



# Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction

By Joseph Dan

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## Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction By Joseph Dan

In *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction*, Joseph Dan, one of the world's leading authorities on Jewish mysticism, offers a concise and highly accurate look at the history and character of the various systems developed by the adherents of the Kabbalah.

Dan sheds light on the many misconceptions about what Kabbalah is and isn't--including its connections to magic, astronomy, alchemy, and numerology--and he illuminates the relationship between Kabbalah and Christianity on the one hand and New Age religion on the other. The book provides fascinating historical background, ranging from the mystical groups that flourished in ancient Judaism in the East, and the medieval schools of Kabbalah in Northern Spain and Southern France, to the widening growth of Kabbalah through the school of Isaac Luria of Safed in the sixteenth century, to the most potent and influential modern Jewish religious movement, Hasidism, and its use of kabbalistic language in its preaching. The book examines the key ancient texts of this tradition, including the *Sefer Yezira* or "Book of Creation," *The Book of Bahir*, and the *Zohar*. Dan explains Midrash, the classical Jewish exegesis of scriptures, which assumes an infinity of meanings for every biblical verse, and he concludes with a brief survey of scholarship in the field and a list of books for further reading.

Embraced by celebrities and integrated in many contemporary spiritual phenomena, Kabbalah has reaped a wealth of attention in the press. But many critics argue that the form of Kabbalah practiced in Hollywood is more New Age pabulum than authentic tradition. Can there be a positive role for the Kabbalah in the contemporary quest for spirituality?

In *Kabbalah*, Joseph Dan debunks the myths surrounding modern Kabbalistic practice, offering an engaging and dependable account of this traditional Jewish religious phenomenon and its impact outside of Judaism.

**About the Series:** Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, **Very Short Introductions** offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

Keenly aware of the daunting task of condensing thousands of years of history into a "very short introduction," Dan, the Gershom Scholem Professor of Kabbalah at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, sharply defines his mission: from the historical perspective of religious ideas, "...there is no 'true' meaning that is above all others," so he seeks to "present some of the most prominent characteristics of the different phenomena...described as 'kabbalistic' in various periods, countries and cultural contexts." Beginning in the second century CE and continuing through the present day, Dan methodically details the changing definition and practice of Kabbalah, incorporating a wide array of tangential texts and illustrations. He addresses not only ancient Jewish mysticism, but the fifteenth century hybrid Christian Kabbalah, the myriad Hasidic interpretations and contemporary New Age applications. A six-point summary of the most likely ways in which readers today may encounter the Kabbalah and an extensive list of suggested further reading round out the book's conclusion. This survey of Kabbalah offers deep history in succinct fashion, resulting in a fascinating and highly readable effort.

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## **Review**

"Dan has given us the best concise history of Jewish mysticism.... As a 'very short introduction' to this sublime treasure house, Joseph Dan's book is warmly recommended."--Benjamin Balint, *Commentary*

"This survey of Kabbalah offers deep history in succinct fashion, resulting in a fascinating and highly readable effort."--*Publishers Weekly*

"In a little more than a hundred pages, Dan races through more than a thousand years of Jewish religious texts, explaining a vast, amorphous body of beliefs and practices that have influenced Freemasons, Hasidim, Carl Jung, New Age gurus and, more recently, Hollywood celebrities. It's quite a performance, carried off with only a few stumbles."--William Grimes, *The New York Times*

"A lucid history and explanation of Kabbalah, covering its key periods, texts, figures, and theories. Dan knowledgeably and expertly untangles the complexity of the tradition, specifically addressing misconceptions by discussing what Kabbalah is and what it is not.... This primer is scholarly yet accessible to the lay reader; it's 'Kabbalah for Dummies' sans the cheeky humor."--*Library Journal*

"Even someone who knows nothing more than the celebrity connection will come away with a nuanced understanding."--*Dallas Morning News*

"Professor Dan is one of the leading scholars of Jewish mysticism in the world today. He combines deep erudition with methodological sophistication and clarity of exposition. He is the ideal person to write a short introduction to the study of the Kabbalah."--Shaye J. D. Cohen, Harvard University

"Culling over fifty years of Kabbalah research, Joseph Dan presents a schematic introduction to Kabbalah, its major periods, personalities, and ideas. This slim volume is a window into the intriguing history of this esoteric wisdom-- its Christian and Islamic influences, the proliferation of Christian Kabbalah, its influence on modern philosophy, and the important periods of Jewish heresy. From the ancient world to New Age spirituality, Dan lucidly covers the key ideas of Kabbalah as they developed over the centuries. Accessible, readable, and informative."--Shaul Magid, Indiana University

About the Author

**Joseph Dan** is the Gershom Scholem Professor of Kabbalah in the Department of Jewish Thought, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His many books include *The Heart and the Fountain: Jewish Mystical Experiences*, *The Early Kabbalah*, and *The Teachings of Hasidism*. He resides in Jerusalem and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he is a visiting professor at the Harvard Divinity School.

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