

Kabbalah - have you heard of it?

Some masons argue that *Kabbalah* is the origin of Freemasonry, particularly of the Royal Arch, but the most common place to see the word is in a hotel in Israel, because *Kabbalah* means *reception*, or *receipt*.

You will recall that in the Bible Moses is summoned to the top of Mount Sinai.

The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for [the people's] instruction.'

Moses went to the top of the mountain, and stayed there for 40 days and nights. If that sounds familiar to you, in the bible 40 days and nights just means a long time. Up on the mountain, Moses received (there is that word) the first five books of the Old Testament - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In the Christian Bible known as the *Pentateuch*, in Hebrew its is known as the *Torah*. To be more precise, the *Torah that is written*, so called because Moses wrote it down from God's dictation. However, it is said that Moses received much more than this; something not written but committed to memory and passed from generation to generation only by word of mouth.

As evidence, consider that some Judaic laws seem not to make sense, implying that God explained them when speaking to Moses, off-line as we might say. Other laws do not appear in scripture and so their provenance is again taken to be God speaking to Moses. Some laws appear only in the books of the prophets and the scribes, much later than the time of Moses, and explained as laws memorised by Moses and passed on verbally. These laws, passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth, are known as the *Torah that is spoken*.

With the destruction of the temple in AD 70, and the later Christian persecution of the Jews, there was a danger that the *Torah that is spoken* might be lost, so in 200 AD Rabbi Judah haNasi began to commit it to paper. What the Rabbi wrote is now called the *Mishnah*. Later Rabbis extended the *Mishnah* and the extension is known as the *Gemara*.

Put the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara* together and you get the *Talmud*, 6,000 or so pages long. However, according to kabbalists, the even *Talmud's* 6,000 pages do not contain all the knowledge Moses received from God. Some say he received everything that can be known, the totality of human knowledge, so Kabbalists search for more, examining the *Talmud* for any sort of clue: perhaps looking not at what was written but at what was not written, words that might have been used but were not; perhaps analysing their dreams after they had read passages of the *Talmud*; perhaps ideas occurring to when they were engaged in activities, other than their studies.

Kabbalah is Judaic mysticism, no means accepted by all Jews. The first written work of *Kabbalah* is the *Zohar*, published in Spain in the 13th century AD, and also known as the *Book of Radiance*. As a practice and study, *Kabbalah* seeks to understand creation, how it was created and by whom. It was not God (*ein Sof*) who was quite distinct from the physical world; being pure spirit in nature. They sought to describe the divine realm; to influence the

heavenly powers on man's behalf, and to achieve mystical union with God. There is also kabbalistic magic.

All this is remarkably similar to what is called *hermeticism* derived from the works of Hermes Trismegistus, thought to have been part god and part man who have lived in antiquity, a couple or more centuries BC. Some six hundred years later, St Augustine believed that Trismegistus had predicted the birth of Christ. It was not until the late seventeenth century AD that Isaac Casaubon demonstrated that the hermetic works were written in the third or fourth century AD, and by several authors.

Now, brethren, there you are! Go forth and win the next pub quiz!