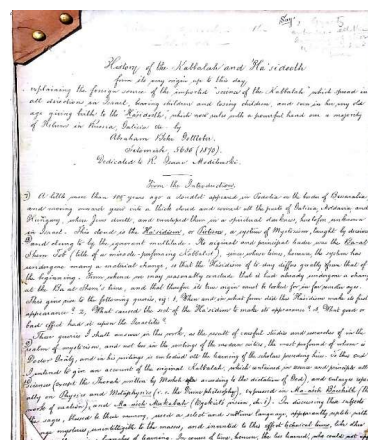
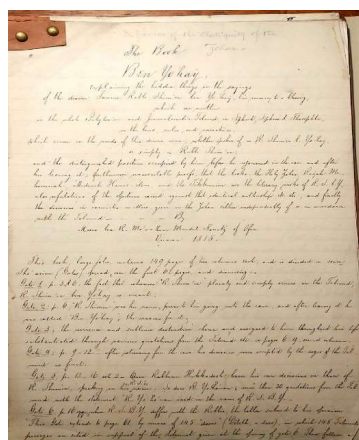
In his archive at the New York Public Library (NYPL), there are manuscripts of unpublished works, including a book about Johannes Kelpius (1667-1708), the 17th-century German pietist who immigrated with his followers to Pennsylvania in anticipation of the end of the world.



Myers's papers in the NYPL (which I have studied recently, with the support of the NYPL and Fordham University grant), include English translations of dozens of books and articles, mostly on Kabbalah, from Latin, French, German, Hebrew, and Aramaic. They include western esoteric and occult works, such as Molitor and Eliphas Levi; 19th-century German Jewish scholarship of Kabbalah, including translations of Heinrich Graetz and Adolph Jellinek;



books on Kabbalah in Hebrew, such as Moshe Kunitz', Ben-Yochai and Abraham Baer Gotlober's, Toldod ha-Kabbalah v'ha-Hasidut. Myer also translated primary Kabbalistic texts, such as Ibn Gabai's derekh Emuna, and many texts from the Zohar.



The archive also includes some letters (regrettably, very few) that shed some more light on Myer's networks and the context of his unique interest and perception on Kabbalah. I will return to them later.

I want to turn now, to examine Myer's perceptions of Kabbalah. Myer's ideas about Kabbalah are presented in his major book, *Qabbalah*, as well as in some of his other writings. His book begins with a chapter on Ibn Gebirol's life and writings (Myer assumed that Ibn Gabirol was a Kabbalist). It continues with chapters on the Zohar and its antiquity, the history of Kabbalah, translation of excerpts from the Zohar, and discussions of the theories of the Sephiroth, the Ain Soph, the four worlds, and the structure of the universe.

Myer was familiar with the current scientific research of the time – it seems that he read almost everything written on Kabbalah. He brings long summaries, quotations, and discussions from different works on Kabbalah and other religions. His views on the history and significance of Kabbalah are based on comparative and philological-historical research. As I already mentioned, the book is the most scholarly, detailed, and up to date discussion of Kabbalah that was published in English at that time.

Much of the work is dedicated to proving the antiquity of the Kabbalah and Sefer ha-Zohar. Myer holds that Kabbalah is of great antiquity:

The Qabbalah of the Hebrews is undoubtedly of great antiquity, a reminiscence of an ancient "Wisdom Religion" of Asia, for we find its doctrines, in germ, in the ancient Buddhist, Sanskrit, Zend, and Chinese books; also examples of its peculiar exegesis in the occult book, Genesis, and in Jeremiah (p. 439).

The idea of “the ancient wisdom religion of Asia”, that Kabbala is an expression of is repeated many times by Myer. Thus, for instance, he writes:

Many centuries before the Christian era, there was in Central Asia a “wisdom religion” fragments of which subsequently existed among the learned men of archaic Egyptians, the ancient Chinese, Hindus, Israelites, and other Asiatic nations; as a secret metaphysical philosophy, and also as a secret physical philosophy (p. 219).

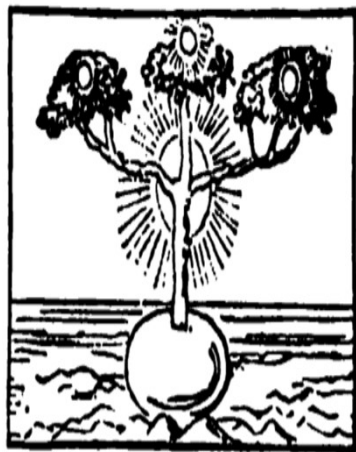


Figure 9.—Hindu Tree of the Sephiroth.



Figure 35.—Hindu Qabbalistic symbol of the Four Worlds.

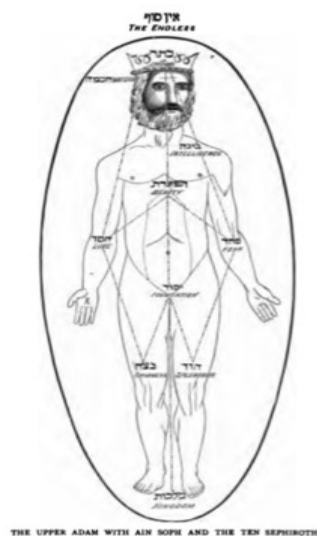
Myer was an admirer of Kabbalah. However, similar to many other scholars and occultists of his time, he sometimes expressed an ambivalent stance towards Kabbalah, because of its oriental features:

The systems of the speculative Qabbalah appears to Occidental thought ... bizarre, strange, perhaps at times, absurd ... the Oriental secret traditions which are not only of great abstruseness, but have been most frequently misrepresented, misunderstood, or misjudged even by their most ardent votaries (p. 179).

Different from Madam Blavatsky and other non-Jewish occultists of the time, that asserted that Jewish Kabbalah should be ignored, or corrected because it was distorted, Myer continues and advocates the study of Jewish Kabbalah:

We claim, that a thorough study of the Hebrew speculative Qabbalah in its connection with the Oriental books of our own religions, and the systems of other Oriental people will give it a much more elevated position, show that a much greater value is in it and a much greater antiquity, than has been heretofore accorded to it... as a great advance towards a more thorough and correct knowledge of the origin and germs of many ideas now existing in religion and philosophy (p. 179).

Myer writes about Kabbalah from a Christian perspective, and claims that an “intimate connection exists between the New Testament ideas and the Israelitish secret philosophy...” (p. 179). In several places, Myer brings Christian interpretations of Kabbalah, such as: “The Triad of the Ancient Qabbalah is Kether, the Father, Binah, the Holy Spirit or Mother, and Hokhmah, the Word or son ...” (p. 261).



Myer based his discussions of Kabbalah on comparative and historical-philological research. However, his interest in Kabbalah and comparative religion is not purely historical. It has a theological, spiritual aim. Myer believes that the study of Kabbalah and its ancient origins will revive Christian mysticism, and will enable the formation of a new theology, that will reunite all divided religions. In the introduction to his book, he explains his aim:

It is my desire to awaken a higher spiritual feeling towards the investigation of the Mysteries of Ancient Israël, in which, the Mysteries of the New Covenant lie hidden; which shall help to awaken in Christian Mysticism its fundamental elements, faith and belief in the True . . . and establish the vast edifice of theology on deep philosophical principles and belief in the True, and not on man's alterable creeds and formulations: and by so doing; prepare a common center for the reunion of all the, at present divided, religious sects.

Myer continues and asserts that the investigations and research of Kabbalah and ancient religions will pave the way to understanding the true principals of humankind:

... and so prepare the way for that which the Deity never intended should be separated, the union of sound reason and correct philosophy with true religion (pp. ix-x).

The project of reuniting all religions based on their true, ancient core, and creating a synthesis of reason, philosophy, and true religion was the aim of many occult movements of the late 19th century and early 20th century. Several scholars of the emerging science of comparative religion aimed at a similar goal. What is unique in Myer's stand is that he regards the research of Kabbalah as the key to this occult, theological-scientific project.

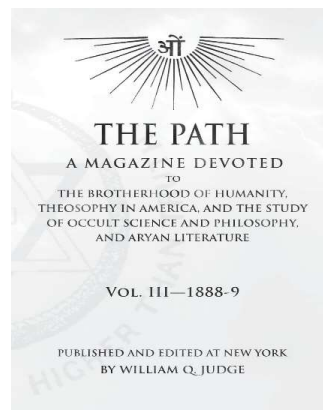
Myer's scientific-theological project of Kabbalah research integrates a historical, scholarly approach and western esoteric and occult ideas. I would like to turn now and investigate the cultural context of Myer and his work, by looking at his connections, networks, and affiliations

Myer was an independent scholar. He had many interests – Kabbalah, ancient Egypt, Neoplatonism, and early modern occultism. He did not receive academic training in these fields but belonged to several independent scholarly and antiquarian societies and associations. He seems to have also been quite an independent occultist. I already mentioned that he was a Freemason. As we shall see, he also had connections with some of the most prominent Theosophists and Occultists of his time in the United States, although, he probably was not a member of any esoteric movement.

Myer's interest in Kabbalah and oriental religions, and his wish to create a universal religion, which will reunify religion and reason, is reminiscent of the principals of the Theosophical Society. Myer indeed had connections with the Society, which was the largest esoteric movement in the late 19th century. Two of his articles, “Hermes Trismegistus” and “Hindu Symbolism” were published in *The Path* – the journal of the American section of the Theosophical Society, edited by William Quan Judge, the president of the section.

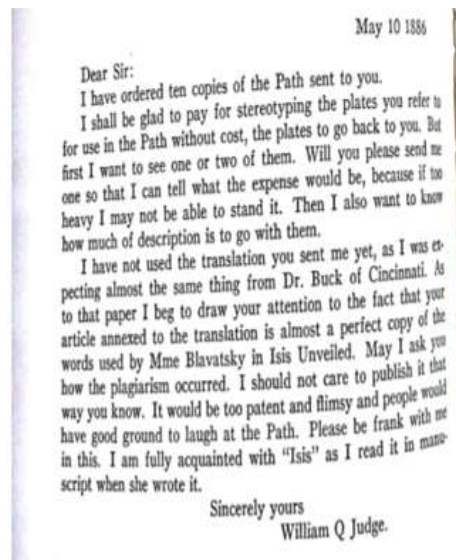


William Quan Judge



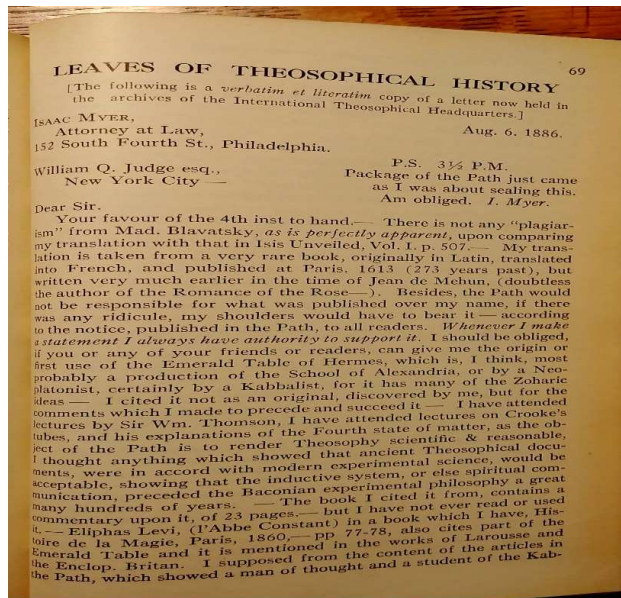
Myer's article "Hermes Trismegistus," includes an introduction and translation of the *Emerald Tablet*, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, a text that was highly popular among alchemists and occultists. According to Myer, the text was written by a Kabbalist and includes many Zoharic ideas. An interesting correspondence between Myer and Judge, regarding the publication of Myer's article was preserved, and published in the 1930's, in the Theosophical journal, *Theosophical Forum*.

In the first letter, sent by Judge to Myer, in May 1886, upon reception of Myer's article, Judge blames Myer of plagiarism, claiming that Myer copied the introduction to his translation from Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*.



Naturally, Myer was very insulted by the accusation of plagiarism. In his response, he said his translation was different from that of Blavatsky, and based on a different source. Furthermore, Myer criticized the translation of Madame Blavatsky, saying that his translation is "far better & more perfect than that in *Isis Unveiled*" – a statement showing that he was not a loyal Theosophist. Finally, he criticizes the articles on Kabbalah, which were published in *The Path*, saying that: "I have not as yet seen any article in your magazine on the Kabbalah which appears

to grasp it or be correct.” Myer probably directed this criticism against Seth Pancoast, who published an article on Kabbalah in the April 1886 issue of *The Path*.



The continuation of Myer’s letter, that relates to the study of the Zohar and its antiquity, is very interesting:

But little dependence can be placed on the writings of Christian D. Ginsburg upon the subject – they are full of mistakes and besides he opposes the antiquity of the Zohar. I have just received the Great Zohar, Cremona, folio edition, of 1558-1559. I can trace back the Zohar to R. Shimon ben Yochai and his School. Moses de Leon did not write it, and there is not an objection to it, as to which Ginsburg has searched the whole literature to obtain all he could, that cannot be answered, and I have the answers...

The letter seems to have convinced Judge, and he finally published Myer’s article in September 1886.

Myer had also connections with Thomas Moore Johnson and possibly, with his occult network. Johnson (1851-1919), from Osceola, Missouri, was (similar to Myer), an eminent attorney, independent scholar, and an occultist who had connections with several groups, including the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor. Johnson edited *The Platonist* which included publications about Plato, Neoplatonism, and Hermeticism, as well as on different esoteric topics, including Yoga, Sufism, and Kabbalah.



THOMAS MOORE JOHNSON
1851 - 1919



Myers article, “On Dreams by Synesios,” was in the fourth volume of *The Platonist*, on May 1888. A letter from Myer to Thomas Moore Johnson is found in the Johnson collection at Missouri State University, and I am very grateful to Vadim, who sent me a copy of this letter.

In the letter, dated November 5th, 1888, Myer thanks Johnson for his invitation to celebrate Plato’s 2317th birthday in Johnson’s residence on Osceola, and regrets that will not be able to attend. Most of the letter concerns the question of the universalism of Platonism as a world-view and to the connection of Platonism and Neo-Platonism with the philosophical systems of the Orient. It seems that Myer and Johnson had much in common. There are

significant resemblances between Myer and Johnson scholarly-esoteric projects, and both were part of similar networks. A significant difference is that while Johnson regarded Platonism as the epitome of the ancient, true esoteric wisdom, Myer saw Oriental religions, especially, Jewish Kabbalah as the primary keys to the ancient wisdom.

Another person Myer had connections with, was Merwin-Marie Snell (1863-1921). Snell, who is not very well known today, was a fascinating figure. He was born to a prominent New England protestant family but converted to Catholicism. He was a theologian and one of the first scholars of comparative religion in the United States. He was one of the organizers of the famous World Parliament of Religions in 1893. Snell was also interested in esotericism and was the founder of one of the most learned, and mysterious occult movements, The Universal Brotherhood. He was the editor of a very short-lived journal, *The Oriental Review*, in which Myer published, in 1893 his article “Qabbalah, Quotations from the Zohar and other writings, treating of the Qabbalistic or Divine Philosophy.”



THE SPECULATIVE VALUE OF COMPARATIVE
RELIGION (HIEROLOGY).

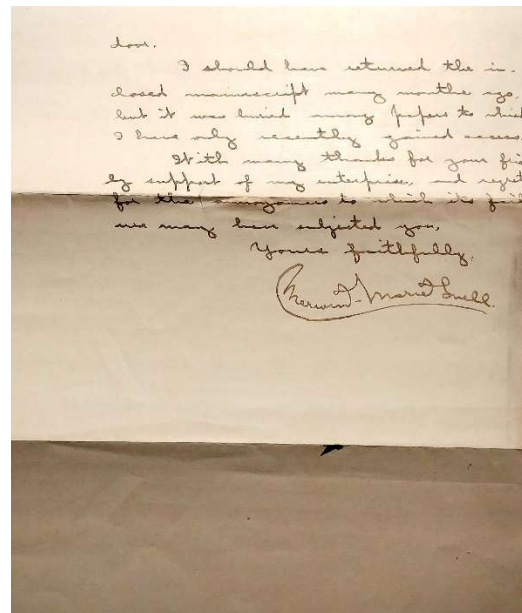
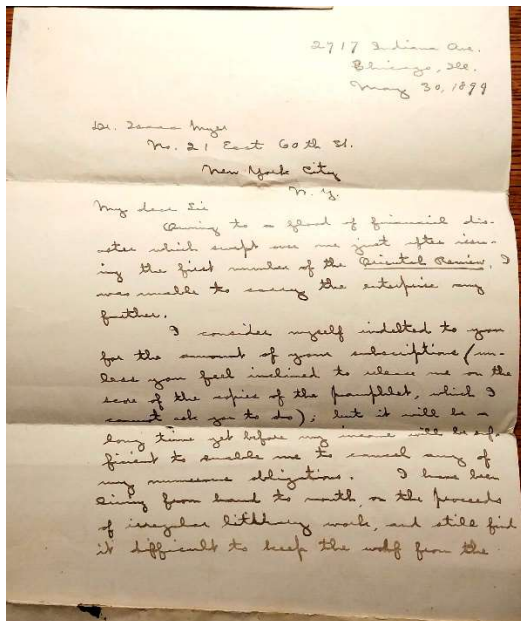
By MERWIN-MARIE SNELL.

THE science of comparative religion, or hierology, is divisible into two parts, the morphology and the history of religions. Morphology is the science of form; in the morphological study of religious facts they are considered in themselves without any regard to the element of time, which in the historical study of them receives the chief attention. Take, for instance, the practice of sacrifice; religious morphology describes the details of the rite, while religious history follows the development of the sacrificial idea in its various forms of votive gift, burnt offering, human sacrifice, etc., ascertaining the origin of each variation, and of the central notion itself. Or suppose that there is question of the mechanical devices used in prayer; religious morphology would describe the rosaries of the Mohammedans and Catholics and Buddhists, and the methods of using them; the praying wheels and flags and mills and walls of the Chinese; and the *harqom*, or bundle of consecrated twigs used by the Parsees in their devotions. Religious history would try to discover whether or not the prayer beads of the different religions had a common origin, and might perhaps find their germ in some simple mnemonic system, such as the *gajra*, or knotted cords, of the Peruvians. It might discover that prayer flags began with the strips of cloth hung upon the trees at the rural spirit shrines, and that the first step toward the prayer wheel and the “praying” wall and mill was the placing of religious mottoes upon useful utensils and machinery.

It will be easily seen that these two forms of the study of religions cannot be considered as distinct branches of the science, for neither of them can be treated to the exclusion of the other. A series of morphological studies, arranged in

Two letters exchanged between Myer and Snell were preserved. My colleague Henrik Bogdan, who studies Snell and the Universal Brotherhood found a letter sent by Myer to Snell and kindly sent me a copy. In the letter, dated January 15th, 1893, Myer discussed his possible contribution to the newly founded Oriental Review and agreed to become a member of the advisory board.

In Myer's archive, I found a response of Snell to Myer. In the letter, dated May 30th, 1894, Snell explains to Myer that he had to close the journal, after publishing only one issue (that included Myers' article), because of "a flood of financial disasters."



Snell, similar to Myer, and Johnson found much interest in comparative religion and based his universal-esoteric ideas on scholarly research. However, he developed his esoteric ideas in a Catholic theological framework, and as far as I know, he did not have any particular interest in Kabbalah.

Myer also had connections with some Jewish scholars of his time, both in America and abroad. The most important Jewish scholar that Myer was in touch with was the famous Jewish Italian philosopher and Kabbalist, from Livorno, Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh (1822-1900).

Benamozegh developed a unique Jewish universalistic philosophy that was based on Kabbalistic ideas. Moshe Idel summarized Benamozegh's position thus: "Kabbalah, the ancient and undistorted mystical lore, is conceived of as the ideal religiosity that was not only the pristine religion of the Jews but also the perfect religious solution of the future" (Idel, Benamozegh, 396)

Myer mentions "Signor Elia Benamozegh, the great Qabbalist of Livorno," several times in his book, and brings statements in favor of the antiquity of the Zohar from Benamozegh's Torah commentary, *Em La-Mikra*. In one case, Myer refers to Benamozegh's reference to words of Jesus in the New Testament as a proof of the antiquity of the Zohar.



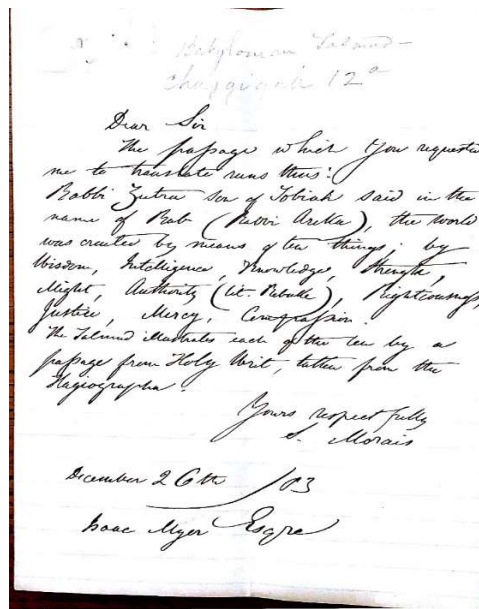
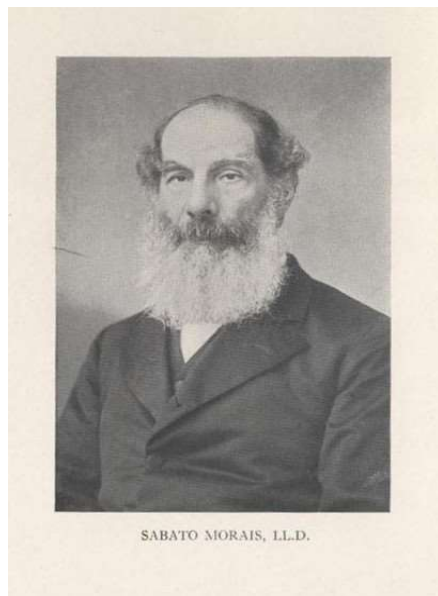
מלך ככל, רב' אומר קריסוס ממש ור"ח אומר שכתבס' ע"י כוונתם —
 וסתמאגס חרנס קריס פרעס „רבא דפרעס” ובאמת לא רחיקי כמכתגי
 מזרים הקדמונים שיהיו אלסם סקרוס כתלר סמלך כמכתגי מקומות אחרים,
 ואולי סיס זס טעס אנהלוקס לתרגס „רבא דפרעס”. ולגס גדולת וחסיובת
 כסתפת גס כן מניעת סמשנל קראו כוסר לת"ח סריסס — מאן קריסוס
 אליון ת"ח דמסרסו גרמיוסו (ולא מלאכו כוסת כספרי סתלמודיוס, רק
 מלאכות כדברי סכוסרי (סחי 12. v. 19) וס רחיס על קרנות ס' כוסר,
 סקרי מתכרי לא סיס לו ללמוד מספרס אחרס, ומסס סנתכוון למלוסס
 קדמונית שלא כמתכוון ידעכו כו סאמכו דכריו) — ועל עקר סחרון סמלס
 רחיקי לג' ויוכוס סכתב סקור כמו שרש, ושרשך בארץ חיוס סלס כסתתלף
 ש' בס' ומלכד. סקרב חוס ססתקחכ' כאלס כלסוניכו, מלאחי לו רחיס
 מלשון ארמי שואר כמקוס קריס גוזאי ואין ססק אללי סקור מעכוין ומלשון

Myer summarizes Benamozeghs argument and says: “Most likely Jesus of Nazereth and Shim-on b. Yochai received many of their teachings from the same school, that of the Secret Learning, which accounts for the fact the Zoharic writings have so many points in common with the New Testament, Philo, and the early Patristic literature” (p. 92).

In the above-mentioned letter to William Quan Judge, Myer tells of his correspondence with Benamozegh, and boasts that he has the proofs for the Zohar antiquity, which Benamozegh did not have: “I received a letter from Elia Benamozegh of Italy, a few days past, he is the greatest living Kabbalist, but he knows not the proofs for the antiquity of the Zohar – I have them.”

There are significant resemblances between Myer and Benamozegh theological perceptions. Both Benamozegh and Myer believed in the antiquity of the Zohar and the Kabbalah, and both assumed that Kabbalistic ideas are found in the New Testament. Both advocated a universal religion and believed that the key to such a universal religion could be found in the Kabbalah. Arguably, Myer’s universalistic Christian-esoteric Kabbalistic theology resembles Benamozegh’s universal Jewish-Kabbalistic ideas more than any other theology of the time.

Myer had connections also with other Jewish scholars, who helped him in his research and translation of Jewish sources. In his archive, I found one letter from Shabbtai (Sabato) Morais (1823-1897).

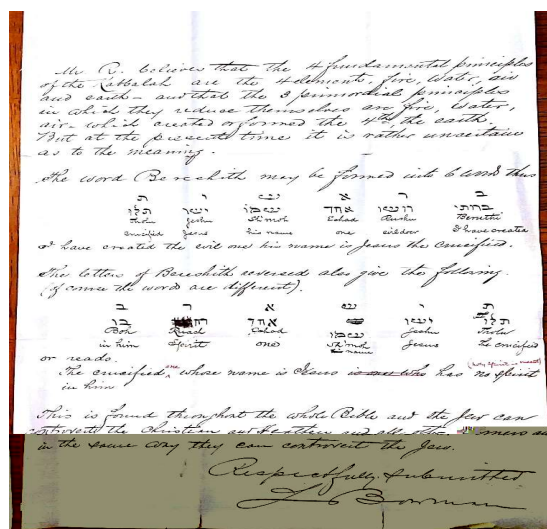


Morais, originally from Livorno, Italy, was for many years the head of the Orthodox Synagogue Mikveh Yisrael in Philadelphia. He was one of the most important American Jewish scholars and leaders of the late 19th century and was involved in International, American and Jewish public and political issues. In 1886, he founded, as was the first president of the original Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

In the short letter I found, Morais answers Myer's questions concerning phrases from the Talmud. Morais was a Freemason, and probably, he and Myer became acquainted through their masonic activity. Morais, who was born and raised in Livorno, was a friend of Benamozegh, and I assume that he made contact between Myer and Benamozegh. Nonetheless, different from Benamozegh and Myer, Morias had low esteem of Kabbalah and criticized it in his writing and sermons. While he and Myer may have shared Political ideas and scholarly and Masonic interests, they did not share the same theological ideas and interest in Kabbalah.

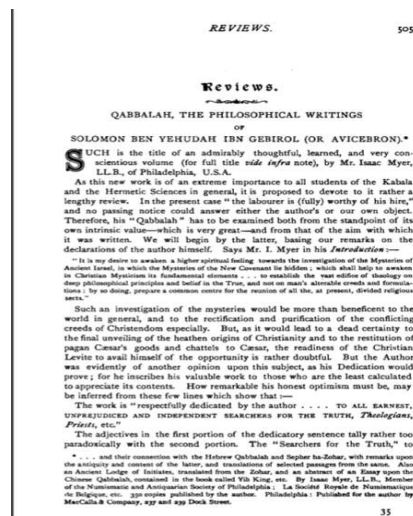
Another Jewish scholar that Myer was in touch with was Henri (Zvi Hirsch) Gersoni (1844-1897). Gersoni was born in Vilnius. He received rabbinic education and studied at the University of Saint Petersburg. Following a love affair with a Christian woman, he converted to Christianity but later regretted his conversion and returned to Judaism. In 1869, he immigrated to America, resided in different places, and finally settled in New York. He was a Journalist, author, and rabbi, and published extensively on various topics in Hebrew, Yiddish and English. Gersoni helped Myer in translating from Hebrew. In Myer's archive, I found a package that contained Gersoni's translations of Hebrew and Aramaic texts from Adolphe Jellinek's *Beitrage zur Kabbalah*. It also included correspondence between Myer and Gersoni, from 1885, regarding translations of different Kabbalistic texts. As far as I know, Gersoni did not have a particular interest in Kabbalah or comparative religion, and it seems the connection with Myer was limited to his help in translation.

Finally, I would like to mention one other intriguing letter, which I have found in Myers' archive. The beginning of the letter is missing, and I am not sure if I deciphered the signature correctly.



The letter presents a reading of the word בראשית as an acronym of ברוחי רישו אחד שמו ישו. This is translated to English as – “I have created the evil one his name is Jesus the crucified.” The writer of the letter says that read backward, the letters of the word בראשית are an acronym of תלוי ישו שמו אחד רוח בו. He translates these words as: “The crucified whose name is Jesus has no spirit in him.” I am not sure how to decipher the signature (possibly, it is L. Bosman?) and I do not know the origins of these interpretations of the word בראשית. It seems the author was a Jew, who spoke Hebrew, but did not know to write it very well (he writes רישו instead of רשע). I am still not sure who the author is, and what is the context of this letter.

To conclude. After its publication, Myer’s, book on the Kabbalah received several positive reviews in the general press, as well as in Freemason and Theosophical journals. Madam Blavatsky, the leader of the Theosophical Society, published a long, and enthusiastic review of the book, which she described as an “admirably thoughtful, learned and very conscientious volume”, which “is of extreme importance to all students of Kabbalah and the Hermetic Science in general.”



Some other Theosophists also cited Myer's book. Scholem and probably other scholars of Kabbalah also knew of the book. Nonetheless, it was rarely mentioned in Kabbalah scholarship. Neither was it popular amongst later neo-Kabbalistic groups.

Notwithstanding the limited impact of Myer and his study of Kabbalah, the book and its author hold an important place in the history of Kabbalah in America. Isaac Myer was the most learned American scholar of Kabbalah in his time, and his book was the first comprehensive study of Kabbalah published in the United States. Myer developed a unique perception of Kabbalah that he based on philological-historical research, erudite studies in comparative religion, and a Christian-Occult theological perception. Although Myer was an independent scholar – and an independent occultist - he was affiliated with several influential Jewish and non-Jewish scholars, antiquarians, and occultists, that contributed to his unique scholarly-theological project.

The occult and scholarly networks, to which Myer belonged, helped to shape other modern forms and perceptions of Kabbalah, which developed and became popular in America in a later period. Although Myer's erudition and interests in Kabbalah were unique in his time, many of the characteristics of his modern American Kabbalah will also characterize later forms of American Kabbalah. The universalistic and perennial understanding of Kabbalah, and the formation of modern liberal neo-Kabbalistic theologies based on historical research and comparative religious studies, that characterize Myer's thought, will reappear in many of the later developments of Kabbalah in America.