

FIRST FRUITS OF ZION ✎ WHITE PAPER

# Mystical Hermeneutics and Kabbalah

Aaron Eby

---

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. ([www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org))

Scripture quotations marked “NIV” are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used with permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked “ESV” are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked “KJV” are taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version.

FIRST FRUITS OF ZION ✎ WHITE PAPER

# Mystical Hermeneutics and Kabbalah

The publication of Paul Philip Levertoff's book *Love and the Messianic Age* brought certain issues to the forefront for discussion. Since *Love and the Messianic Age* is a comparison of Chasidic teaching with the gospel of John, it raises some questions: First, do First Fruits of Zion and our publishing arm Vine of David employ or support a mystical hermeneutic method? Second, are First Fruits of Zion and Vine of David instructing or encouraging people to study and accept Kabbalah?

## Does First Fruits of Zion Employ a Mystical Hermeneutic?

### What is a mystical hermeneutic?

This interpretive method is one that views the Hebrew Scriptures as having shades of meaning in addition to a strict grammatical interpretation. Jewish interpreters frequently see the inspired text of the Hebrew Scriptures as having deeper meanings intended by God that may not have been known or realized by the human authors.

Note that “mystical,” as used above, does not imply any kind of magic, ritual, or meditative practice. It is nothing more than seeing additional interpretations of a passage of Scripture besides its obvious meaning.

Strictly speaking, mysticism is the study of hidden things: matters pertaining to the soul, the inner nature of man, and the secret things of God, as well as interpretations that are revealed rather than derived logically. But in our discussion of a “mystical hermeneutic,” it makes sense to include the overlapping category of midrashic interpretation, since it is also characterized by finding deeper meaning perhaps unknown to the original authors, and thus it may be subjected to the same objections.

A mystical hermeneutic method is often identified as a type of eisegesis.<sup>1</sup> This type of engagement with the Scriptures is frequently employed in Jewish thought and has been since ancient times. It is particularly common in aggadic and midrashic literature. Scholars have noted it not only in rabbinic literature, but also in writings such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, and the biblical prophets.<sup>2</sup> Although the Kabbalah certainly employs a mystical hermeneutic, it would be incorrect to describe this type of interpretation as “Kabbalistic”—as if it were derived from the Kabbalah. Calling this hermeneutic “Kabbalistic” would be like calling a combustion engine “Mercedes-like.” It is just a fundamental Jewish method that makes its way into all kinds of Jewish literature, including Kabbalah.<sup>3</sup>

### Is a mystical hermeneutic applied by the apostles?

From a Western perspective, it is natural to view a grammatical-historical, purely exegetical interpretation of Scripture as superior to traditional Jewish methods. However, the apostolic authors, coming from an ancient Jewish milieu rather than a Western one, did not share that perspective. It seems natural to us to assume that the apostolic authors employed the same types of interpretation as their Jewish contemporaries, which included both exegesis and eisegesis. This is borne out by numerous examples as many scholars have noted. Christian theologians, recognizing this conventional Jewish use of the Hebrew Scriptures by apostolic authors, refer to the concept as *sensus plenior*, or “fuller sense.”

Ellis writes:

As a whole the examples show that the principles attributed to Hillel were also used by messianic Judaism represented by Jesus and the New Testament writers.<sup>4</sup>

Biblical interpretation in the NT church shows in a remarkable way the Jewishness of earliest Christianity. It followed exegetical methods common to Judaism and drew its presuppositions from Jewish backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>

Doeve puts it this way:

In the first there is the well-known fact, that the entire New Testament contains a considerable number of direct quotations from the Old Testament; in more than one of these cases we find the text applied in a way quite foreign to the context in which it appears in the Old Testament ... Such use of scriptural texts reminds us of what we found in rabbinic literature.<sup>6</sup>

Moore describes Jewish exegesis of Scripture as:

Atomistic exegesis which interprets sentences, clauses, phrases and even single words independently of the context or the historical occasion ... combines them with other similarly detached utterances and makes use of analogy of expressions, often by purely verbal association ... The interpretation of the Scriptures in the New Testament is precisely of the same kind.<sup>7</sup>

Longenecker explains his view:

In actual fact, there appear to be numerous cases of *sensus plenior* in the New Testament—that is, of instances where Scripture is cited in a manner that goes beyond a literal sense, or beyond what can be determined by the rules of historical-critical exegesis to have been the Old Testament author's message for his time ... All I can do here is record my agreement with its proponents and to say that I believe any normal reading of the data supports some type of *sensus plenior* understanding.<sup>8</sup>

He sees this in concert with ancient Jewish interpretive methods:

Paul goes beyond the limits of both literal and midrashic exegesis and interprets the Old Testament allegorically, subordinating the literal sense and elaborating an additional meaning that spoke to the situation being addressed. ... We noted earlier that allegorical exegesis played a part in all the known branches of Judaism in the First Christian century—dominantly in the writings of Philo, but also to be seen in milder forms in Pharisaic and sectarian exegetical practices. And in these two allegorical treatments ... Paul reflects this general Jewish background.<sup>9</sup>

These methods of interpreting and applying Scripture may seem quaint, illogical, or even superstitious to a Christian theologian, but they are part and parcel of a Hebraic mindset. As the above citations attest, we must recognize that the apostolic authors stood within their culture and practiced the accepted religious hermeneutic of their time, a hermeneutic that did not arise from a Protestant Christian course on hermeneutics.

Some Christian theologians are uncomfortable with the idea that eisegetical insight could have any validity. But if eisegetical insight is patently invalid, then either the Apostolic Scriptures do not contain eisegetical insight, or they are also invalid. Faithfully presuming the truth of the Apostolic Scriptures, these theologians are therefore forced to interpret the Apostolic Scriptures with a presupposition that the authors exclusively employ a grammatical-historical, face-value approach to the Tanach. Thus, these theologians read this interpretive method into the teachings of the apostles, which sometimes requires complicated gymnastics to make it fit. How ironic that they would resort to eisegesis (or meta-eisegesis?) in order to make their case by reading exegesis into the apostolic interpretations of the Tanach!

These convoluted explanations may satisfy a Christian seminarian, but they do not impress anti-missionaries who seek to destroy the faith of believers in Yeshua. A large number of anti-missionary arguments focus on passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that the apostles apply differently from their original context. Anti-missionaries claim that this proves that the apostolic authors either mishandled or misunderstood the Tanach.

If we attempt to pass off the apostolic reading as the actual grammatical, historical, literal interpretation of the original passage, then we must also assert that no known Jewish scholars from ancient times until today

(outside of followers of Yeshua) knew Hebrew grammar well enough to understand the real face value meaning of the passage.<sup>10</sup> If that were the case, then God's purpose in choosing human language to communicate would seem not to have met with much success.

However, if we show the apostolic authors as having employed the same sorts of interpretive methods as other Jewish writings, the anti-missionary cannot object without condemning other literature that he or she holds as true.

This point is not meant to criticize a grammatical, historical, literal approach. Surely such an approach is valid and even a foundational component of traditional Jewish interpretation. However, it is not the only valuable method of finding meaning in the Scriptures, nor the only method employed by the apostolic community.

Ultimately, there are numerous rational, respectable scholars on both sides of this issue. It is not an argument between critical thinkers on one side and superstitious crackpots on the other. It is a sensible debate that goes on between reasoned scholars in both camps (not unlike the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism), and it will probably not reach a conclusion any time soon.

### **Should we employ a mystical hermeneutic?**

The idea that the apostles engaged in interpretations that went beyond the plain sense of the Scripture in context raises some serious concerns. Are we, then, at liberty to proof-text whatever we like by reading our own thoughts and ideas into Scriptural text? This would obviously lead to chaos.

Jewish commentators today do not frequently invent new midrashic interpretations. Instead, the insights of the sages of the past are studied and retold. Most commentators today do not feel at liberty to interpret this way, because they are not the sages.

Similarly, we are not on an equal level with the apostles. We can allow them to interpret midrashically and pass on their midrashic interpretations without indulging in it ourselves.

Additionally, an important principle in Judaism is that Scriptures never lose their plain meaning. That is to say, even when a verse is applied in a way that goes beyond its plain sense, the plain sense still must be applied and understood. A midrashic interpretation does not replace a grammatical interpretation, nor is it allowed to contradict it. Any midrashic interpretation that directly conflicts with the plain sense of Scripture is invalidated. This is explained in the Talmud:

A verse never departs from its plain meaning. (b.*Shabbat* 63a)<sup>11</sup>

Thus, allowing for multiple interpretations of a text does not mean a free-for-all. Rather, we would do well to rely on the midrashic interpretations of earlier generations only, instead of inventing them ourselves. Furthermore, it would be wise to examine midrashic interpretations carefully and take care not to accept interpretations that directly oppose the plain meaning of the Scriptures.

### **Does First Fruits of Zion Promote Kabbalah?**

It is understandable how someone could come away with the impression that First Fruits of Zion is promoting Kabbalah having read *Love in the Messianic Age*. Levertoff was raised and thoroughly educated in a Chasidic environment. He was an expert not only in the Scriptures but also in Chassidus, a form of Judaism that is strongly characterized by mystical thought. He contributed to the translation of the *Zohar*, a primary Kabbalistic text, for Soncino Press. His book simplifies and explains concepts in Chasidic thought, and therefore naturally makes many references to Chasidic and Kabbalistic sources, such as the *Zohar* and the *Tanya*.

But this should not be construed as a blanket endorsement of Kabbalah or even Chassidus on the part of First Fruits of Zion by any means. First, Levertoff does not present an unfiltered glimpse into every facet and point of Kabbalah. Rather, he quite methodically selects concepts that he sees as at harmony with the Apostolic

Scriptures. In *Love and the Messianic Age*, you will not find any hint of witchcraft, sorcery, occult, paganism, or superstition. The mystical concepts he brings out are love and relationship with God, knowing God on a deep and intimate level, and longing for the era when his presence is fully revealed in the world. There is nothing of substance to criticize in these points.

In addition, Levertoff does not present this material uncritically as factual. Rather, when he presents these concepts he does not present them as his own thoughts, but constantly prefixes them by saying things like “In the Chasidic theology ...”, “A great deal of Chasidic thought revolves around ...”, and “To the Chasidid ...” Levertoff speaks of these opinions as those of “these writers,” not ever identifying them as his own.

Beyond this, while we obviously see this book as inspiring and of historic significance, meriting its re-publication, we do not place an automatic stamp of approval on every concept related in the book. D. Thomas Lancaster writes in the introduction to *Love and the Messianic Age*:

Levertoff says that the mystical and transcendent movement “of Jewish piety has an almost Johannine coloring” yet is nonetheless different from the path set out before us by the Master. In the first six chapters, Levertoff briefly summarizes the complex, esoteric teachings of Chasidic Judaism with only sparse commentary. During the course of those six chapters, the reader will be exposed to a variety of mystical constructs, some of which are inspiring and insightful and some of which may seem dubious. It is not necessary to agree with or endorse the mystical concepts Levertoff advances in these chapters. He is merely presenting those concepts as they are taught in Chasidic Judaism for the purpose of comparison and contrast with apostolic theology.<sup>12</sup>

Later, Lancaster reiterates:

Again, one should keep in mind that the various ideas and concepts presented in the first six chapters need not be accepted at face value. Instead, Levertoff simply presents them for purposes of comparison and contrast with the teachings of Yeshua and the apostles. When studying the Talmud, Midrash, and other Jewish sources, it is not necessary to endorse the whole gamut of the literature to profit immensely from its content. The study of Jewish mysticism is no exception to that rule. Read it, consider it, and then take it or leave it.<sup>13</sup>

First Fruits of Zion does not give a blanket endorsement even to the ideas and conclusions of Levertoff himself. While we view him in high regard as a significant component of Messianic Jewish history, he also made mistakes and held to ideas we cannot condone, as did many other respectable Jewish and non-Jewish believers at the time. (For example, he held to the replacement theology that was common in his day.) While we feel that these errors should be viewed sympathetically in light of his era and context, we treat his works like any other commentary: we compare them with the rigid standard of the Holy Scriptures. They are merely tools to help us understand God’s Word.

Let us make this clear: **First Fruits of Zion does not by any means endorse Kabbalah or encourage anyone to study it.** Rather, it is more fruitful to focus on the basics of Scripture and its plain meaning in context. The concepts laid out in Kabbalistic texts are by and large not relevant to most individuals in the Messianic Movement and have potential to be mishandled. Few have a sufficient frame of reference to understand it in a proper context. Kabbalah has never been widely and publicly studied in Judaism, and for good reason.

Even within Chasidic Judaism, people are frequently warned not to study Kabbalah without fundamental Torah knowledge and maturity. It is not generally recommended to men under the age of forty, and even then only if they are fully educated in Judaism. An article by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz posted on the web site askmoses.com, which is published by the Chabad branch of Chasidic Judaism, warns:

To avoid misunderstanding, Kabbalah had to be taught one-on-one by a master teacher singularly attuned to the capabilities and receptivity of each student. One cannot simply open the classic Kabbalistic texts and glean their truths in a vacuum. Unfortunately, today Kabbalah has been commercialized by

those who pretend to grasp its innermost secrets. These pretenders purport to teach—and to sell—what they do not understand, to people who are not equipped to receive it. Kabbalah's mystifying formulas become nothing more than intoxicating mantras to those who mindlessly repeat them.<sup>14</sup>

As you can see, Rabbi Steinsaltz is critical of a different kind of Kabbalah: a commercialized empty shell hawked by charlatans. This caricature of Judaism, devoid of any real Torah knowledge, finds celebrities flocking to it in order to give some semblance of meaning to their shallow lives.

Indeed, other imitations of Kabbalah take on many forms. So-called “Practical” Kabbalah and “Hermetic” Kabbalah are syncretisms between the mystical traditions of Judaism and idolatry of various false religions. They very explicitly apply witchcraft, magic, paganism, incantations, and divination. They are evil, forbidden, and at total odds with the gospel and the Torah. They are also passed off as mainstream and show up prominently in the Judaica section of bookstores.

While First Fruits of Zion does not recommend that believers study any kind of Kabbalistic sources, a clear distinction must be seen between the type of Torah-rooted, Chasidic mysticism Levertoff distills in *Love and the Messianic Age* and the shallow and superstitious mumbo-jumbo uttered by Madonna.

That is not to say that sources like the *Zohar* are not useful in certain circumstances. There are numerous points of convergence between modern mystical Judaism and apostolic theology. For example, the Apostolic Scriptures interpret the Messiah's suffering as a fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 53. Anti-missionaries sometimes claim that Judaism does not teach that Isaiah 53 speaks of the Messiah at all. However, the *Zohar* comments on Isaiah 53 at several points. In some of these cases, the *Zohar* explains the servant of Isaiah 53 as the Messiah (e.g., II 212a, III 276b); elsewhere, it discusses Isaiah 53 in terms of the righteous suffering on behalf of others (III 118b).

Thus, one primary area of usefulness for the *Zohar* and Chasidic mystical literature is for comparative study. That is exactly what *Love and the Messianic Age* is. Levertoff explained his purpose in writing the book as to shatter faulty Christian stereotypes of Judaism by pointing out areas of overlap. His colleagues in the Christian world had a false impression of Judaism that it was dry and dead, void of any charisma or relationship with God. That is why Levertoff wrote:

I hope by means of this short study to prove that traditional Orthodox Judaism has no lack of spiritual fervor.<sup>15</sup>

Since most people in our movement today do not have the education and maturity necessary to place the mystical sources in their proper context, we feel it best to look to individuals such as Levertoff to distill the concepts for us.

Another question sometimes arises: does much or all of Jewish mysticism come from Gnostic and neo-Platonic sources? Gershom Scholem, a famous scholar of Jewish mysticism, proposed this view,<sup>16</sup> but more recently, scholars such as Moshe Idel have challenged these claims and feel that the reverse is true: certain mystical concepts developed within the “wellsprings of Judaism” itself, and Gnosticism was influenced by Judaism.<sup>17</sup> (The reality is probably quite nuanced, and an over-simplification of the issue could lead to faulty conclusions.)

Even so, First Fruits of Zion promotes a critical, reasoned evaluation of these concepts and ideas and a “take it or leave it” approach.

## The Superiority of the Scriptures

Both of these questions revolve around a central issue: the absolute superiority of the divinely inspired Scriptures. We feel that every extra-biblical work, whether it is the *Zohar*, the Talmud, or a book written by a nineteenth-century Jewish believer, must be tested and compared to the truth of the Scriptures. Even so,

extra-biblical works can prove to be very helpful for understanding and elucidating the words and concepts of the Bible.

The Scriptures, as we know, are “breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). We know that the word of God is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

The Bible is absolutely unique in nature. It is not simply an artifact from an ancient civilization or the mere product of a people’s philosophical musings. It is God’s word, will, and nature precisely revealed. It is infinite in its depth, and the riches of profound wisdom and knowledge it contains is limitless because God is limitless. May God continue to enlighten our eyes in his Torah and cause our hearts to cling to his commandments.

## Endnotes

- 1 Eisegesis (sometimes spelled eisegesis) is a method of interpreting Scripture that involves reading one's own ideas into a text. Modern theologians usually consider this an error.
- 2 E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in Light of Modern Research* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 92–93.
- 3 The word *kabbalah* (קבלה) itself simply means “received” as in received doctrine or tradition. In this paper it refers to the mystical and esoteric stream of thought in Judaism.
- 4 Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in Light of Modern Research*, 91. See also Arne Jarand Hobbel, “Hermeneutics in Talmud, Midrash and the New Testament,” *Immanuel* 24/25 (1990): 132–146.
- 5 E. Earle Ellis, “Biblical Interpretation in the New Testament Church,” in *Mikra: Text, Translations, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Martin Jan Mulder and Harry Sysling, eds.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 724.
- 6 J. W. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (Assen, Netherlands: Koninklijke Van Gorcum & Comp., 1954), 95–96.
- 7 George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (3 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1:248–249.
- 8 Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), xxxiii.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 109–110.
- 10 One might argue that non-believing Jews did not understand the true meaning of the passages because they lacked the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But one does not need special guidance from the Holy Spirit to understand common human language. If the meaning of a passage is concealed to all but those who have received some kind of divine revelation, then the passage is—by definition—mystical. Thus, this fails as an argument against mysticism.
- 11 Artscroll version. See also b.*Yevamot* 24a.
- 12 Daniel Lancaster, introduction to *Love and the Messianic Age*, by Paul Philip Levertoff (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2009), 12.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 14 Rabbi Adin (Steinsaltz) Even-Yisrael, “Truly Kaballistic!” n.p. [cited 20 July 2009]. Online: <http://www.askmoses.com/en/article/545,2107499/Truly-Kaballistic.html>.
- 15 Paul Philip Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2009), 23.
- 16 E.g., Gershom Scholem, “Zohar,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (First Edition): 1193–1215.
- 17 Micha Odenheimer, “Challenging the Master: Moshe Idel’s critique of Gershom Scholem,” *Jewish Action* 50:3 (Summer 1990). Online at: [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Kabbalah\\_and\\_Mysticism/Modern\\_Times/Academic\\_Study\\_of\\_Mysticism/Moshe\\_Idel.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Kabbalah_and_Mysticism/Modern_Times/Academic_Study_of_Mysticism/Moshe_Idel.shtml). See also Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

Proclaiming the Torah and its way of life,  
fully centered on Messiah, to today's People of God

FIRST FRUITS OF  
**ZION**



---

PO Box 649, Marshfield, MO 65706-0649 Phone: 417 468 2741 Toll-free: 800 775 4807 Fax: 417 468 2745 [www.ffoz.org](http://www.ffoz.org)