Chapter 2

Kabbalah: In Its Beginnings

“Say unto wisdom: Thou art my sister....”
Join thought to divine wisdom, so she and he become one.
—Proverbs 7:4 with comment by Azriel of Gerona, thirteenth-century Kabbalist.

Like today’s other mainstream religions most of Judaism’s religious practices are patriarchal. Yet in its traditions are also found remnants of Ancient Near East Goddess religions that preceded it. In fact, contrary to widespread assumptions, there is considerable evidence that only in recent years has Judaism become a totally monotheistic male-god-only religion.¹

Some of the more widely known examples of the persistence of pre-patriarchal practices are the definition of a Jew by matrilineal descent, long a de facto practice and since the establishment of the state of Israel, a legal fact; the custom of a woman lighting the Sabbath candles to “bring in” the Sabbath, a tradition probably related to her being identified with the Shekinah, God’s feminine aspect, also called the “Sabbath Queen;” and the use of lunar months in the Hebrew calendar. As we shall discover, Kabbalah, though greatly transformed by patriarchy, also derives from earlier matrifocal religious practices. And we shall also see that the “secret” it has been carrying according to tradition—the great mystery nestled in the branches of “the Tree”—is the knowledge of the Goddess, not merely as the feminine aspect of God identified with the bottom of the Tree, but as the totality of creation.

To understand how this came to be, we will look first at traditional Jewish Kabbalah’s myriad beliefs. We will then move on to how mostly non-Jewish mystics of the Hermetic or Western esoteric tradition, transliterating the word “Qabalah,” adapted it to incorporate additional metaphysical beliefs.

Transliterated from Hebrew, Kabbalah (or Qabalah) means “that which is received from ancient times.” It is represented by a glyph called “the Tree of Life” or often simply
“the Tree.” Because many words used to describe and talk about Kabbalah are transliterated from Hebrew, their spellings vary from source to source. On the Tree are round objects, called by their Hebrew name, “sefirot” (singular, “sefirah”). The sefirot are connected by branches called “channels” or “paths.” There are ten sefirot. Their most commonly accepted names and meanings in Jewish Kabbalah are shown in the accompanying drawing.

Jewish Kabbalah is not one set of beliefs, but rather a variety of beliefs and practices drawn from a number of sources, which changed, evolved—some might say mutated—over the centuries.

Traditionally in Judaism restrictions were placed on who could study Kabbalah. Usually you had to be at least forty years old and married. (However, two of the greatest kabbalists, Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria, began their studies well before this age.) You had to have high moral standards, prior religious studies, and be emotionally stable. And you had to be a man. A concept central to Jewish Kabbalah is that the separation of Shekinah (the feminine divine) from God occurred in the Garden of Eden when Adam mistook the lowest sefirah, Malkut (synonymous with Shekinah), for the entirety of divinity. This mistake caused Shekinah to be separated from God. The goal of much of the prayer and meditation of Kabbalah (especially, as we shall see, of Lurianic Kabbalah) is the reuniting of the Shekinah with the male God. Kabbalists believe this reunion will enable the arrival of the Messiah.

The implications of this myth for feminist/women’s/Goddess spirituality are vast. In this myth, Adam’s sin is related to Goddess worship and reinforces the more obvious symbols of Goddess condemnation in Genesis such as the vilification of the serpent—long a symbol of healing and regeneration and of the Goddess—the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge (the “apple” or pomegranate” are also symbols of the Goddess) and the Tree itself, which at one time is very likely to have represented the Hebrew/Canaanite Goddess Asherah (whose symbol was a tree). These and other ramifications of kabbalistic thought are almost always disregarded or overlooked.

To better understand these ideas, and to get to the Goddess root, we need to start at the beginning—or as near the beginning as we can get—and see how belief upon belief, myth upon myth, were heaped on the branches of the Tree until finally her original shape became entirely obscured.
Though Kabbalah in Judaism didn’t emerge as a strong literary form until the thirteenth century and attained its greatest popularity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, according to tradition, Kabbalah existed from the beginning of human life.

**WHAT THE BIBLE TELLS US**

According to tradition, Kabbalah was given to Adam in the Garden of Eden. At first these teachings were secret, and their transmission oral. Also according to tradition, the first written description of Kabbalah is credited to the first biblical patriarch, Abraham.

Kabbalists reading the Bible see evidence of Kabbalistic thought throughout. There is even a tradition which asserts that the written Torah... is only a surface Torah; that the real Torah can only be perceived by “reading between the lines.” The written Torah is traditionally attributed to the sefirah, Tifaret, while the oral Torah is identified with Malkut (Shekinah), one of whose epithets is “the mouth.”

However, this dual attribution is probably one of the many attempts we will find as we explore Kabbalah to lessen the importance of the female divine. In the early twelfth century, kabbalists considered Shekinah synonymous with Torah, regardless of whether Torah was oral or written. It wasn’t until the thirteenth century that the distinction of oral as feminine and written as masculine began to be made. In Kabbalists’ view, the Torah scroll then became a phallic symbol, with the crown atop it being its feminine part.

Certain biblical passages become very important in Kabbalistic thought. These include the creation story, Isaiah’s vision of God enthroned in the Temple accompanied by angels, and the opening of the book of Ezekiel (which is dated about 6 B.C.E.). The latter includes the vision of the chariot, in which the prophet sees a throne containing a humanlike figure surrounded by a rainbow-like radiance, spinning through heaven accompanied by four winged creatures. These creatures or cherubim, which always appear in pairs, are sometimes represented as male and female, sometimes both female.

This vision of the chariot became the central image of merkavah (chariot) mysticism, a form of Kabbalistic thought in which the worshipper made his body the “divine chariot” or vehicle to attract the Shekinah. That is, the worshipper became a “vessel” or “chariot” for her.
In the *Sefer Yetsirah* (Book of Creation), the first Kabbalistic writings, attributed to Abraham but thought to be written 200-500 C.E., the creation is said to have been an act of divine speech, as in Gen. 1:3: “And God said, Let there be light and there was light,” (emphasis mine).

Another important biblical concept with Kabbalistic ramifications is that of the Hebrew term “Hokmah,” meaning Wisdom (in Greek, Sophia). Throughout the Bible, Hokmah is spoken of in female terms. For example in Proverbs 8: “Doth not wisdom cry? And understanding put forth her voice? She standeth in the top of high places, by the way, where paths meet, she standeth....” Here wisdom and understanding (later commonly understood as separate sefirot) appear to either be synonymous or both female. In addition, “she standeth in the top of high places” can be understood as a reference to the Hebrew/Canaanite Goddess Asherah, whose altars were built atop hills and other high places. Wisdom continues to speak: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before the works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was...Then I was by him, as one brought up with him...Blessed is the man that heareth me...For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all that hate me love death.”

Clearly this biblical passage rings with the voice of female divinity, called Wisdom.

Similarly, in Proverbs 9, we read: “Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars...as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him: Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled....”

In addition, in early Jewish mysticism, Wisdom was synonymous with Torah, the “word of God.”

In Kabbalah, however, Hokmah becomes male, the “supernal father” and is the first emanation from the Keter or “nothingness.”

What does all this mean in terms of the origins of Kabbalah?

First, it is clear that according to tradition, Kabbalah has existed as long as humans have—that is, it existed in some form from prehistoric times.

Second, it has undergone enormous changes, first in its oral tradition, and then in its written explanations.
And third, and most tantalizing, these changes have included reversals of the original intent, one instance of which is the gender reversal of Hokmah (Wisdom), a female noun in Hebrew which is consistently personified as female in Scripture and other writings. This reversal of Hokmah, together with the shift in symbolism of Torah from wholly female to mostly male, is our first inkling of more extensive reversals and changes.

**Sefer Yetsirah and Other Early Influences**

In the third to sixth centuries C.E., *merkavah* mysticism developed to include magical teachings. The teachings linked to Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot were similar to Greek and Gnostic Sophia teachings. Observances included the singing of “chariot” hymns which always included the refrain “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is filled with his presence or (sometimes translated glory).” This passage is still used as the sanctification in both the Jewish and Christian religions.

The use of the words “glory” and “presence” is interesting, as glory (koved, in Hebrew), is a masculine noun which came to have two meanings during this time. It meant both the name of God when used in mystical inquiry, and was a name given to an area of theosophical research. The term “presence,” meaning the Shekinah, came to be associated with the feminine manifestation of God that dwelled in the chariot. The goal of the participant in *merkavah* mysticism was to ascend to the throne and thus to “glory,” which is envisioned as a “supernal man” sitting on the throne.

Jewish Gnosticism, another mystical movement at this time, was mostly concerned with the creation (in Hebrew *ma’aseh bereshit*) and with the ten “sayings by which the world was created.” These sayings became ten divine qualities. This thread of mysticism may have also included speculation about what is called in Kabbalah the “Adam Kadmon,” as described in Genesis 1:26: “And God said, Let us make man in our image....” (The use of the pronoun “us” here stems from the use of the Hebrew noun “Elohim” in the original, which is usually translated “God” with a solely male connotation, but which is a plural noun encompassing both female and male.)

The *Sefer Yetsirah*, purporting to reveal the secrets of creation, contains the first written mention of the “thirty-two wondrous paths” consisting of ten sefirot, which it describes as “entities of emptiness,” and twenty-two elemental letters. A further
description indirectly shows a link with Goddess beliefs: “Their measure is ten, yet infinite. Their end is embedded in their beginning, their beginning in their end...” This description is that of the uroboros, a depiction of the universe as a snake swallowing its tail, an ancient Goddess symbol and credited here to the influence of the Ophitic (Jewish snake worshipping) sect.10

Consisting of fewer than 2,000 words, *Sefer Yetsirah* nevertheless extensively influenced later Kabbalistic thought. It includes, according to Gershom Scholem, the “Judaizing” of non-Jewish concepts. For example, the idea of Shekinah in part originated with the Gnostic idea of a divine spark in exile on Earth. Later, this combined with Jewish ideas, including that of a heavenly entity called “Shekinah” representing the earthly community of Israel (in Hebrew, *knesset* Israel). The feminine noun “Shekinah” comes from the biblical Hebrew verb “shakkan” (to dwell), and its first meaning was that aspect of deity that can be apprehended by the senses.11

*Sefer Yetsirah* also contains Jewish thought on divine Wisdom (Hokmah), including the “thirty-two secret paths of divine wisdom.” The meaning of sefirot in this work was “numbers” with a mystical allusion to their use in creation. In Hebrew, letters and numbers are represented by the same symbols.

The first sefirah, later called by the masculine noun “Keter” (Crown), was, in this early work called “Ru’ah” (spirit), a feminine noun. In thought that appears to be borrowed from the Greeks, Ru’ah (spirit) emanates the element air as represented in the second sefirah. From air issues the third sefirah, related to the element water, and the fourth sefirah, related to the element fire. The last six sefirot represent the six dimensions of space. Nevertheless, the ten sefirot are a closed unit, as in the uroboros image.

All real beings, the text says, came into existence through the interconnection of the twenty-two Hebrew letters. The first three letters are also related to the seasons, links borrowed by Greek/Hellenistic thought. The first three letters are also related to the head, torso, and stomach.

The next seven letters, which are known as double letters in Hebrew, represent the seven planets (known at that time), the seven heavens, seven days of the week, and seven human orifices of the eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth. The final twelve letters represent the twelve signs of the zodiac, twelve months, and the limbs of the body. This
material later evolved into the magical instructions for making a “golem” (synthetic man) and other magical kabbalistic practices.\textsuperscript{12}

This demonstrates the importance and specificity of language in kabbalistic thought, and gives us another Goddess link: the role of language in creation; that of equating creation with “the word,” originally a Goddess epithet.\textsuperscript{13}

And we see that not only did the second sefirah, Hokmah, undergo a sex change, but also the first sefirah, later known by the male noun “Keter” (Crown) was originally known by the female noun “Ru’ah” (spirit), a meaning far closer than “crown” to the “spirit” of the first sefirah—which, we are told, is without gender and is pure spirit beyond human understanding.

**MEDIEVAL MYTHOLOGY**

Several centuries passed before Kabbalah emerged near the end of the twelfth century in the Jewish community of Provence, France, with the circulation of *Sefer ha-Bahir* (“Bright Book”), the first text to use what has become a typical kabbalistic approach and symbolic structure. The text states that the term “sefirah” is not connected with the Greek word meaning sphere, but rather with the Hebrew word for sapphire. It discusses the ten sefirot, which it calls (in an elaboration of *Sefer Yetsirah*), the “ten divine sayings” by which the world was created.\textsuperscript{14}

The *Bahir*’s main importance in the development of Kabbalistic thought is its use of symbolic language. It interprets Scripture not in terms of worldly events but in terms of events in the divine world. The sefirot become divine attributes, rather than numbers, and are variously referred to as beautiful vessels, kings, voices, and crowns. Introducing the theory of “transmigration of souls” (reincarnation) into Jewish thought, this text says that the divine attributes or powers constitute the “secret tree” from which souls come. We can understand this as the written incorporation (or emergence) of another Goddess symbol, the Tree, and the implication of the Goddess as the spiritual source.

From France, Kabbalistic thought traveled to Spain, emerging in Toledo at the beginning of the thirteenth century. An early Spanish Kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia of Toledo, advised his fellow Kabbalists that the purpose of wearing *tallit* (prayer shawls) and *tefillin* (phylacteries, thin leather straps wound around the hands and head, with a stamp-size square worn at the middle of the forehead) was “so that you will be filled
with the awe of Shekinah....” To help this process, Abulafia instructed them to visualize the name of God (YHVH) and enter a deep meditative state. Also at this time, elements of Neoplatonic mysticism and speculations about the origins of evil were incorporated into Kabbalistic inquiry.\(^{15}\)

The most important text in Kabbalah according to many kabbalists, the *Sefer-ha Zohar* (Book of Radiance), was written in Aramaic between 1280 and 1286 by Moses de León, a Jew living near Madrid. León is thought to have written at least parts of it in a trance state, that is as “automatic writing.”\(^{16}\)

It is here that we read a description of the Tree as representing the *Adam Kadmon* (primordial man):

“These bodies are named according to this arrangement: Hesed, the right arm; Gevurah, the left arm; Tif’eret, the trunk of the body; Netsach and Hod, the two legs; Yesod, completion of the body and sign of the holy covenant [the phallus and site of circumcision]; Malkut, the mouth—we call her the oral Torah. Hokhmah is the brain...Binah is the heart-mind.... Keter elyon is the royal crown, the skull....”\(^{17}\)

Thus we see the Tree, a symbol of the Goddess, transformed into a man.

In one form of Kabbalistic meditation, the meditator imagined himself traveling within the beard of the Adam Kadmon. Since the power to direct the future resided in the oil of the beard, such a meditation gave the Kabbalist the ability to control future events.\(^{18}\)

The *Zohar* describes the emergence of the ten sefirot from the “Ein Sof” (Endless or Infinite—also described as “nothingness,” in terminology similar to Eastern philosophies). The first sefirah, now called Keter (Crown), is also called Ayin (Nothingness). It is envisaged as the crown on the head of the Adam Kadmon (as well as the head itself). The sefirot are also pictured as a “cosmic tree” growing downward from its root: Keter.

Keter emanates a “point,” Hokmah (Wisdom), the second sefirah, now characterized as the Father. This point expands, forming Binah (Understanding), the womb, the divine Mother, who receives the seed of Hokmah. She conceives the seven lower sefirot in this order: Hesed (Love), Gevurah (Power—also the location of demonic and evil forces and also called Din, or Judgment), Tifaret (Beauty, also called Rahamim [Compassion] and Heaven, Sun, Son, King, Holy one, blessed be he); Netsach (Eternity),
Hod (Splendor), Yesod (Foundation, also called Tsaddiq). The light and power of all other sefirot are channeled through Yesod (seen as the male phallus) to Malkut/Shekinah (Presence or Kingdom). However, humans must enter the divine through Malkut/Shekinah. According to Rabbi Joseph, a thirteenth-century kabbalast, Binah was considered the gentle, wise aspect of the feminine divine while Gevurah was the angry aspect. She was “red with anger” at being cut off from “her Lord.” Her hair, like Adam Kadmon’s beard, is black, curly, and oily, and is “alive with the power of destruction.”

The Zohar introduces extensive mythical imagery with sexual symbolism when discussing the relationships among sefirot.

What are we to make of this? In the description of Keter, we see a reversal in the Tree, for it now grows downward from its roots. To put it mildly, this is unnatural, and depicts the change from the Goddess symbol of a tree with its roots firmly planted in the earth, to a tree with its roots in transcendence.

Further, the undifferentiated light manifests first as the Supernal Father bearing the name (Hokmah/Wisdom) of a female manifestation of divinity. This “father,” depicted as the active partner, impregnates (plants his seed in) the gentle, passive aspect of the female divine, specified here as the Mother Binah, the receptive partner, the receiving vessel. Gevurah is depicted as an uppity female. Her anger at being cut off from divinity, rather than being considered righteous or justified, becomes a source of evil or demonic powers. Though energies pass freely among other sefirot, Malkut/Shekinah can only receive from the sefiarah above her, Yesod, the phallus. To put it bluntly, just as Binah’s divinity comes only from receiving the male seed, so Malkut’s divinity comes only through sexual intercourse with the male above her. However, at least one remnant of the Goddess’s power remains: just as one enters earthly life through woman, so one can only enter the divine life through Malkut.

The implications of the Zohar’s representation of the Godhead may go even further. According to Elliot Wolfson, the picture the Zohar presents is of a male androgynous godhead, whose male androgyny begins in the supposedly ungendered Ein Sof. (The term “male androgyny” means that the representation is male and phallic and that this male, phallic godhead contains feminine attributes.) Male androgynous symbolism extends to the act of creation, which in the Zohar becomes, in an act of male
masturbation, God’s writing or inscribing with his phallus in letters that are semen on a tablet understood to be feminine. Through this activity, God begets himself.\(^{21}\)

This description is an example, par excellence, of reversal and attribution of Goddess traits to the male God. For in previous Goddess myths, the Goddess, complete unto herself (androgynous), orgasmically gives birth to the universe. She also gives birth to the male God, who in Kabbalah has found a way to circumvent the need to be born of woman.

In a commentary on the Genesis creation story, the Zohar says:

“The Beginning emanated, building itself a glorious palace. There it sowed the seed of holiness to give birth for the benefit of the universe.... The secret is ‘With Beginning — created God’.”

The term “beginning” here refers to Hokmah, the father, and the “glorious palace” is Binah, the mother. Rather than accepting the biblical “in the beginning, God created...” the Zohar, in leaving the subject blank, turns it around. Daniel Matt’s interpretation is that the great secret represented by the blank is that “an ineffable source” created God.\(^{22}\)

Perhaps. But, at the very least, this is certainly an admission that “God” is not the original creator. One might be vague and call this original creator the “ineffable source,” or one might be consistent with the facts of procreation and call her the Great Mother, the Goddess.

It is interesting to note here [and keep in mind for a later discussion of language in chapter 5] that the Zohar is known to have given new meanings to words, some of which were incorrect translations of the original Hebrew and Aramaic. Also, the text often uses two different words to mean the same thing; this is most common with nouns.\(^{23}\)

In the Zohar, Sabbath is personified as female, Shekinah—the Sabbath Queen, identified with the sefirah Malkut:

“When Sabbath enters she is alone, separated from the Other Side....Basking in the oneness of holy light, she is crowned over and over to face the holy king....There is no power in all the worlds aside from her.”

The “Other Side,” here refers to the demonic realm which, according to kabbalistic thought, threatened both the Shekinah and her people on weekdays. The “holy king” is represented by the sefirah Tifaret.
In the *Zohar*, the Torah is personified as female, synonymously with Shekinah/Malkut. For example, “If this [perfect balance] is so with the angels, how much more so with Torah, who created them and all the worlds, and for whose sake they all exist. In descending to this world, if she did not put on the garments of this world, the world could not endure.”

Despite previously mentioned attempts to phallicize the Torah, it continued to be perceived by kabbalists as a crowned female wrapped in beautiful garments. And to this day, “garments” cover the Torah scroll and the congregation rises to honor the Torah when the Ark opens to reveal her. Before the Torah can be read, her crown and garment—usually fringed, embellished, and embroidered velvet or silk—are removed. The two wooden legs of the scroll part as it is unrolled.

The *Zohar* relates that Shekinah, called the rainbow, “took off her garments and gave them to Moses. Wearing that garment he went up the mountain...” to receive the written commandments. “The garment” here becomes a cloud enclosing and protecting Moses.

Several interpretations may interest us. First, the rainbow here and in Genesis 9:13, and in Ezekiel 1:28 (where it is also enclosed in a cloud), are accepted as signs of the Shekinah. She is seen as manifesting a rainbow, representing the colors of all the sefirot.

Second, Moses needs the blessing or power of the Shekinah in order to approach the male God—and in order to receive his written commandments. Through the Shekinah transferring her “rainbow” to Moses, and through Moses’ going up on the mountain to receive his orders, power is transferred from the female to the male, both in the divine and earthly realms.

Further, the *Zohar* establishes a divinity with four aspects, composed of Father (Hokmah), Mother (Binah), Son/King (Tifaret) and Daughter (Malkut/Shekinah), also called by kabbalists Matronit or Matrona. Associated with these four aspects or persons were the four letters of the mystical divine name: YHVH. Y (in Hebrew, the letter yod) was the Father, H (in Hebrew, heh) the Mother (Binah). V (in Hebrew, vau), the Son, and the second H (heh), the daughter, were “crowned by their mother.” The Shekinah, though the daughter, also had motherly traits and functioned as an intermediary between the people, or community of Israel, and God.
The Hebrew letters of the divine name are said to reflect their maleness and femaleness, in part because of their shapes. In modern prayer books, the Hebrew word for YHVH is abbreviated by writing only two yods (the initial “male” letter). In any case, this word is never pronounced. (Considering the name of deity unpronounceable is another trait borrowed from the Goddess, one of whose epithets was “She whose name cannot be pronounced or spoken.”) Rather, the Hebrew word “Adonai,” meaning Lord, is substituted.

The Zohar description of the formation of its holy family includes a number of reversals. For example, Wisdom, called the Father, is said to have “spread out and brought forth” Understanding (that is, the Mother Binah). After the two unite, the Mother gives birth first to a son, and then to a daughter. The son is said to “nourish” the daughter.28

These passages are similar to other mythological descriptions of the female being born from the male, such as Eve from Adam’s rib, and Athena from the brow of Zeus.

The four persons of the Zohar tetrad are similar to mythological tetrads of earlier cultures that include a father, mother, and two children, sometimes a son and daughter and sometimes two sons. Examples include: the Greek Cronus, Rhea, Zeus, and Hera; the Egyptian Shu (Father or sky god), Tefnut (Mother goddess of moisture), Geb (Son or Earth god), and Nut (daughter or sky goddess); the Indian Shiva/Rudha (Lord of procreation and also lord of the dance), Parvati, the Great Mother, whose forms include Devi, Kali, and Shakti; Genesha and Kartika; the Hittite/Canaanite Elkunirs (or El, the male creator, Ashertu (or Asherah, his wife), Baal-Hadad, their son, and Ishtar (Astarte or Anath), their daughter; the Sumarian An (god of heaven), Ninhursag (Great Mother, also called Ki or Mother Earth), Enki (god of water) and Enlil (god of air). It was from this last pantheon that the great Goddess Inanna descended.

By the time these tetrads evolved in their respective cultures, it had become standard for the Father God in some way to “give birth” to the Mother Goddess. In addition, in cultures where there was both a son and a daughter, the son was born first. The son and daughter usually united sexually and in some cultures the mother and father were also sister and brother. Kabbalists rationalized their acceptance of the divine incest of the son (Tifaret) and daughter (Shekinah/Malkut) by saying that under the ideal circumstances of the divine realm, all unions are permitted.29
In all cultures these tetrads represent transitions from previous matrifocal religions in which the Mother Goddess gave birth to all—including the God (and any other children)—to fully patriarchal religions in which deity is entirely male.

The mythology presented in the Zohar is of the same ilk, but appears at a much later date than the actual transition. It is likely, therefore, that it represents the writing down of an oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation, possibly combined with the familiarity of some kabbalists of writings about these earlier mythologies.

For example, Raphael Patai credits the idea that God needs to be united with his female counterpart in order to retain his power to the influence of Indian beliefs about Shiva being incomplete without Shakti. However, a clearer description of both the kabbalistic and Indian expressions is that they are remnants of earlier spiritual beliefs in the primacy of the female divine.

In part, Patai summarizes the central myth of zoharic Kabbalah, as follows:

Adam’s sin was that he mistook the tenth (and lowest) sefirah (Malkut/Shekinah) for “the totality of the Godhead,” which consisted of ten sefirot. This caused a break between God and the Shekinah. Humanity continues to repeat Adam’s mistake, causing a continual separation between God and “his spouse.” The Shekinah became the Mother of Israel as well as the representative (or intermediary) of the community of Israel before God. In addition, when the people of Israel sin, it forces the divine couple to turn away from one another, allowing the forces of evil to attach themselves to the Shekinah, keeping her from union with God. When human husband and wife have intercourse, it motivates the divine couple to do the same.

But there is a further complication. The Temple at Jerusalem served as the bedchamber for God the King (Tifaret) and the Shekinah, securing the well-being of Israel and the entire world. When the Temple was destroyed, the Shekinah went into exile with the community of Israel. This lessened God’s power. Since God can’t get along without a female consort, Shekinah’s place was taken by Lilith, called “ruler of shedemons.” This situation will last until the Messiah comes and enables the union of Shekinah with the King. At that time Lilith will cease to exist.

To make things even more interesting, there is confusion in the Zohar (as well as other Kabbalistic literature) about whether Lilith is separate from or the same as Shekinah. The Zohar often refers to Lilith as “the slave-woman.” In one instance, the
Zohar says: “The Shekinah is at times called the Mother, at times, the Slave-Woman, and at times the King’s Daughter.” Another passage reads: “When Israel was exiled, the Shekinah too went into exile, and this is the nakedness of the Shekinah. And this nakedness is Lilith...”

A Clearer Vision

Seen in the light of current knowledge of Goddess religions, the myth central to Kabbalah begins with at least two reversals. First, the male God not only gives birth to the universe, but also has contractions in order to do so. This patriarchal reversal causes a separation between the divine and the physical world which had not previously existed. That is, because it is no longer a female deity who gives birth, the (male) divinity is forever separated from the creation (whereas in Goddess religions divinity is immanent in creation). Adam’s sin is clearly Goddess worship—that is, understanding the whole of divinity as imaged as female. This concept is apparently a reversal of an earlier myth expressed in third-century Gnosticism, in which the (biblical) male God mistakes himself for the entirety of divinity. According to this myth, a female divinity called Sophia “wanted to create something, alone without her consort...” Her creation was an imperfect male God who “became arrogant, saying ‘It is I who am God, and there is none other apart from me.’ When he said this, he sinned against the entirety.”

Regarding the Jerusalem Temple, it is known that the Goddess (as Asherah and in other forms) was worshipped there, with King Solomon one of her devotees. When the Temple was destroyed, so was the home of the Goddess and her consort, and thus divinity was weakened by victorious patriarchy. She was absent, separated out of divinity, not by some mystical, mythological event, but by human actions to suppress her worship.

The union of God the King with Lilith can be seen from several different perspectives. First, characterizing Lilith as a she-demon is a way of saying that the present concept of divinity is not only less than perfect, but perverse. Second, the use of the female divinity Lilith to represent this imperfection, this perversity, represents the demonization both of the Goddess and of women, and the separation of women into the categories of “good” and “evil.” Third, the confusion over whether Shekinah and Lilith are separate or identical reflects men’s ambivalence towards women. Further, the
inclusion of Lilith could be seen as a persistence of the trinity of maiden, mother, and crone, with Malkut functioning as the triune Goddess (Shekinah=Maiden, Matronit=Mother, Lilith=Crone). However, because the natural cycle has been obliterated, the crone (Lilith) can only be perceived as evil.

The myth of the reunion of the Shekinah with the male God is in reality a yearning for the return of the Goddess to divinity—for the acceptance of the female divine, not just as the female part of the male, but as a full equal. When this happens, Lilith will not cease to be, rather she and Shekinah will again be understood to be two aspects of the Goddess. And we, too, will be whole. This happens not with the coming of the Messiah—spiritual leadership vested in one man—but with the coming of what I suggest calling the Age of Perfection or the Age of Bliss—when all participate equally in spirit.

The Age of Bliss comes when mother is no longer divided against daughter, nor sister against sister, and when female and male are united in true equality in our perception of the divine and in our everyday lives.

**Notes:**

3. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 13, 16, 20-22. Wolfson also points out that in this androcentric symbolism, the scroll’s crown corresponds to the corona of the penis, symbolizing that the feminine divine has become part of the male deity, rather than remaining independently divine.
7. Ibid. p. 15.
8. Ibid. pp. 13, 16.
16. Ibid. p. 6.
17. Ibid. p. 50.
25. Epstein, *Kabbalah*, p. 46, and Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 9-28. Elliot Wolfson explains that in early Kabbalah, Torah was understood to be wholly feminine and synonymous with Shekinah. Beginning with the *Zohar* and continuing for several centuries, various teachers attempted to assert that written Torah (and especially the scroll) was male, however, the female imagery of Torah kept reappearing, especially in the Hassidic tradition.
28. Ibid. p. 117.
29. Ibid. p. 129.
30. Ibid. p. 133.
32. Ibid. p. 249.