

# **Silk Roads: Paths for the Faithful**

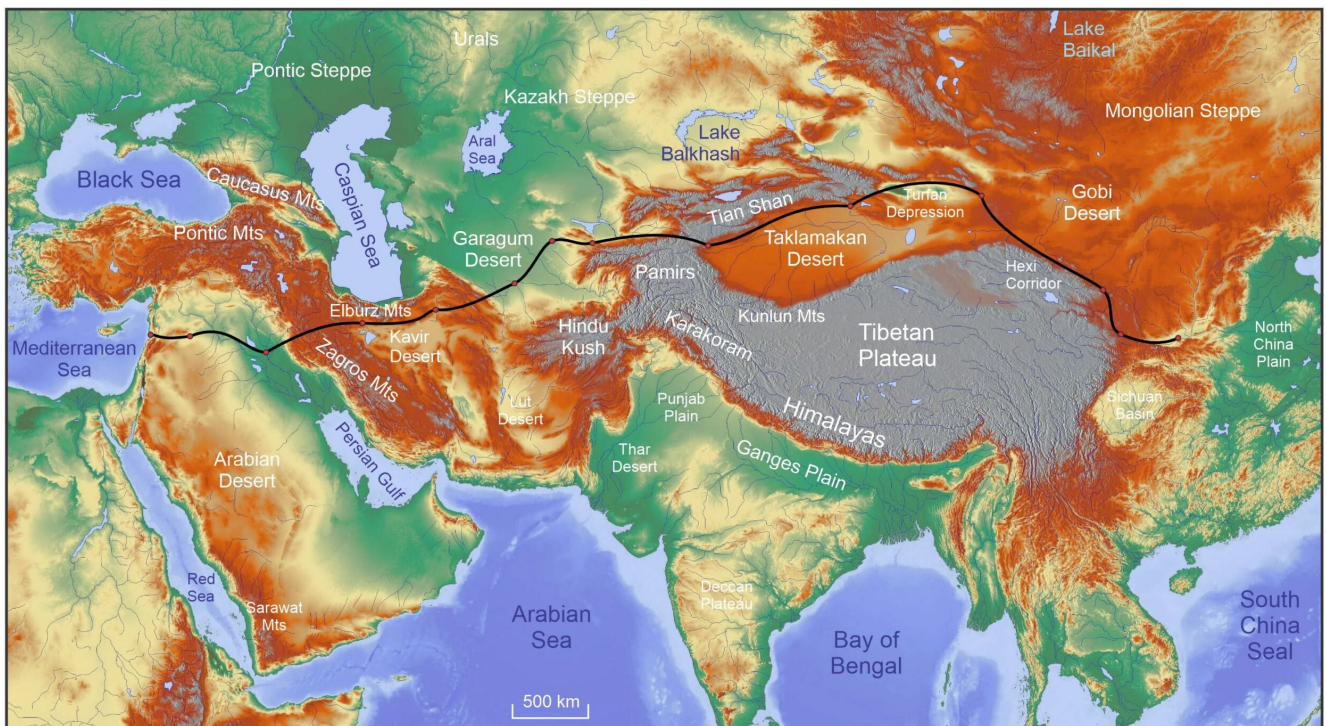
The Silk Roads were overland routes connecting China to the Mediterranean Sea, which allowed the trading of silk, paper, gold, jewels, horses, and other goods. These began during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE at the time of the Roman Empire in the West and the Han Dynasty in the East. The Silk Roads remained active until the 15<sup>th</sup> Century CE, when they were largely replaced by maritime trading routes. At present they are mainly used for archeological research and tourism. The illustration shows a modern camel caravan in the desert near Dunhuang. As well as trade goods, the Silk Roads facilitated the movement of religious ideas. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam followed the Silk Roads into China. Mithraism, Manichaeism and Islam spread into Europe.

## **Central Asia**

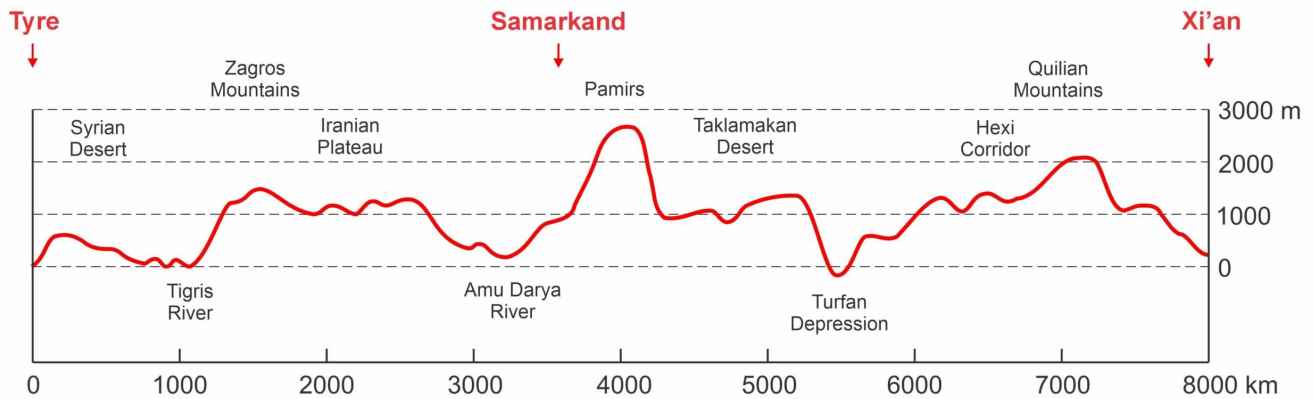
A map of the present political boundaries in central Asia will allow us to get our bearings:



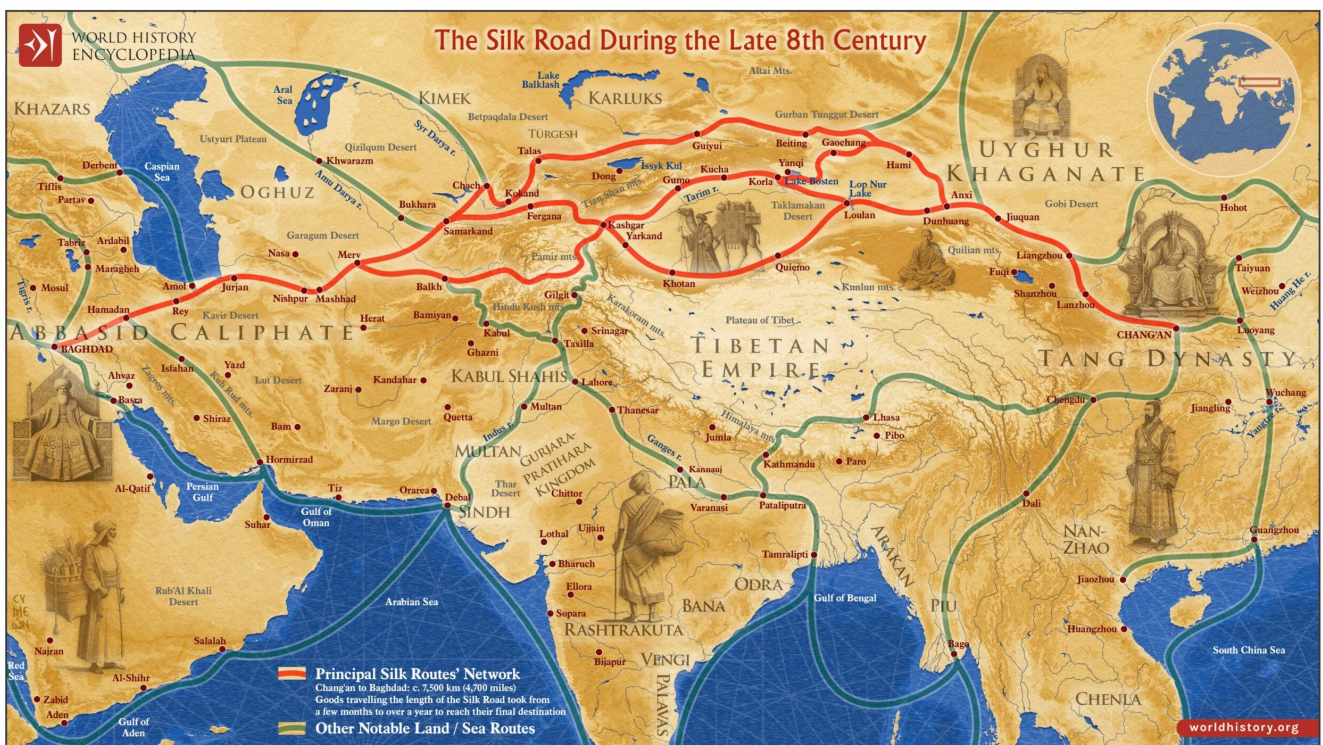
The following map shows the topography of the region and traces one of the many possible Silk Roads from Chang'an (Xi'an) in China to Tyre on the Mediterranean.



The following diagram, modified from Wood (2002), shows the changes in altitude (in meters above sea level) over the journey. It also notes the main mountains that are traversed, the deserts that are crossed and the main rivers on the way.



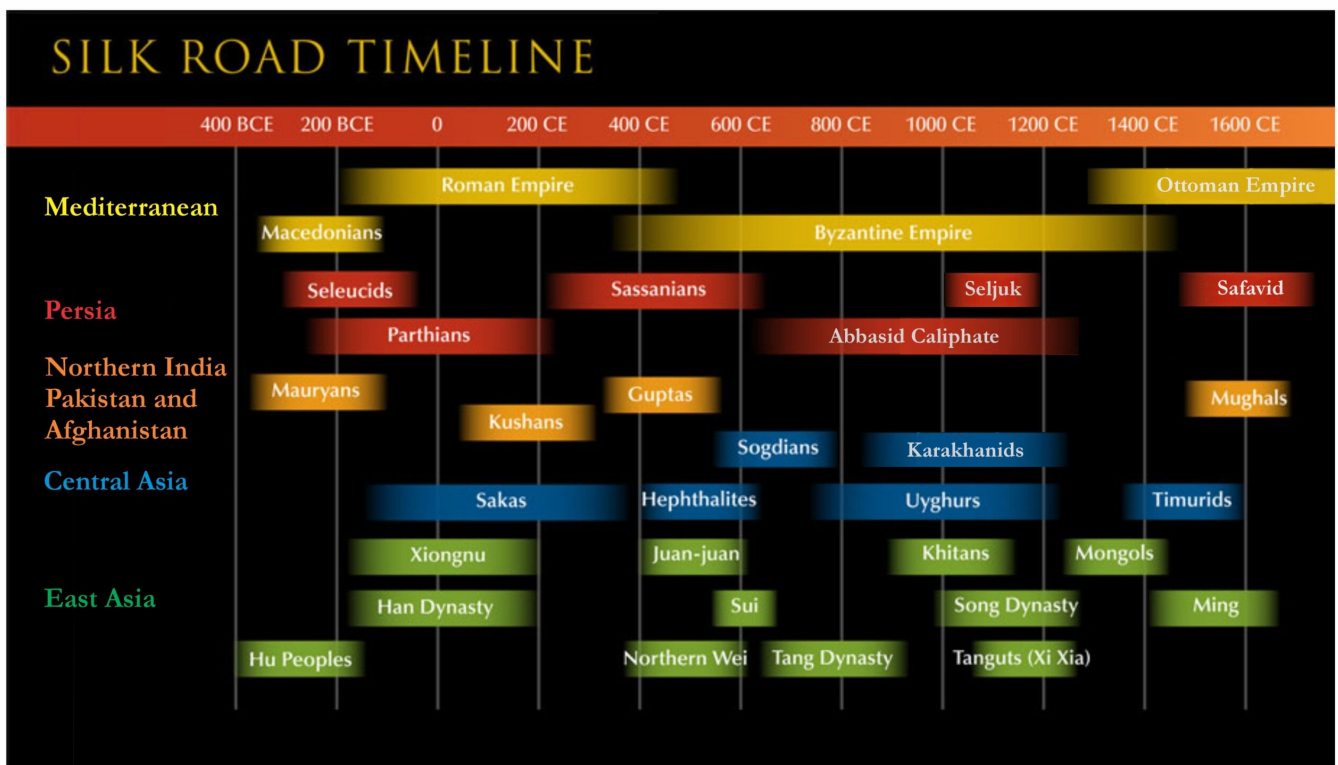
The Silk Roads spanned some 8000 km and were active for about 1700 years. They are described in multiple recent books (Frankopan, 2016; Hansen, 2017; Millward, 2013, Torr, 2018, Whitfield, 2024; Wood 2002). A striking TV series from Japan can be downloaded from archive.org. The following two maps by Simeon Natchev show the Silk Roads at two different points in time: the first map when trade began between the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE, and the second map when the Silk Roads were at their height during the late 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE with the Tang Dynasty in China and the Abbasid Caliphate in the West. The first map also shows the maritime routes connecting China, India and Europe, and the monsoon winds that facilitate them. These sea connections are sometimes considered the “Golden Road” (Dalrymple, 2025, pp 4-5).



The Mongol Empires (1206-1368) supported trade along the Silk Roads. However, in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century CE the Mongol Empires fragmented, and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) blocked overland connections between the Silk Roads and Europe. Trade between China and Europe continued

using the maritime routes. Vasco da Gama made his first voyage from Portugal to India around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497. The overland Silk Roads soon became used only for local trade, and desert sands reclaimed many of the ancient trading posts (Beckwith, 2009, pp 232-262; Torr, 2018, pp 105-126).

Many different empires established themselves for periods of time in central Asia (Beckwith, 2009). The following diagram, modified from Waugh (2009), shows some of the most important. Though having its capital in the east, the Mongol Empire (1206-1368 CE) extended all the way to Europe.



### The Library at Dunhuang

Since it will play a role in much of what will be said about the movement of religions along the Silk Roads, we shall briefly mention the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (洞, dūn, tumulus/mound + 黄, huáng, shining/brilliant). Dunhuang, located on an oasis containing Crescent Lake and is surrounded by sand dunes, was an important stop on the Silk Road from the time of

its beginning in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE (Hansen, 2017, pp 288-335). Nearby is the Jade Gate – an opening in the Great Wall of China that allows entrance to the Hexi Corridor connecting the cities of Chang’an and Luoyang to the deserts of Xinjiang in Western China.

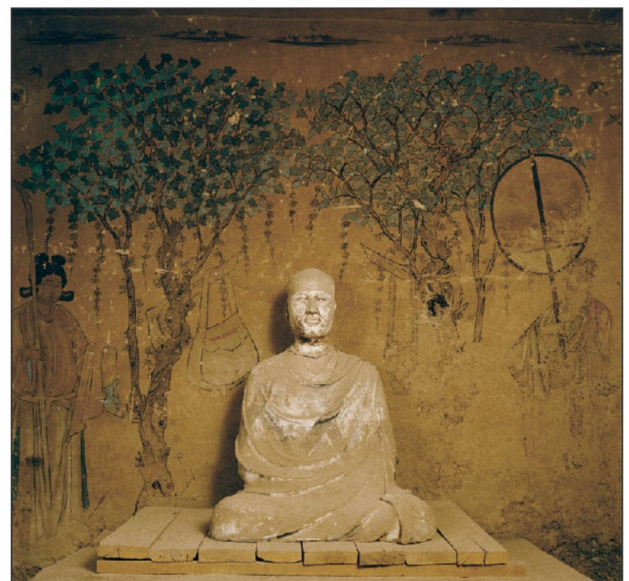
Buddhist monks first arrived in Dunhuang in the early centuries of the common era. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE, they began carving caves into of the sandstone cliffs 25 km southeast of the city. These Mogao Caves – “Caves of a Thousand Buddhas” – are a system of about 500 separate temples decorated with wall paintings and sculptures and connected by intricate stairs and platforms. By the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, the monk Hong Bian had made the Three Realms Monastery near the caves into an important center of learning. When he died, his statue was placed in Cave 17. On the wall behind him were painted two banyan trees with a water bottle and a cloth bag hanging on the branches. Under one tree an acolyte holds a fan; under the other, a disciple holds the monk’s staff.

In 1002 CE the Karakhanids spread into the Taklamakan Desert and destroyed the Buddhist City of Khotan (Sinor, 1990). Though they had once followed both Buddhism and Christianity, the Karakhanids had converted to Islam in 934 CE and considered all other faiths as infidels. Fearful that Dunhuang might also be destroyed, the monks put all their treasured manuscripts and paintings in Cave 17 with the statue of Hong Bian, and sealed the cave off from the outside world (Rong, 1999).

In 1900, while sweeping sand from the temple floor of Cave 17, a Daoist monk, a custodian for the caves, realized that the rear wall was false and discovered that the sealed-off chamber contained piles of ancient manuscripts. In sum there were about 50,000 manuscripts and other objects in the cave, which became known as the “Library Cave.” In 1907 the newly discovered treasure trove was examined by the explorer Aurel

Stein, who purchased many of the manuscripts for the British Museum (Morgan & Walters, 2012). Paul Pelliot visited in 1908 and bought a set of manuscripts for the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*.

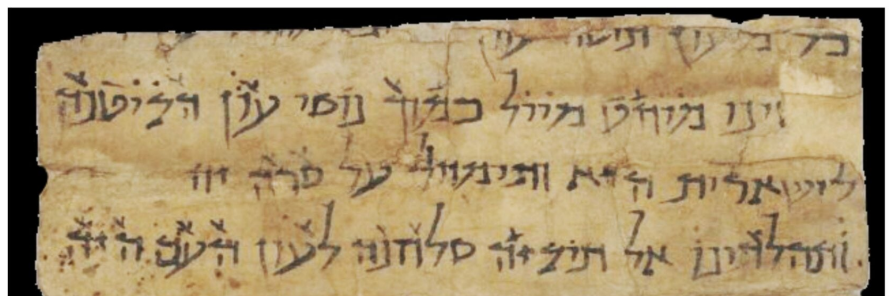
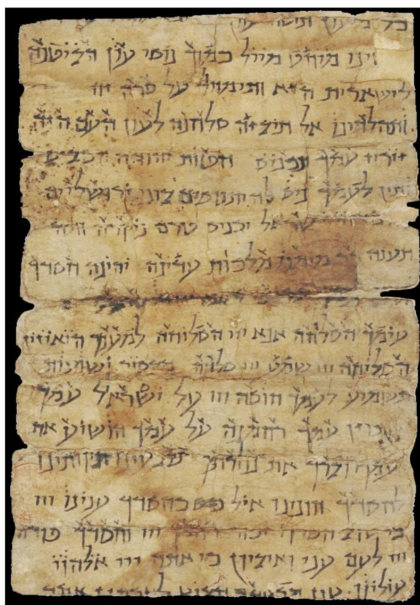
The following illustration shows on the left the entrance to the Mogao Caves. Most of the building is from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. On the upper right is the statue of Hong Bian in the Library Cave. On the lower right is an impression of what the cave must have looked like in 1900.



Most of the manuscripts found at Mogao concerned Buddhism and were written in Chinese. However, some of the manuscripts related to other religions such as Manichaeism, Christianity, Judaism and Daoism. Many ancient languages other than Chinese were also represented: Sanskrit, Tibetan, Sogdian, Hebrew, and Old Uyghur.

## **Judaism**

One of the manuscripts from the Library Cave is a Hebrew prayer for forgiveness (*selihah*). At one time it was folded up, perhaps so that it could be carried easily in a small container as an amulet to ward off evil. The text does not directly quote scripture but is very biblical in its wording. The following illustration shows the complete manuscript on the upper left. The photograph has been lightened to facilitate reading. On the upper right is an enlargement of the first 4 lines together with a transcription (Koller, 2024). The English translation of these 4 lines is below together with a quotation form the book of Numbers showing a similar style.



כל מיעון תיסר עון  
 [נק]ינו מיחט מײל כמוד גוסי עון הבײטנה  
 לישארית הזא ותימחל על סנה זה ]  
 ותהלתינו אל תיבזה סלחנה לעון העם הזה

every abode(?). Remove iniquity  
 we are clean of sin! Who is a God like you, who bears iniquity? Look please  
 at this remnant, and pardon for ... this defection  
 Do not spurn our praise. Forgive please, the iniquity of this people

**Compare: Numbers 14:19**

Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people  
 according unto the greatness of thy mercy

The manuscript is dated to around 800 CE. This and a few other Hebrew manuscripts from other stations on the Silk Road

suggest that Jewish merchants were involved in the trade between China and the West. There may therefore have been Jews in China during the Tang dynasty or even earlier. A group of Jews in Kaifeng in central China petitioned the emperor to build a synagogue in 1163 CE (Berg, 2024). Their ancestors may have originally travelled to China over the Silk Roads. Their descendants still live today in China.

## **Zoroastrians**

The religion of Zoroastrianism was established toward the end of the second Millennium BCE, and became the state religion of the main Persian Empires: the Achaemenid (559-331 BCE), Parthian (559 BCE – 331 BCE) and Sasanian (224–651 CE). Zoroastrian priests were generally called *magi*.

### **(i) Biblical Magi**

The Gospel of Matthew relates how three *magi* (translated as “wise men”) came from the East to visit the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

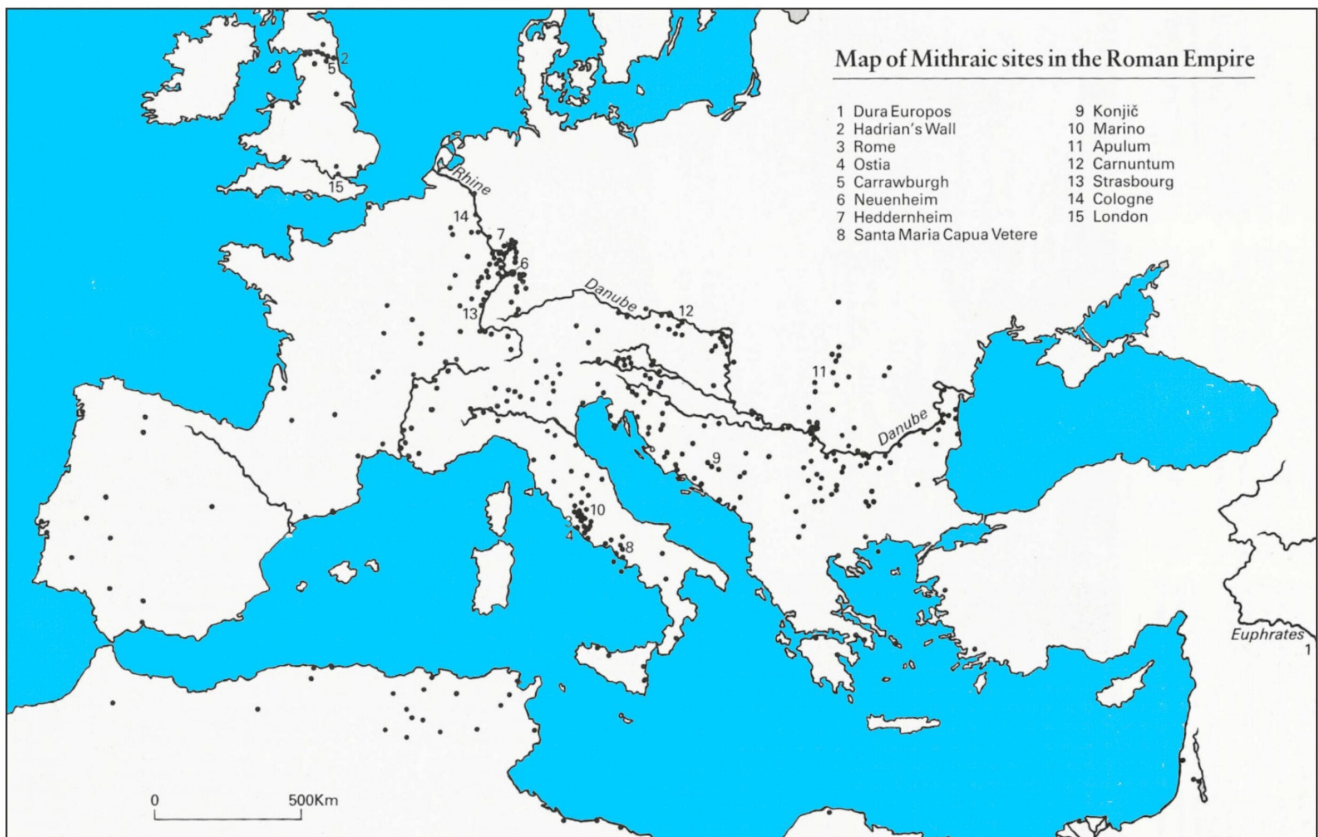
Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (*Matthew 2: 1-2*)

These wise men may have been Zoroastrian priests from Persia. If so, they would have travelled along the Silk Roads. The illustration below shows a mosaic representation of the magi from the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuove in Ravenna (565 CE). The magi are shown in typical Persian clothing: flowing capes and Phrygian caps.



## (ii) Mithraism

Mithraism was a Roman Mystery Cult focused on the God Mithras, one of the many Gods (*yazata*) worshipped in Zoroastrianism. The cult involved secret meetings in underground temples called Mithraea, archeological evidence for which has been found throughout the Roman Empire:



Mithraism was active from about 50 CE to about 300 CE. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE Christianity was mandated as the sole state religion in the Roman Empire (Edict of Thessalonica, 380 CE). Thereafter Mithraism essentially vanished.

The Mithraeum was set up for a communal feast for the initiates, who were almost always men and mainly soldiers. One essential part of the temple was a fresco or sculpture of Mithras slaying a bull – the “tauroctony.” No one really understands what this sacrifice means. It might have something to do with redemption and salvation, much like the crucifix in a Christian church.

The iconography was stable across its many different locations. In the center, the God Mithras slays the bull. Above are representations of the sun and the moon, and below the bull is attacked by a crab, a snake and a dog. The following illustration shows a tauroctony from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE unearthed from the Villa Borghese in Rome:



The cult was originally believed to have been imported into the Roman Empire by soldiers who had fought in the Parthian wars, a series of conflicts occurring from 54 BCE to 217 CE, and who had thereby been exposed to the Gods of Zoroastrianism. However, there are relatively few Mithraea in the Eastern reaches of the Empire. And there is no evidence that the worship of Mithra in Persia involved any of the apparent rituals that occurred in the Roman Mithraea. Some have therefore suggested that the cult was a Roman invention (e.g. Stoll, 2022). Indeed, some of the earliest Mithraea are concentrated near the city of Rome (Chalupa, 2016), Nevertheless, the cult was devoted to one of the Zoroastrian gods, and most of the early descriptions of the cult acknowledged its Persian origins (Boyce et al, 1991, pp 468-490).

One possibility is that Roman Mithraism allowed its cult members to embrace an “otherness” and make themselves distinct from their fellows:

the imagery of Mithras dressed in the Persian garment and soft shoes with Phrygian cap on top of his curly hair alluded to the Greek *topoi* of Persians who were Rome's 'exotic other' and 'fiercest foe'. Such an iconography enabled the Roman Mithraists to depict their god as a foreign deity and to identify themselves as those Roman elites who had the knowledge of worshipping the foreign god. The Oriental imagery of Mithras created a boundary for Mithraic brotherhood and distinguished the cultic community from other forms of religiosity and religious groups in the wider cultural and religious boundaries of Rome. Whatever its origin, the Roman mystery cult of Mithras strongly relied on Roman attitudes and romantic visions of Persia and the Parthians in particular. (Mahzjoo, 2024).

### **(iii) Sogdians**

At the time when trading was at its height, the main middlemen on the Silk Roads were Sogdian merchants (Pin Lyu, 2024). Sogdia was the name for the area of land between the Amu Darya (or Oxus) and the Sri Darya Rivers. Its capital was Samarkand. The following map shows the location of Sogdia in Central Asia. The black lines show several of the Silk Roads:

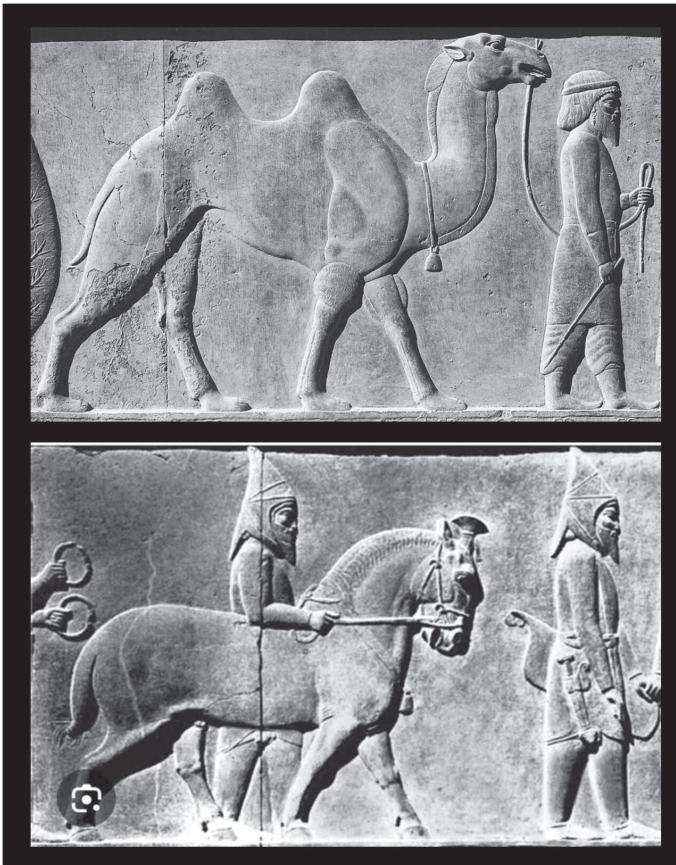


The Sogdians were descendants of the ancient Scythians. At the time of the Achaemenid Empire, when they were known as Saka, they paid tribute to the Persian Emperor in the form of camels and horses.

During the time of the Sasanian Empire, Sogdia was at the eastern limits of the empire and practiced Zoroastrianism (Grenet, 2015). When the empire was invaded by the Muslims, these frontier regions were able to maintain their religious practices for several centuries.

During the Abbasid Caliphate the Sogdians traded extensively with the Chinese and established large merchant colonies in cities of northern China.

The following illustration shows on the left two bas-relief representations of Saka bringing camels and horses to the Emperor at Persepolis (6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE). On the right is a Tang dynasty porcelain statuette showing a group of Sogdian musicians on a camel. This was found in Xi'an and dates to 723 CE.



Zoroastrian funerary practices mandated that the corpse should not be allowed to pollute either the air or the land. Neither cremation nor burial was possible. Zoroastrians typically laid the corpse out on a stone bed and allowed vultures to strip the flesh from the bones. In China, Zoroastrians compromised by constructing closed tombs within which the deceased was laid out on a funerary couch and allowed to decay above ground. If the deceased was a rich merchant, this funerary bed could be quite ornate. The following illustration shows on the left a carving from a 6<sup>th</sup> Century Zoroastrian funerary couch in Northern China, now in the Miho Museum in Japan. The upper half of the carving shows a Zoroastrian priest caring for the sacred fire during the funeral service for the deceased. He is recognized by the face mask that prevents him from contaminating the fire with his mortal breath. The mourners are behind the priest. A camel is recognized to the right of the sacred fire, and several pack horses are seen below. The upper right of the illustration shows how the complete

funerary couch was set up.

The lower right shows a small ceramic statuette of a Zoroastrian priest with a face mask. Although he is sometimes considered a camel driver, he is more likely a priest tending to the sacred fire. The face mask is just too typical. The statuette was found in northern China and dates to the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE.



## Buddhism

Gautama Buddha lived in the northeastern region of India in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. After his death his followers taught the new dharma throughout the Indian subcontinent. The Mauryan

Empire (320 BCE–185 BCE) expanded to incorporate Greco-Persian lands in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ashoka (304–232 BCE), the third Mauryan Emperor, promoted Buddhist thought throughout his domain.

### **(i) Gandhara**

Few representations of the Buddha occur from the first centuries of the new religion. Since the teaching proclaimed that the everyday world was transient and misleading, artistic representations may have been considered unworthy. This changed when the faithful encountered artists of the Greco-Persian world in a region of northwest India called Gandhara. Realistic sculptures of the Buddha and his disciples proliferated. The following illustrations shows sculpture of the Buddha made in the Gandhara from the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE:



### **(ii) Colossal Buddhas**

As their religion spread along the Silk Roads, Buddhist monks

began to carve statues of the Buddha out of the sandstone cliffs along the route. Some of these assumed colossal sizes (Wong, 2019). The earliest large Buddhas, up to 15 m tall, were carved at the Yungang Grottoes near Datong in Northern China beginning in 465 CE. Colossal seated Buddhas, 33 and 23 m tall, were carved in the Mogao caves near Dunhuang in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE.

And around 600 CE, in Bamiyan, located in present-day Afghanistan, 130 km northwest of Kabul, two huge standing Buddhas were carved, one 38 m and the other 55 m tall. Since details such as the folds in the robe and the facial features could not be carved in the sandstone, these were added to the rough-hewn statues using stucco. The arms were constructed using stucco on wooden armatures. Over the years much of the stucco work eroded away leaving the large ungainly limestone forms.

The people in the area when the statues were carved were Hephthalites. These people followed several different religions (Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Manichaeism) and tolerated the work of the Buddhist monks.

In 2001 the Taliban enforced a Muslim edict forbidding artistic representations of human beings. The two Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed.

The following illustration shows at the top a panorama of the Buddhas in the Bamiyan Valley before their destruction. The lower left of the illustration shows a close-up of the larger of the two Buddhas. The lower right compares before and after its destruction.



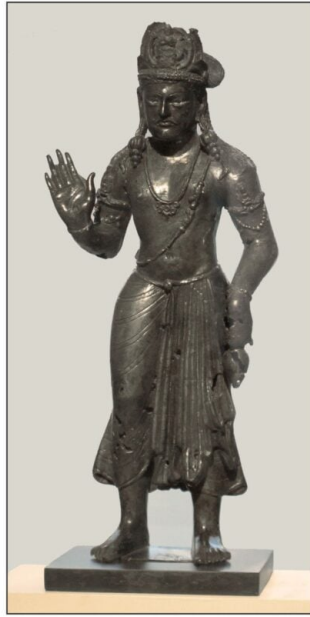
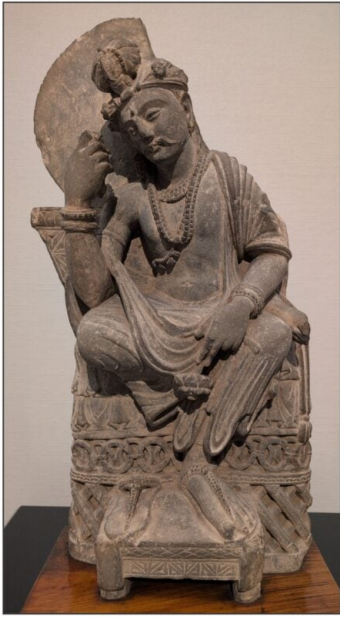
### (iii) Avalokitesvara

Avalokitesvara was the bodhisattva of compassion. His name in Sanskrit means “he who looks down,” i.e. he who considers the concerns of the faithful. As Avalokitesvara travelled along the Silk Roads to China he slowly changed gender from male to female (Stein, 1986; Suebsantiwongse, 2025; Yu, 2001). In China she became known as *Guānshìyīn*, (觀世音, look/observe+people/world +sound/voice: “the one who perceives the cries of the world”) or Guanyin. As the deity moved to Japan, she became known as Kannon, and veered back toward masculinity.

Avalokitesvara characteristically holds a lotus flower and sometimes prayer bead. Sometimes he or she has multiple heads which make her vision and hearing more acute. Occasionally the deity has multiple arms the better to aid those in need. As Guanyin, she often carries a vase of pure water to relieve suffering.

The following illustration shows the transformation of Avalokitesvara. In order from left to right and then from up to down:

1. Stone, Avalokitesvara, Gandhara, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE
2. Bronze, Avalokitesvara, Gandhara, 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE
3. Stone, Avalokitesvara, Northern China, 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE
4. Wood, Avalokitesvara with multiple heads, Northern China 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE
5. Wood, Avalokitesvara "seated at royal ease," China, 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE
6. Bronze, Avalokitesvara, Nepal, 14<sup>th</sup> Century CE
7. Gilded Wood, Kannon, Japan 11<sup>th</sup> Century CE
8. Porcelain, Guanyin, China 17<sup>th</sup> Century CE
9. Jade, Guanyin, China, 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE
10. Titanium callosal statue (78 m) Nanshan Guanyin, Hainan Island, 21<sup>st</sup> Century CE



#### **(iv) The Diamond Sutra**

As Buddhism travelled along the Silk Roads to China, the sacred texts began to be translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. One of the most important translators was Kumarajiva (344–413 CE) who was born in Kuqa on the northern edge of the Taklamakan desert. His father was a Buddhist monk from Kashmir. Around 400 CE Kumarajiva travelled to Chang'an where he wrote most of his translations of the Buddhist literature.

The original Diamond Sutra was likely composed shortly after the time of Gautama Buddha's life in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. However, it was not formally written down in Sanskrit until the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE. The sutra narrates a dialogue between the Buddha and his elderly disciple Subhūti about the nature of reality and how to attain the wisdom that would release one from suffering. The world is transient and illusory; one must release oneself from any attachments; one must seek emptiness. The following is from Red Pine's introduction to his translation of the sutra (2001):

following his Enlightenment, the Buddha had taught people to free themselves from suffering by realizing the impermanence and interdependence of everything upon which their suffering depended, including and especially themselves. The Buddha called this the realization of *shunyata* (emptiness), the view that because nothing exists independently of other things, it has no nature of its own, and every-thing is therefore empty, and this emptiness is the true nature of reality. Later, when the Buddha began teaching people to view emptiness itself as empty and to put the emptiness of emptiness to work in the liberation of all beings, few disciples grasped this new teaching, which he called the perfection of wisdom, the wisdom beyond wisdom.

One of the most important discoveries in the Mogao Caves near

Dunhuang was a woodblock-printed copy of Kumarajiva's translation of the Diamond Sutra. The pages were printed by Wang Jie in 868 CE, probably in Sichuan, and then pasted together to form a scroll about 5 m long. The colophon gives the date and notes that the sutra was being made freely available to all who wished to read. This is the oldest printed book of which we have a copy.

The frontispiece of the scroll shows a woodblock drawing of the Buddha surrounded by bodhisattvas, and supernatural guardians. In the lower left is the disciple Subhūti. The following illustration shows this print together with details of the Buddha and his disciple redrawn by Zhao Ming An.



The following illustration shows the first page of text in the scroll along with a character-by-character translation of the title and the first few words of the sutra:

<p>→ 金 剛 般若 波羅蜜 經</p> <p><i>jīn gāng bōrě bōluómì jīng</i></p> <p>precious strong prajna paramita sacred text diamond wisdom perfection sutra</p> <p style="color: red;">Diamond Sutra of Perfect Wisdom</p>	
<p>→ 如 是 我 聞。</p> <p><i>rú shì wǒ wén</i></p> <p>as true I hear thus we listen</p>	
<p>一 時 佛 在 舍</p> <p><i>yī shí fó zài shè</i></p> <p>one time Buddha be at house once hotel</p>	
<p>衛 國 獨 園。</p> <p><i>wèi guó dú yuán</i></p> <p>protect country alone garden park</p> <p>Thus I have heard. Once, the Buddha was staying in the Anathapindada's Park</p>	<p>凡欲讀經先念淨口業... 遍</p> <p>循唎 循唎 摩訶循唎 循唎 娑婆訶</p> <p>奉請除災金剛 奉請辟婁金剛 奉請黃隨求金剛</p> <p>奉請白淨水金剛 奉請赤聲金剛 奉請定除尼金剛</p> <p>奉請紫賢金剛 奉請大神金剛</p> <p>金剛般若波羅蜜經</p> <p>如是我聞一時佛在舍衛國祇樹給孤獨園與大比丘眾千二百五十人俱尔時世尊食時著衣持鉢入舍衛大城乞食於其城中次第乞已還至本處眾中即從坐起偏袒右肩右膝著地合掌恭敬而白佛言希有世尊如來善護念諸菩薩善付囑諸菩薩世尊善男子善女人發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心應云何往云何降伏其心佛言善哉善哉須善提如汝所說如來善護念諸菩薩善付囑諸菩薩汝今諦聽當為汝說善男子善女人發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心應如是住如是降伏其心唯然世尊願樂欲聞</p>

And the following illustration shows the last page of the scroll which includes the famous verse that the Buddha uses to describe the transience of the world. On the left, a character-by-character translation is followed by the English version of Red Pine, based on both the Sanskrit and the Chinese versions of the sutra (2001):

一切有為法。	一切有為法。	一切有為法。	一切有為法。	一切有為法。
yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ	yī qiè yǒu wéi fǎ
everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma	everything existing law dharma
如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影	如夢幻泡影
rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng	rú mèng huàn pào yǐng
as like dream illusion bubble shadow	as like dream illusion bubble shadow	as like dream illusion bubble shadow	as like dream illusion bubble shadow	as like dream illusion bubble shadow
如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。	如露亦如電。
rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn	rú lù yì rú diàn
as like dew also as like lightning	as like dew also as like lightning	as like dew also as like lightning	as like dew also as like lightning	as like dew also as like lightning
應作如是觀	應作如是觀	應作如是觀	應作如是觀	應作如是觀
yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān	yìng zuò rú shì guān
answer create as right see agree work so observe	answer create as right see agree work so observe	answer create as right see agree work so observe	answer create as right see agree work so observe	answer create as right see agree work so observe

As a lamp, a cataract, a star in space  
an illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble  
a dream, a cloud, a flash of lightning  
view all created things like this.

## Christianity

During the first 4 centuries of Christianity, the nature of Jesus as both God and Man was extensively discussed. One position was that Jesus was of two distinct natures – *dyophysite*; another was that his two aspects were conjoined as one – *miaphysite*; and yet another was that his Jesus became fully divine – *monophysite*. Though these old distinctions are almost impossible to understand in modern times, in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE they were matters of life and death. The Church of the East (also known as the Assyrian Church) distinguished itself as *miaphysite*, and became separate from the *dyophysite* Byzantine and Roman Churches in 451CE. These latter churches condemned as heretical the *monophysite* teachings of Nestorius, a theologian in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. The Church of the East is often known as the “Nestorian Church,” although its views on

the nature of Jesus actually differed from those of Nestorius (Brock, 1996). Although the Church of the East remained separate from the Western Churches for many centuries, it has now established communal relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

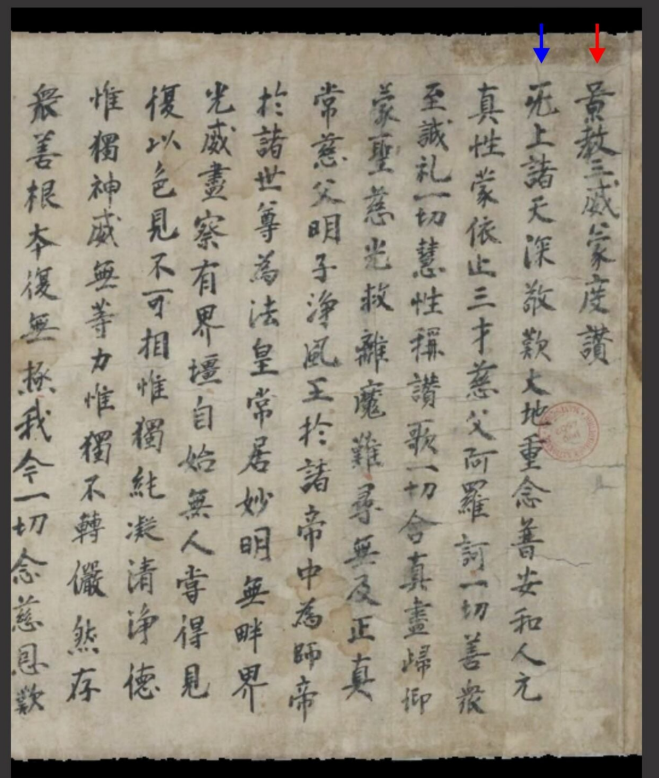
### **(i) The Dunhuang Gloria**

Among the manuscripts found in the Mogao caves was a Chinese Christian Hymn loosely based on the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (Glory to God in the highest), also known as the Greater Doxology (words of praise), especially the version used in the Church of the East. The manuscript was probably written about 800 CE and provides clear evidence that missionaries of the Church of the East had travelled on the Silk Roads to China and were actively proselytizing there centuries before the Jesuits first arrived in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century CE (Moule, 1930, Teng Li, 2024).

The hymn has 11 verses each containing 4 lines of length 7 syllables, in keeping with Chinese poetic practice. The following illustration shows the beginning of the hymn together with a character-by-character translation of the title and the first line.

→	景	教	三	威
	jǐng	jiào	sān	wēi
	bright brilliant	teaching	three	power majesty
	蒙	度	讚	
	méng	dù	zàn	
	receive	save	praise	
	The Brilliant Teaching of the Three Majesties for Obtaining Salvation.			

→	無(无)	上	諸(诸)	天	深	敬	歎
	wú	shàng	zhū	tiān	shēn	jìng	tàn
	if not without	above high	every all	sky heaven	deep very	respect honor	praise
	If the highest heavens with deep reverence adore						



The following is a translation of the first three verses of the hymn (Moule, 1930, p 53; Henson, 2017, p 329)

If the highest heavens with deep reverence adore,  
 If the great earth earnestly ponders on general peace  
 and harmony,  
 If man's first true nature receives confidence and  
 rest,  
 It is due to Alohô the merciful Father of the universe.

All the congregation of the good worship with complete  
 sincerity;  
 All enlightened natures praise and sing;  
 All who have souls trust and look up to the utmost;  
 Receiving holy merciful light to save from the devil.

Hard to find, impossible to reach, upright, true,  
 eternal,  
 Merciful Father, shining Son, holy Spirit, King,  
 Among all rulers you are Master Ruler,  
 Among all the world-honoured you are spiritual Monarch

“Alohê” is a Chinese transcription of the Syriac name for God.

### (ii) The *Jingjiao* Stele

In 781 CE a monument dedicated to the Christian faith (景教, *jingjiao*, luminous religion) was erected in Chang’an (Keevak, 2008; McGrath, 2021). The limestone stele is almost 3 m high. At the top is a cross and a nine-character title. The following illustration shows the stele *in situ* (before it was moved to a museum), an enlargement of the title, and a character-by-character translation.



大	秦	景	教	流	行
dà	qín	Jǐng	jiào	liú	xíng
large	state	bright	teaching	spread	travel
	Roman Empire		Christianity		
中	国	碑			
zhōng	guó	bēi			
middle	kingdom	monument			
	China				

Monument to the Propagation of the Luminous Religion of Rome in China

The stele summarizes the beliefs of the Christian Church in an inscription of about 1900 characters. This mentions that the Christian church was first established in China in 635 CE through the efforts of the monk Alopen. At the bottom of the stele is a much shorter inscription in Syriac.

After the end of the Tang dynasty 907 CE, Christianity almost disappeared (Teng Li, 2024). The *Jingjiao* Stele was buried, either for protection by the monks or as an act of desecration by those who reviled the foreign religion. It was unearthed during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

Nevertheless, the Church of the East continued to send missionaries along the Silk Roads and several centuries later, Christian Churches were built throughout the Mongol Empire. The Mongol Empire (1206–1368) and the Yuan Dynasty in China (1271–1368) were tolerant of the different religions. The foreign religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism contributed as much to society as the homegrown Daoism and Confucianism.

## **Manichaeism**

Mani (216-274 CE) was a Persian prophet who conceived the world as divided between the light and the dark. He taught that the human soul was imprisoned by birth into the material world, and that the suffering that this entailed would only cease at death, which released the soul from the body. If one died free from sin, one's soul would return to the realm of light. The dualistic religion that he founded – Manichaeism – flourished in the centuries after his death, spreading all the way to Spain in the west and China in the East.

### **(i) Spread to Europe**

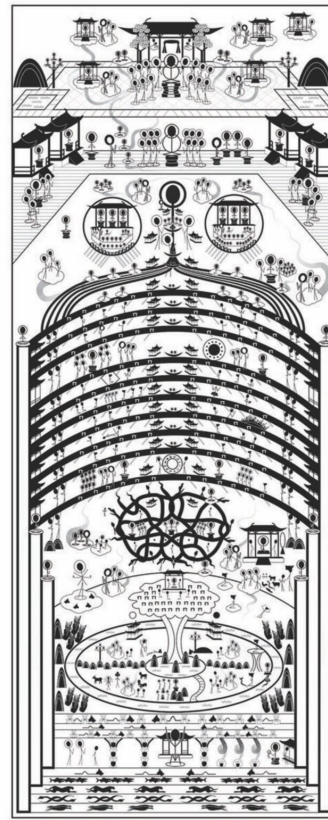
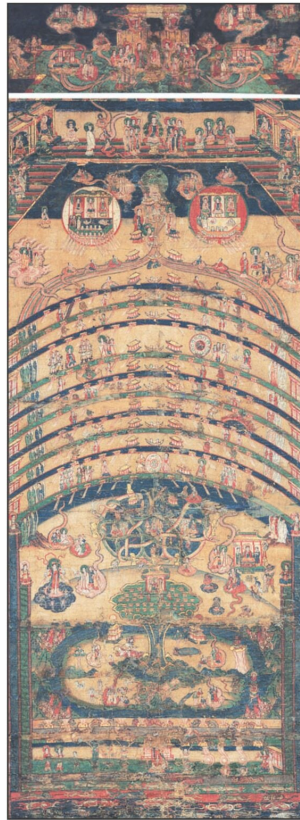
In Europe, Manichaeism declined after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. However, some isolated groups, such as the Bogomils in Bulgaria and the Cathars in Southeast France, continued to follow Mani's teachings:



## (ii) Spread to China

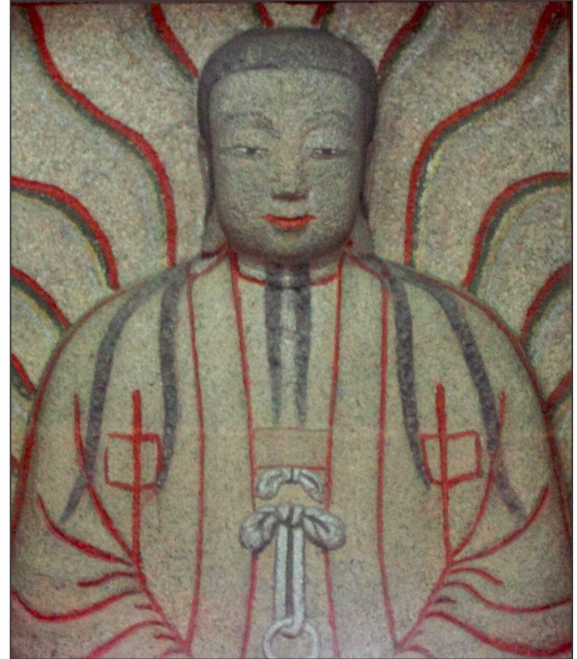
Manichaeism spread along the Silk Roads into China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). During the Uyghur Kahnate (744–840 CE) in what is now Northern China and Mongolia, Manichaeism was acknowledged as the state religion (Mackerras, 1990).

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), a large silk painting (158 by 60 centimetres) was made to illustrate the Manichaean cosmology. This showed the realm of light at the top. In the center was a representation of the judgment that occurs at death: the decision whether the soul is released into the realm of light or sent back to the hell on earth. The following illustration shows the painting with some explanatory analysis (Gulaczi, 2015, pp 247-258), and enlargements showing a portrait of Mani (from the left side of the New Aeon level) and details of the tangled judgement process:



Realm of Light  
 New Aeon  
 Liberation of Light  
 Ten Firmaments of the Sky  
 Atmosphere (Judgement, Transmigration)  
 Earth

In Cao'an a small town on the west coast of China, a small temple built in 1339 CE was dedicated to Mani, the "Buddha of Light" (Lieu, 1998, pp 188-193). Over the years the temple became used for Buddhist practices. The following illustration shows the bas-relief portrait of Mani over the altar and the inscribed stone in the grounds of the temple.



The inscription reads

Purity (清淨, *qīngjìng*), Light (光明, *guāngmíng*),

Power (大力, *dàlì*), Wisdom (智慧, *zhìhuì*)

Supreme (無上, *wúshàng*), Ultimate Truth (至真, *zhìzhēn*)

Mani (摩尼, *móní*), the Buddha of Light (光佛, *guāngfú*)

The first four are the attributes of the Manichaean Heavenly Father. Mani considered himself as a prophet in the line of Zoroaster, Buddha and Christ. As such he could be conceived as one of the manifestations of the divine – the Buddha of Light.

## Islam

After its founding in Arabia in 622 CE, Islam quickly spread to adjacent regions. By the time of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE), the community of the faithful (*Ummah*) extended all the way from Spain to the borders of China:



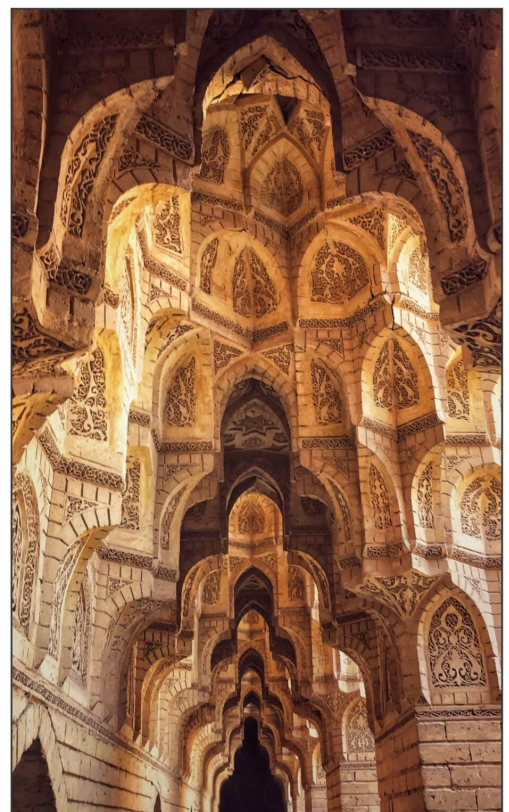
## (i) Abbasid Caliphate

The Abbasid Caliphate with its capital in Baghdad oversaw a period of great prosperity and learning, that later became known as the Islamic Golden Age. At a time when Europe was going through the Dark Ages, Baghdad was a place where scholars studied and preserved the literature of the past and contributed to our knowledge such new ideas as algebra and trigonometry. Islamic physicians distinguished different diseases, and Islamic physicists mapped the heavens. Abbasid architecture developed gorgeous arches and domes, stucco decoration with arabesque patterns, and walls covered with multicolored tiling.

The Abbasids made great use of the newly discovered paper (Schatzmler, 2018). The technology of papermaking originated in China around the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE and was brought to the Middle East through the Silk Roads. The first paper mill in Baghdad was built in 795 CE. Paper made it easy to provide inexpensive books for scholars to study. Knowledge became no

longer limited to the elites.

The following illustration shows on the left a painting of a scholars in a library during the Abbasid Caliphate taken from a 13<sup>th</sup> Century manuscript. This may represent the House of Wisdom, also known as the Grand Library of Baghdad, which was founded in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE. On the right is a photograph of a honeycomb archway (*muquarnas*) from the Abbasid Palace in Baghdad built in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century CE.

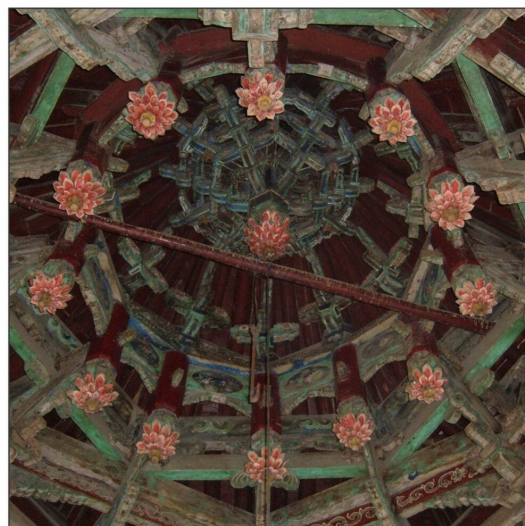
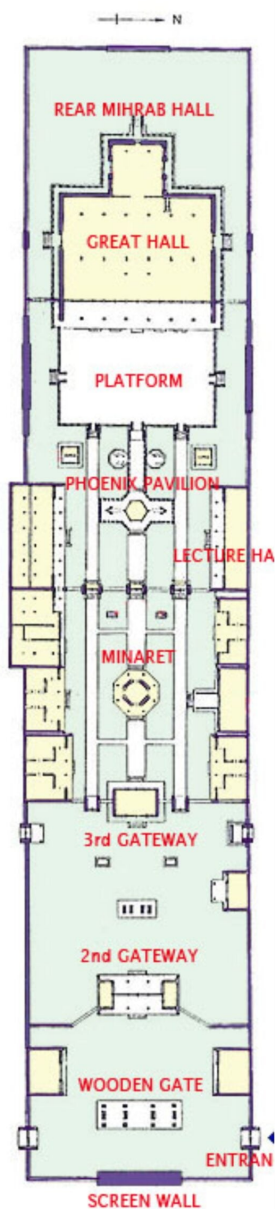


## (ii) The Great Mosque in Xi'an

Islamic merchants came to China along the Silk Roads. By the 8<sup>th</sup> Century the Muslim population of Chang'an (Xi'an) was sufficient to warrant the building of a mosque in the form of a temple. The Great Mosque of Xi'an (清真寺, *Xī'ān Dà Qīngzhēnsì*) was first constructed in 742 CE, and rebuilt in its present form in 1384. Islam was referred to as 清真 (Qīngzhēnjiào: pure and true religion), and a mosque is

generally referred to as 清真寺 (*Qīngzhēnsì*: pure and true temple).

The following illustration shows a plan of the mosque together with photographs of the Phoenix Pavillion (凤亭, *fèng tíng*), the “Examining the heart tower” (省心楼, *shěng xīn lóu*) which probably served as a minaret, and the ceiling of the Phoenix Pavilion:



## Epilogue

For many centuries the Silk Roads were a conduit for goods to

travel between East and West. The East produced silk, paper, tea, and porcelain. The West gave gold, silver, glass, cotton, and leather. The regions along the Silk Roads provided horses, camels, rugs, lapis lazuli and jade.

As well the Silk Roads allowed different religions to travel to distant countries. Buddhism came to China. Islam spread to both the East and the West. Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity also journeyed with the caravans. Travellers on the Silk Roads were missionaries as well as merchants (Foltz, 2010).

Some feeling for the people of the Silk Roads can be found in the poem *The Golden Road to Samarkand* by James Elroy Flecker (1814-1915), a British poet who briefly worked in the consular services in the Middle East before dying at a young age of tuberculosis. The conclusion to his play *Hassan*, published posthumously in 1922, is a conversation among the members of a caravan about to leave Baghdad for Samarkand:

We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go  
Always a little further: it may be  
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow  
Across that angry or that glimmering sea.

White on a throne or guarded in a cave  
There lives a prophet who can understand  
Why men were born: but surely we are brave,  
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand

...

Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,  
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,  
And softly through the silence beat the bells  
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.

We travel not for trafficking alone;  
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:

For lust of knowing what should not be known,  
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

The following is a reading of these verses by Roger Helmer

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Flecker-Golden-Road-Helmer.mp3>

And the musical introduction to the Japanese TV series on The Silk Roads by Kitaro:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Kitaro-Silk-Road-Theme.mp3>

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# The Divine Feminine

All the major religions of the present world are androcentric in nature and misogynistic in practice. The following are some typical injunctions in the Christian scriptures:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.

And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. (*I Corinthians* 14: 34-35)

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. (*I Timothy* 2: 11-12)

These rulings are in spite of (or perhaps because of) women being more attentive to religious teachings, and participating more often in religious services than men (Pew Research Foundation, 2016). The two passages nevertheless serve a purpose – they provide clear evidence that the New Testament does not always represent the word of God.

The androcentricity of organized religion differs completely from prehistoric religious beliefs, wherein God was more likely female than male (Stone, 1978). Over recent centuries, however, female aspects of the godhead have become more and more recognized. This posting briefly considers some of the manifestations of the divine feminine, and mentions what might be involved in a feminist theology.

## The Primordial Mother

In prehistoric families, the most amazing and incomprehensible

event was the birth of a child. The role of the father was little understood, and mothers were revered as the primary source of this new life. A female force was therefore naturally thought to be behind the creation of the universe, and was worshipped as a mother goddess (Graves, 1948; Neumann, 1963; Stone, 1978). Between 30,000 and 10,000 years BCE, small votive offerings to the mother goddess – “Venus figurines” – were created throughout Europe. The illustration below shows (from left to right) the ceramic Venus of Dolni Vestonice in the Czech Republic, the limestone Venus of Willendorf in Austria and the serpentine Venus of Savignano in Italy:



Barstow (1983) describes these figurines:

The goddess was faceless, as if to accentuate her universality, her ability to “stand for the power of the female. Lacking feet, she appeared to come straight up out of the earth, with which she was identified. Unclothed, her every body seem to have an efficacy. Often – but not always – she was big-breasted, and her hands were frequently placed under her breasts as if to display them. Many figurines show

her entire body as ample, with huge breasts, belly and buttocks, as if the very plenitude of her body would ensure plentiful crops and hers. Sometimes she is pregnant, her enlarged belly emphasized by special markings.

In neolithic times, most societies began to worship multiple divinities, though female forces were among the most important – Ishtar in Mesopotamia, Astarte in Canaan, Persephone in Greece. and Isis in Egypt. These goddesses often displayed two aspects: one related to life and fertility and the other to death and war.

These goddesses were widely worshipped, with their followers often participating in extended rites called the “mysteries.”

Apuleius’ Latin novel *The Golden Ass* (2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE) tells the story of Lucius who, while dabbling in the magic arts, inadvertently turned himself into an ass. At the end of the book, he attends one of the mysteries, and is changed back to human form through the power of Isis. The goddess announces herself:

I am here before you, Lucius, moved by your prayers—mother of the natural world, mistress of all the elements, firstborn offspring of the ages, highest of the deities, queen of the dead, first among the gods, the manifestation in a single body of all the gods and goddesses. I control by my will the luminous summits of the sky, the salubrious breezes of the sea, and the mournful silence of the underworld. I am the single divine being, worshipped the world over in different forms, with varying rites and under a multitude of names. Some call me Juno, others Bellona, some Hecate, and yet others Rhamnusia. But the people on both sides of Ethiopia who are lit by the first rays of the rising sun, and the Egyptians, pre-eminent for their ancient knowledge, worship me with the proper rituals and by my true name: Queen Isis. (Translation of Singer and Finkelpearl, 2021, pp 158-60)

The illustration below shows a pectoral ornament in the form of a winged Isis from the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. In her right hand, she holds an *ankh*, the symbol for “life”; in her left hand she holds what may be the hieroglyph for a sail, the symbol for the breath of life. On her head is a throne, indicating her majesty.



### **Judaism – Wisdom and Shekhinah**

In the Hebrew scriptures Jahweh is most definitely male, and there is little mention of any female aspect to the deity. However, in *Proverbs* there are several passages spoken by the female figure of Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), one of which reads

I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.

When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water.

Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth:

While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world.

When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth:  
When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep:  
When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth:  
Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him;  
Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. (*Proverbs*, 8 22-31)

Christians have interpreted this passage as referring to Christ the Son, who they believe was with God the Father before the world began. Christ is described as “the power of God and the wisdom of God” in *I Corinthians* 1:24.

This female figure of Wisdom in *Proverbs* is closely associated with *Sophia*— the goddess of wisdom and the creator of the world in Gnostic scriptures (Perkins, 1985).

Wisdom also became related to the concept of the *Shekhinah* – God’s “presence” or “immanence” in the world. This concept was initially used to describe the holiness of the Ark of the Covenant, but expanded to include the idea of God’s dwelling with his people. *Shekhinah* is manifest when believers gather to study the Torah, celebrate the Sabbath, or pray together. The Mishnah (probably derived from Jewish oral tradition in the centuries BCE) states

If two sit together and there are words of Torah spoken between them, then the Shekhinah abides among them (*Pirkei Avot*, 3:2)

In the medieval period, the presence of God in the world was conceived as in terms of the ten *Sephiroth* of the *Kabbalah*. The tenth *Sephirah* is known either as *Malkuth* (“kingdom”) or *Shekhinah* (“presence”). In Kabbalistic writings the *Shekhinah*

became the female aspect of the Godhead (Smith, 1985; Scholem, 1991; Devine, 2014; Laura, 2015).

In the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (13<sup>th</sup> Century CE), the *Shekhinah* is considered as the intermediary between God and his people:

Every message the King requires goes forth from this Lady's house. Any message from below that is sent to the King arrives first at the house of His Lady, and from there proceeds to the King. The Lady is thus the universal go-between, from above to below and from below to above. (*Zohar* 2:51a quoted by Green, 2002).

Scholem (1965) describes the uneasy status of *Shekhinah* in Jewish religious thought:

This discovery of a feminine element in God, which the Kabbalists tried to justify by gnostic exegesis, is of course one of the most significant steps they took. Often regarded with the utmost misgiving by strictly Rabbinical, non-Kabbalistic Jews, often distorted into inoffensiveness by embarrassed Kabbalistic apologists, this mythical conception of the feminine principle of the *Shekhinah* as a providential guide of Creation achieved enormous popularity among the masses of the Jewish people, so showing that here the Kabbalists had uncovered one of the primordial religious impulses still latent in Judaism. (p. 105).

### **Christianity – Mother Mary**

Mary, mother of Jesus, is not considered extensively in the Christian scriptures. Outside of five main episodes – the angelic annunciation of the forthcoming virgin birth, the visitation with Elizabeth, the nativity of Christ, presentation of Jesus in the temple, and the crucifixion, she is scarcely mentioned. In one brief episode she visited her son while he was teaching and was ignored (Mark 6: 31-34). However, Christ did acknowledge her at the crucifixion,

telling John, "Behold thy Mother!" (John 19: 26-27).

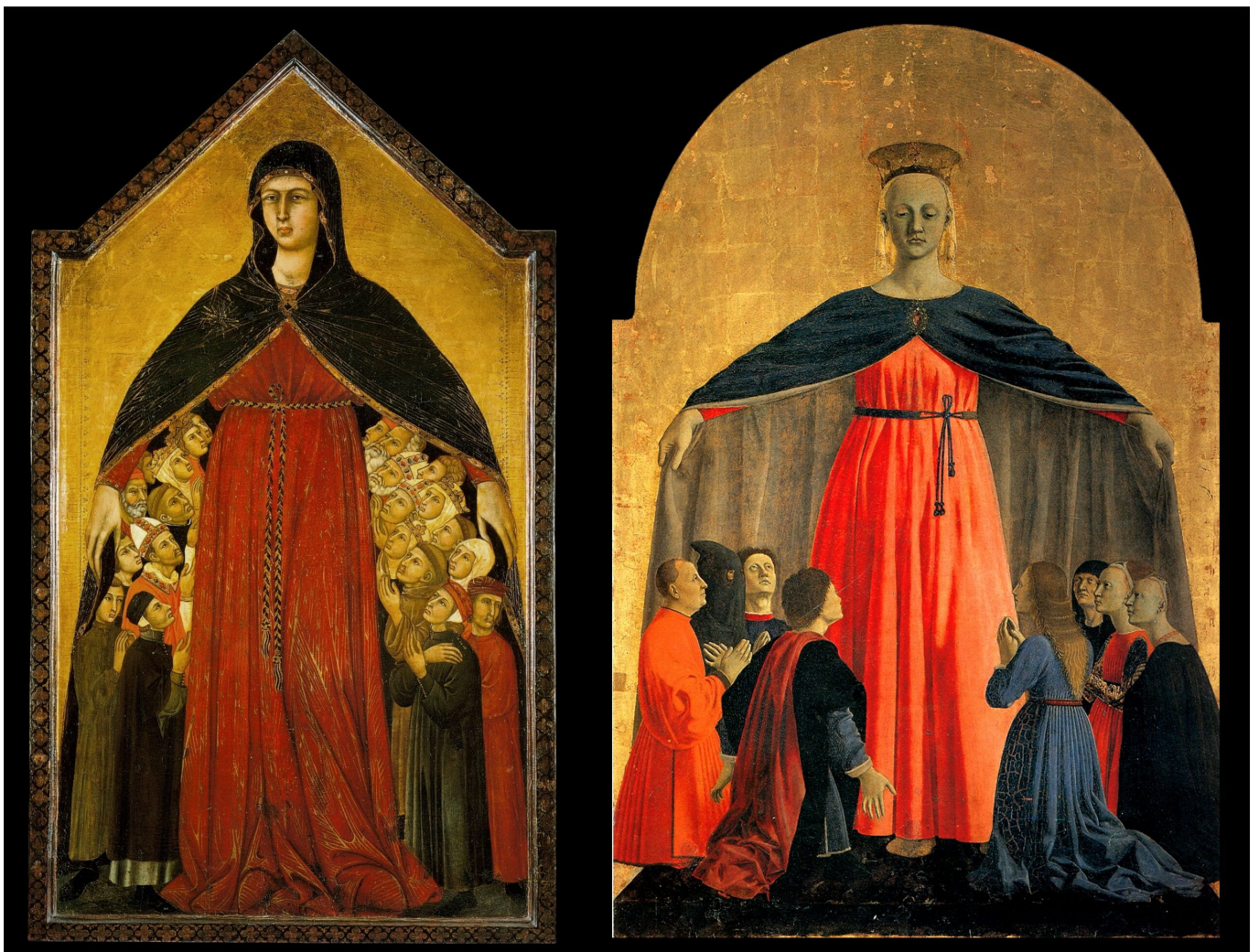
Mary was not mentioned in the first version of the Nicene Creed of 325 CE, but acknowledged as the virgin mother of Christ in the revised version of the creed in 381 CE:

Jesus Christ ... who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man

Since Christ was both God and Man, his mother was special – *Theotokos*, the bearer of God. This was first pronounced at the council of Ephesus in 431 CE. Mary the mother of God has been long venerated in the Eastern churches. The illustration below shows the mosaic (9<sup>th</sup> Century CE) in the cathedral (now mosque) of the *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople, and the icon of Mary and the Infant Jesus of Vladimir (1131 CE).



After the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium CE, Mary began to be more and more honored in the Western Church. No one really understands this change in religious feeling. Most of the new Gothic Cathedrals in France were dedicated to *Notre Dame* (“our Lady”), and special Lady Chapels were built in English cathedrals. Believers thronged to images of Mary for consolation and for mercy. The following illustration shows two representations of the *Madonna della Misericordia* (“Lady of Mercy”), by Simone Martini (1310) and Piero della Francesca (1462).



Various traditions and beliefs have accumulated over the years so that now Marianism is an acknowledged subset of Christian beliefs, particularly in the Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches (Johnston, 1985; Leith, 2021; Matter, 1983; Rubin, 2009). In 1568 the *Ave Maria* was included in the Roman

Catholic Breviary. The most famous setting of the prayer is by Gounod (1859) based on Bach's Prelude No 1 (1722).

Ave Maria, gratia plena,	Hail
Mary, full of grace,	
Dominus tecum	the Lord
is with thee	
benedicta tu in mulieribus	Blessed art
thou amongst women,	
et benedictus fructus ventris tuis, Jesu	and blessed is
the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.	
Sancta Maria, Mater dei,	Holy Mary,
Mother of God,	
ora pro nobis peccatoribus	pray for us
sinner,	
nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.	now and at
the hour of our death.	

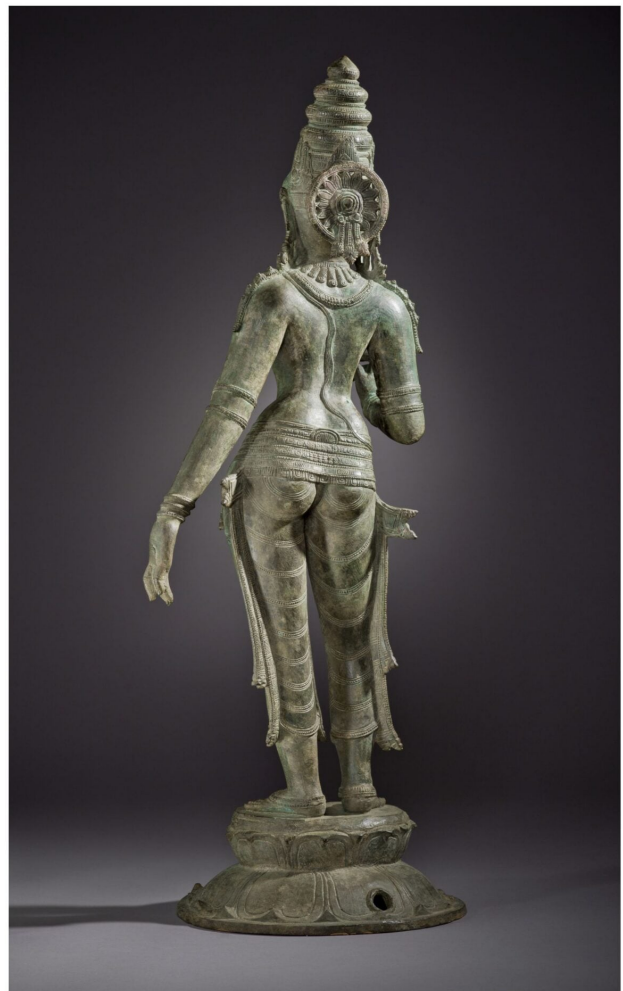
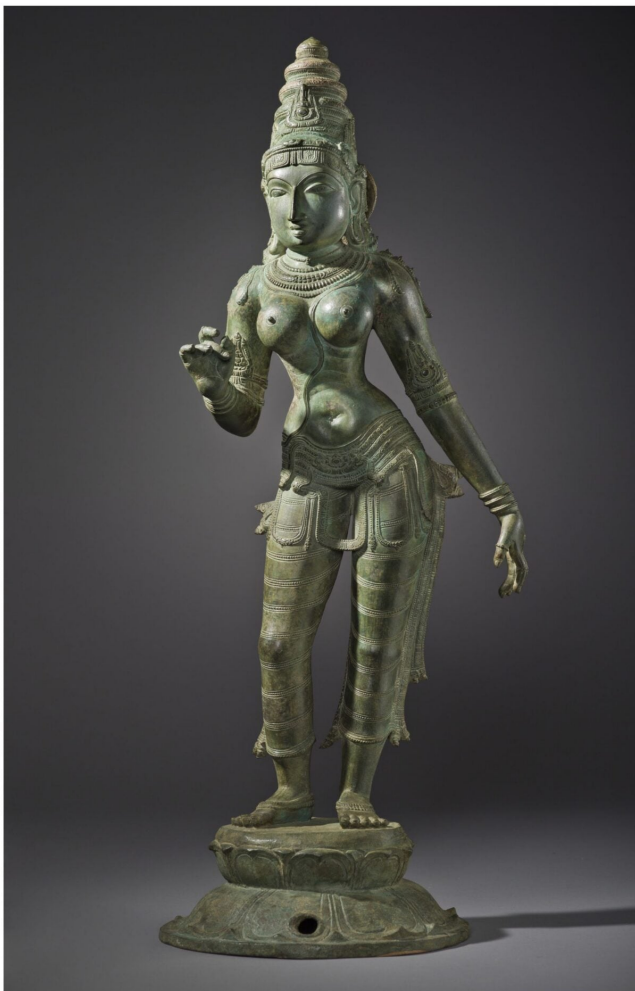
<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/13-Ave-Maria.m4a>

Theologians have long argued that Mary must have been herself conceived without sin so that she might carry the incarnation of God within her womb. This doctrine of the "immaculate conception" was discussed for many years, but only finally accepted by the Vatican in 1854. Since Mary was without sin, there was no need for her to die. Theologians therefore proposed that before her death she was instead taken up directly into heaven – "the assumption of the Virgin." This idea finally becoming Catholic doctrine in 1950. Protestants reject both these doctrines. When it comes to Mary, the Christian churches have been loathe to allow their members the beliefs they long for.

**Hinduism**

In contrast with the Western (or Abrahamic) religions, Hinduism is adorned with goddesses of many types and purposes (Kinsley, 1986; Pattanaik, 2000). Eroticism is an acknowledged part of divinity.

The supreme goddess *Mahadevi* is widely venerated. She changes form at will and goes by many names. She can exist alone as *Shakti*, the goddess of cosmic energy, or as *Kali*, the goddess of time and change. The illustration below shows a bronze statue of *Bhudevi*, the “Goddess of the Earth” (13<sup>th</sup> Century CE) from the Los Angeles Museum of Art



The female goddess often serves as the consort of a male divinity – *Parvati* with *Shiva*, and *Lakshmi* with *Vishnu*. Sometimes these pairs become unified into one deity – the androgynous *Ardhanarishvara*, whose right side is feminine and

left side male. The illustration below shows a sandstone relief of *Shiva and Parvati* (11<sup>th</sup> Century CE) from the Dallas Museum of Art, and a bronze *Ardhanarishvara* (circa 1000 CE) from the Los Angeles Museum of Art.



## Buddhism

Buddhism is often considered as a religion without the need for gods or goddesses. Since the universe has existed forever there is no need to postulate a divine force that once created it. However, the Buddha in his various manifestations and many of his enlightened followers (the *Bodhisattvas*, from *bodhi*, knowledge, and *sattva*, being) are revered as sincerely as any of the gods in more definitely theistic religions.

The Buddha and most of the Bodhisattvas are male. The hierarchy of priests and monks in Buddhism are male (Faure,

2008). However, over the centuries the feminine has made its appearance.

One of the most important of the Bodhisattvas was known as *Avalokitasvara* – “the lord (*isvara*) who gazes (*lokita*) down (*ava*) at the world.” This Bodhisattva of Compassion is described as the “Regarder of the Cries of the World” (Reeves, 2008) in Chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sutra* (the Sanskrit original deriving from the 1st century CE, Chinese translations occurring in the third to sixth Centuries CE).

As the centuries passed and as Buddhism spread from its origin in India to Tibet, China and South East Asia, *Avalokitasvara* changed into female form (Yü, 2000). In Tibet, the Bodhisattva became *Tara* (Blofeld, 1979; Shaw, 2006). Tara herself is manifest in many different ways. Among them are white Tara, the goddess of Compassion, and green Tara, the goddess of Enlightenment. The illustration below shows an Indian stone sculpture of *Avalokitasvara* (9<sup>th</sup> Century CE) and a gilt copper-alloy casting of *Tara* (14<sup>th</sup> Century CE) from Tibet or Nepal and now in the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena. *Avalokitasvara* is holding a lotus flower. Tara’s left hand shows the *mudra* (gesture) of teaching and her right hand the *mudra* of charity.



In China *Avalokitasvara* evolved into *Guanshiyin* (the Chinese translation of “the one who perceives the sounds of the world”) or *Guanyin* (pinyin; Kuan Yin in the Wade-Giles romanization). In Japan *Guanyin* became Kannon, re-assuming a male identity. The illustrations below shows a painted wooden carving of Guanyin (circa 1100 CE) in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas, and a colossal statue of Guanyin (2015) in the Tsz Shan Monastery in Hong Kong.



The Jesuits first arrived in China in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Christian concepts soon became part of life and culture in Southern China. One particular effect was the syncretism (from Greek *syn* together and *krassis* mixture) of *Guanyin* and the Virgin Mary (Paul, 1983; Reis-Habito, 1993). The illustration below from Pham (2021) shows two ivory carvings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York: a European representation of Mary (13<sup>th</sup> Century) and a Chinese representation of Guanyin (16<sup>th</sup> Century).



## The Eternal Feminine

With the Scientific Revolution and the Age of the Enlightenment, reason began to exert itself in the affairs of the soul. The existence of God was either denied, or considered only in the abstract. However, cold reason could not handle the emotions, which came to the fore in the Romantic Movement. Feminine forces were the means to handle feelings.

At the end of Goethe's *Faust Part II* (1831), Faust, who had sold his soul to the devil in order to achieve knowledge and power, is saved from damnation by the intercession of female heavenly powers. Their final chorus in the play celebrates the power of the "Eternal Feminine."

Alles Vergängliche  
Ist nur ein Gleichnis;  
Das Unzulängliche  
Hier wird's Ereignis;  
Das Unbeschreibliche

All that has happened  
Is only a parable;  
The insufficient  
Is now fulfilled;  
The indescribable

Hier ist's getan;  
Das Ewig-Weibliche  
Zieht uns hinan.

Is now realized;  
The Eternal Feminine  
Leads us upward.

The chorus has been set to music by Schumann in his Scenes from Goethe's Faust (1853), Liszt in his Faust Symphony (1880) and by Mahler in his Symphony No 8 (1910). The following is the Mahler version:

[https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/9-12-Mahler\\_-Symphony-8-In-E-Flat.m4a](https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/9-12-Mahler_-Symphony-8-In-E-Flat.m4a)

## Theosophy



From 1875 to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the Theosophical Movement exerted an uneasy influence on our thinking. Under

the initial direction of Helena Blavatsky (1831 -1891), the movement combined Western esotericism and spiritualism with Eastern religious thought, and added a dash of charlatanism. Theosophy did promote of peace in a world enamoured of war and it did increase Western understanding of Eastern spiritual ideas. However, it ultimately foundered on its own fakery. The illustration on the right shows a painting of *The Mother of the World* (1937) by the Theosophist painter and explorer Nicholas Roerich.

## **The Gaia Hypothesis**

In the 1970s, studies of how the Earth's atmosphere constantly maintained parameters of temperature and pH that were optimum for the continuation of life led to the Gaia hypothesis, named after the Greek Goddess of the Earth, the primordial mother of all life:

the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity to regulate chemical composition, surface pH and possibly also climate. The notion of the biosphere as an active adaptive control system able to maintain the Earth in homeostasis we are calling the 'Gaia' hypothesis (Lovelock and Margulis, 1974)

According to the Gaia hypothesis, human life is just a component of a larger self-regulating organism, the planetary biosphere. Some are skeptical of this hypothesis, claiming it describes the Earth's process as determined by its future ends – teleological – rather than by its antecedent causes – mechanistic. However, just because science does not easily accommodate purpose does not mean that there is no underlying purpose to the universe.

The Gaia hypothesis has gained much recent support from the modern environmental movement. In some sense humanity has become a cancer on the life of the planet. Unchecked climate change threatens the homeostasis of the world and the life of

everyone.

## **Feminist Theology**

During the past few decades, feminist philosophers have challenged the androcentricity of the Christianity and Judaism (Anderson, 1998; Christ, 2003; Goldenberg, 1979; Johnson, 1984, 1992). These thinkers have pointed out the unfairness and inappropriateness of restricting the priesthood to men. And they have criticized mainstream theology for its focus on logic at the expense of intuition. One cannot prove the existence of God, but one can feel it.

Many people handle the unknowns of life by believing in the ethical instructions and the explanatory narratives that are available in religion. Science does not teach us what to do and does not always get us through the night. By providing a purpose to life and by promising ways to approach suffering and death, religion can help. Feminist religion – “theology” (Goldenberg, 1979) with its stress on grace and compassion promises to be far more effective than present mainstream theology.

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## Thoughts on the Kabbalah

The Kabbalah is a body of Jewish thought based on mystical insight into the nature of God and an imaginative interpretation of the Torah. The word itself means “received.” According to legend this special knowledge was imparted by God either to Adam in Eden or to Moses on Sinai, and handed down thereafter from generation to generation to an enlightened few, who preserved the received wisdom and taught it to their students. This post presents some thoughts about the Kabbalah from someone who, though neither Jewish nor fluent in Hebrew, is fascinated by the intricacy of its ideas.

### Early Origins of the Kabbalah

Since at the beginning the Kabbalah was largely unwritten, we have no clear ideas about its origins. However, in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, various books on the Kabbalah were written down using the

Aramaic language in the region of Syria-Palestine (Dan & Kiener, 1986; Dan, 2007; Hoffman, 2010; Matt, 1996a, Ogden, 2016).

One of these foundational texts of the Kabbalah is the *Sefir Yetzirah* – the “Book of the Creation,” or “Book of Formation.” The universe was created by God engraving in light upon the darkness the 32 letters and numbers of the Hebrew language (*Sefir Yetzirah* I:1, Kaplan translation, 1990):

With 32 mystical paths of Wisdom  
engraved Yah  
    the Lord of Hosts  
    the God of Israel  
the living God  
    King of the universe  
El Shaddai  
    Merciful and Gracious  
    High and Exalted  
    Dwelling in eternity  
    Whose name is Holy –  
        He is lofty and holy –  
And He created His universe  
    with three books (Sepharim),  
    with text (Sepher)  
    with number (Sephar)  
    and with communication (Sippur).

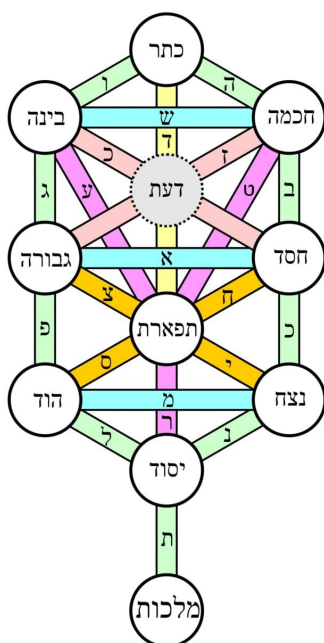
Text and number define the nature of the universe. Its qualities are described by language, and the quantities of its components are described by number. Communication allows the universe to exist – as divine speech. Note that the Hebrew root S-F-R using the letters *samech* (s), *pay* (p/f) and *resh* (r) is the basis of many words denoting writing and books, counting and numbers.

Another text probably written in that period, the *Sefer HaBahir* – the “Book of Illumination” –associated the ten

numbers with ten different ways that God was manifest in the universe that He created: the *Sefirot* (Verses 124-193, Kaplan translation, 1979). These divine emanations became a way to understand all things.

The following illustration shows the 10 *Sefirot* (singular *Sefirah*) together with 22 linkages, each denoted by one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. As well as the 10 *Sefirot*, the idea of *Da'at* or “knowledge” is represented in the upper half of the diagram. Originally this was not directly connected to any of the *Sefirot*. Rather it appeared to be entangled in the network: knowledge develops through the study of the *Sefirot* and their interactions. Kaplan (1990, p 25) suggests that it is “the point of confluence between Wisdom and Understanding.” Other interpretations consider *Da'at* to be one of the 10 *Sefirot*, and consider *Keter* as the Divine Will that infuses the whole underlying structure of the universe.

כתר	Keter	Crown
חכמה	Chochmah	Wisdom
בינה	Binah	Understanding
דעת	Da'at	Knowledge
חסד	Chesed	Love
גבורה	Gevurah	Power
תפארת	Tif'eret	Beauty
נצה	Netzach	Endurance
הוד	Hod	Splendor
יסוד	Yesod	Foundation
מלכות	Malkhut	Kingdom



א	Alef (a)	1	Ox
ב	Bet (b/v)	2	House
ג	Gimel (g)	3	Camel
ד	Dalet (d)	4	Door
ה	He (h)	5	Window
ו	Vav (v)	6	Nail
ז	Zayin (z)	7	Sword
ח	Chet (ch)	8	Fence
ט	Tet (t)	9	Serpent
י	Yod (y)	10	Hand
כ	Kaf (k)	20	Palm (hand)
ל	Lamed (l)	30	Goat
מ	Mem (m)	40	Water
נ	Nun (n)	50	Fish
ס	Samech (s)	60	Support
ע	Ayin (o)	70	Eye
פ	Pe (p/f)	80	Mouth
צ	Tsadi (ts)	90	Hook
ק	Qof (q)	100	Back of Head
ר	Resh (r)	200	Head
ש	Shin (sh/s)	300	Tooth
ת	Tav (t)	400	Cross

The Sefirot are arranged in three linked columns. The middle column represents the main flow of energy from the Creator to the Creation. The left column tends toward the female aspect of the Divine, and the right column toward its male aspect (Kaplan, 1990, p 34). However, in some formulations, *Malkhut*

is also considered as the female aspect (*Shekhinah*) of *Keter*. We shall return to this idea when we examine the *Zohar*.

The numbers and letters in this representation of creation could be used in various ways – to explain the nature of things, to predict the future, to ward off disease and to exert magical control. The practice of *Gematria* (a Hebrew word likely deriving from the Greek *grammateia*, knowledge of writing) represents words by the sum of their letters according to the alphanumeric cipher given in the preceding figure. Thus, the word for father *av* can be considered as 3 – the sum of *alef* (1) and *bet* (2): Similarly, mother *em* can be considered as 41 – the sum of *alef* (1) and *mem* (40). Adding father and mother together leads to the word for child *yeled* which has a value of 44 – the sum of *yod* (10), *lamed* (30) and *dalet* (4). (I am indebted to Tokarczuk, 2022, p 579 for this example).

The use of Creation's numbers and letters in magic was the basis of *Kaballah Ma'asit* (practical), as compared to *Kaballah Iyunit* (contemplative). Amulets containing magical words were used to treat or prevent disease. The legendary Prague Golem (illustrated on the right by Philippe Semeria) was formed out of clay and brought to life by writing the Hebrew letters *alef*, *met* and *tav* upon his forehead – these make the word *emet*, "life." Once the Golem became dangerous, he was returned to clay by erasing the first of these letters so that the word became *met*, "death" (Scholem, 1965/1996, pp 158-204)



Many are the ways in which the world and its history can be mapped onto the *Sephirot*. One analysis relates these different emanations to the sayings of God as reported in the first chapter of *Genesis* (Kaplan, 1990, pp 6-7). God spoke and the universe came into being. The following are the words introduced by "And God said..." as they flow from Keter into the other nine emanations

3 Let there be light (*Chochmah*, Wisdom)

6 Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters (*Binah*, Understanding)

9 Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear (*Chesed*, Love)

11 Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind (*Gevurah*, Power)

14 Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night (*Tif'eret*, Beauty)

20 Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. (*Netzach*, Endurance)

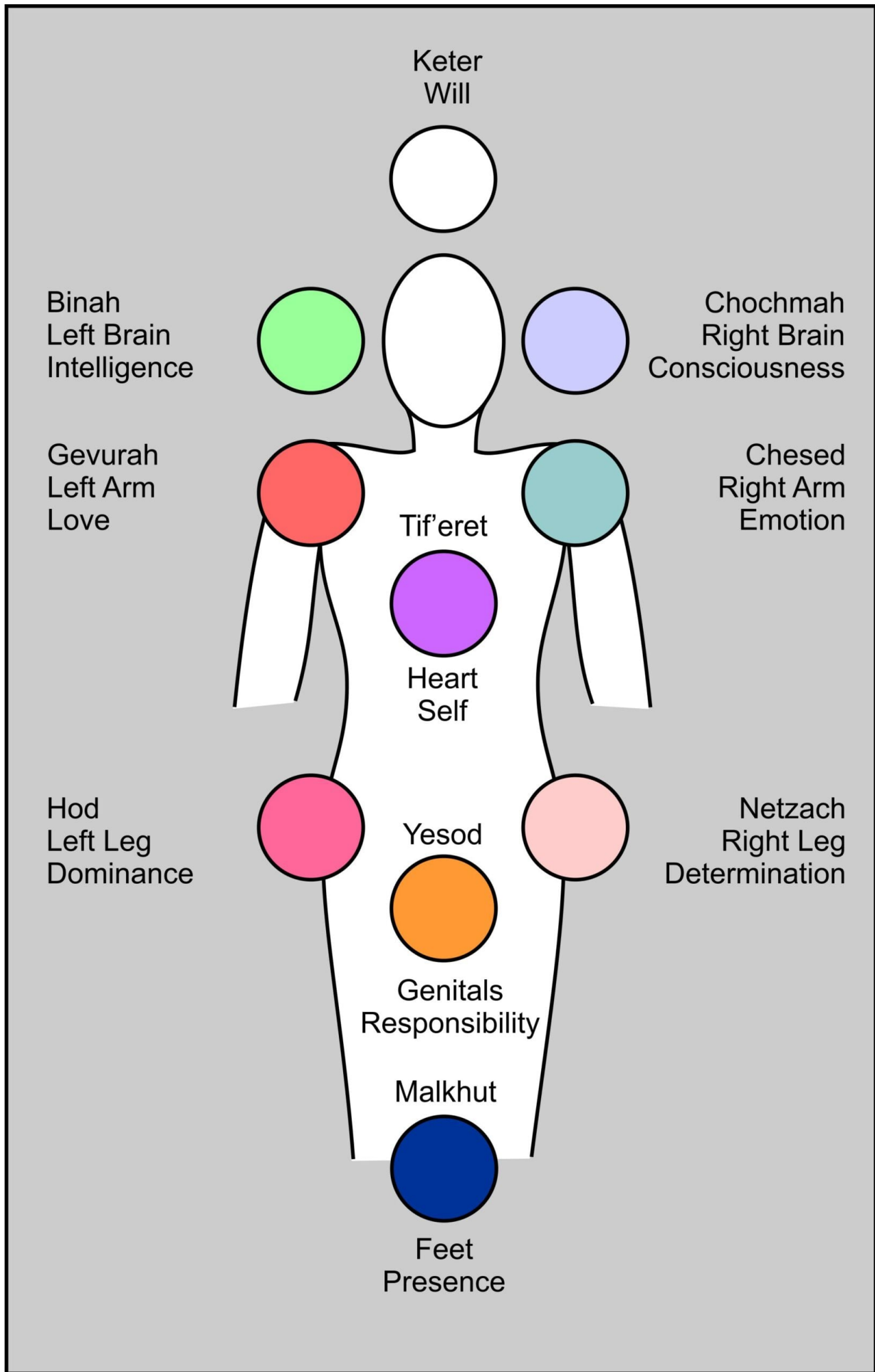
24 Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind (*Hod*, Splendor)

26 Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (*Yesod*, Foundation)

28 Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (*Malkhut*, Kingdom)

Likewise, each of the ten commandments as given in Exodus 20 may relate to a particular *Sefirah* (Bar-Asher, 2022). However, exactly which commandment goes with which *Sefirah* varies from one commentary to the next. Most accept that the first commandment (“I am the Lord thy God ... Thou shalt have no other gods before me”) relates to *Keter*.

The ten *Sefirot* can be mapped to the primordial human body in many ways. The following illustration shows an amalgam of several (Kaplan, 1990, p. 151; Berenson-Perkins, 2000; Atzmon, 2003). These relations are in keeping with the idea that “God created man in his own image” (*Genesis* 1:27).



Little definite is known about the history of Kabbalah scholarship between these early origins in Palestine and the 13<sup>th</sup> Century in Provence, France, where Rabbi Isaac the Blind (about 1160-1235 CE) wrote a commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Scholem, 1987, Dan & Kiener, 1986; Dan, 2007). He and his colleagues were the first to organize the 10 *Sefirot* in the way (see preceding figure) in which they are now most commonly considered (Dan & Kiener, 1986, pp 32, 73-86). He described the *Sefirot* as the emanations of a boundless God – *Ein Sof*, words meaning “no limit” and denoting that which is both infinite in space and eternal in time (Valabregue-Parry, 2012). *Ein Sof* is everything but is also nothing because it is not anything in particular. The concept of *Ein Sof* is therefore related to the idea of *Ayin* or “nothingness” (Matt, 1990). The words *Ein* and *Ayin* use the same Hebrew letters. *Ayin* and *Ein Sof* work through the first *Sephirah* – *Keter* – to create the other *Sefirot*.

The study of the Kabbalah then spread from Southern France to the Jewish communities in Spain. In Gerona, Rabbi Azriel (about 1160-1238 CE), who had studied with Rabbi Isaac the Blind, wrote

Anything visible, and anything that can be grasped by thought, is bounded. Anything bounded is finite. Anything finite is not undifferentiated. Conversely, the boundless is called *Ein Sof*, Infinite. It is absolute undifferentiation in perfect, changeless oneness. Since it is boundless, there is nothing outside of it. Since it transcends and conceals itself, it is the essence of everything hidden and revealed. Since it is concealed, it is the root of faith and the root of rebellion. As it is written, “One who is righteous lives by his faith.” The philosophers acknowledge that we comprehend it only by way of no.

Emanating from *Ein Sof* are the ten *sefirot*. They constitute the process by which all things come into being and pass away. They energize every existent thing that can be

quantified. Since all things come into being by means of the sefirot, they differ from one another; yet they all derive from one root. Everything is from *Ein Sof*; there is nothing outside of it. (quotation from Matt, 1996a, p. 29)

The Spanish Rabbi Josef Gikatilla (about 1248-1305), whose name comes from the Spanish *Chiquitilla* (little one) wrote in his *Sha'are Orah* ("The Gates of Light," translated by Weinstein, 1994):

The depth of primordial being is called Boundless (*Ein Sof*). Because of its concealment from all creatures above and below, it is also called Nothingness (*Ayin*). If one asks, "What is it?" the answer is, "Nothing," meaning: No one can understand anything about it. It is negated of every conception. No one can know anything about it—except the belief that it exists. Its existence cannot be grasped by anyone other than it. Therefore its name is "I am becoming."

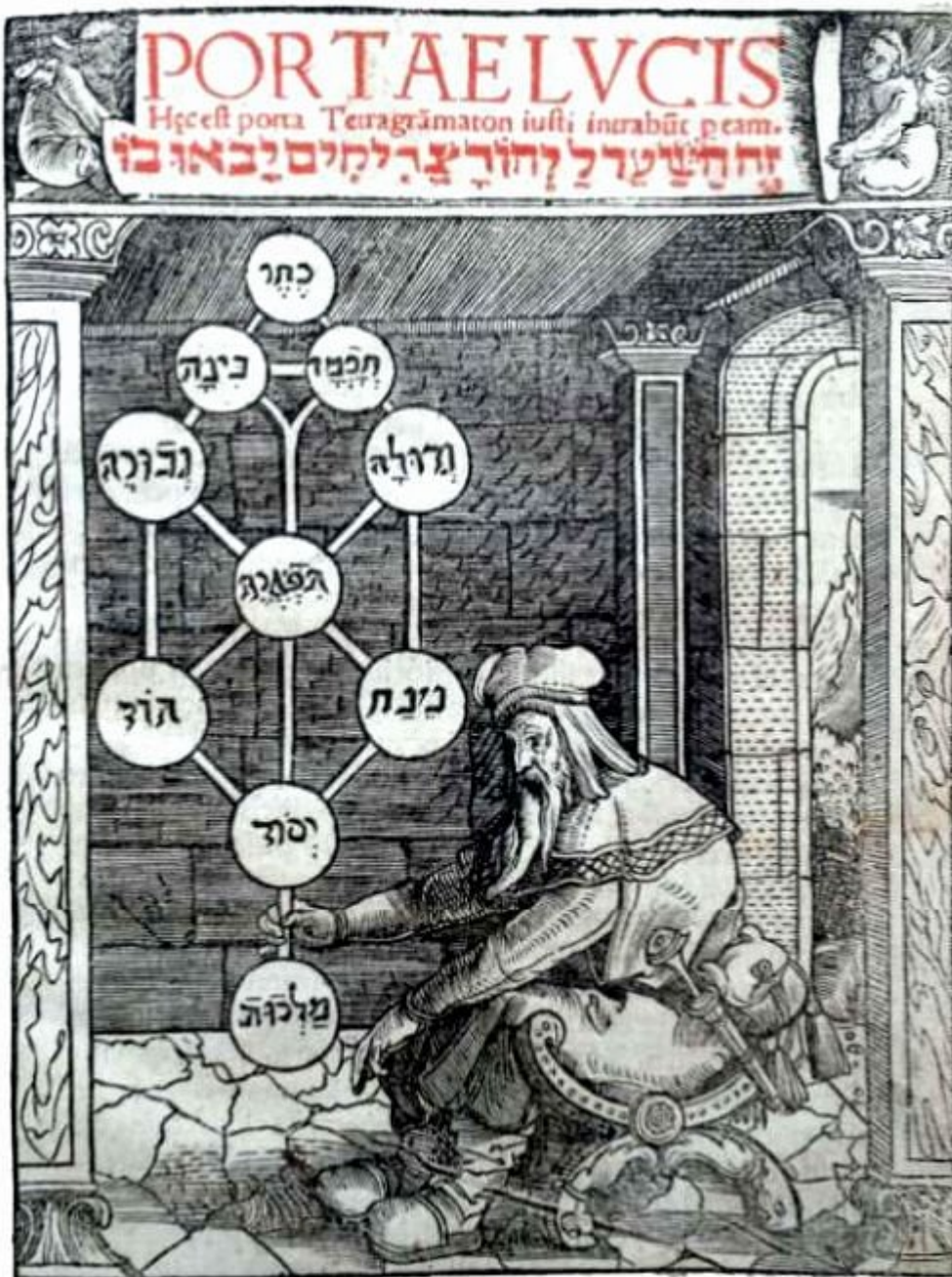
The final comment refers to the name "I am that I am" – *Eheyeh asher eheyeh* – of God in the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. Since Hebrew does not clearly indicate the tense of the verb, this can also be translated as "I am who I shall be" or "I shall be who I am."

In the *Sha'are Orah*, Gikatilla related the ten Sefirot to the various names of God in the Torah (this table derives from the Wikipedia article on Gikatilla):

## SEPHIROT AND THE NAMES OF GOD

Sephirah	Holy Name
כתר, <i>Keter</i> , "Crown"	אהי"ה, <i>Eheye</i> , "I AM"
חכמה, <i>Chokhmah</i> , "Wisdom"	יה, <i>Yah</i> , "LORD"
בינה, <i>Binah</i> , "Understanding"	יהו"ה, <i>Havayah</i> , "LORD"
חסד, <i>Chesed</i> , "Kindness"	אל, <i>El</i> , "God"
גבורה, <i>Gevurah</i> , "Severity"	אלהים, <i>Elohim</i> , "God"
תפארת, <i>Tiferet</i> , "Beauty"	יהו"ה, <i>Havayah</i> , "LORD"
נצח, <i>Netzach</i> , "Eternity"	יהו"ה צבאות, <i>Havayah Tsevaot</i> , "LORD of hosts"
הוד, <i>Hod</i> , "Splendor"	אלהים צבאות, <i>Elohim Tsevaot</i> , "God of hosts"
יסוד, <i>Yesod</i> , "Foundation"	אל חי, <i>El Chai</i> , "the living God"
מלכות, <i>Malkuth</i> , "Kingship"	אדוני, <i>Adonai</i> , "my Lord"

The illustration below shows the frontispiece of a Latin translation of the *Sha'are Orah* (*Portae Lucis*) by Paulus Ricius, published in Augsburg in 1516, from the collection of the British Museum. The engraving shows a Kabbalist meditating on the *Sefirot*.



Mystic meditation on the ten Sefirot allows one to gain access to the nothingness of *Ein Sof*. Matt (1996a, p 119) quotes an anonymous Kabbalist from 13<sup>th</sup> Century Gerona:

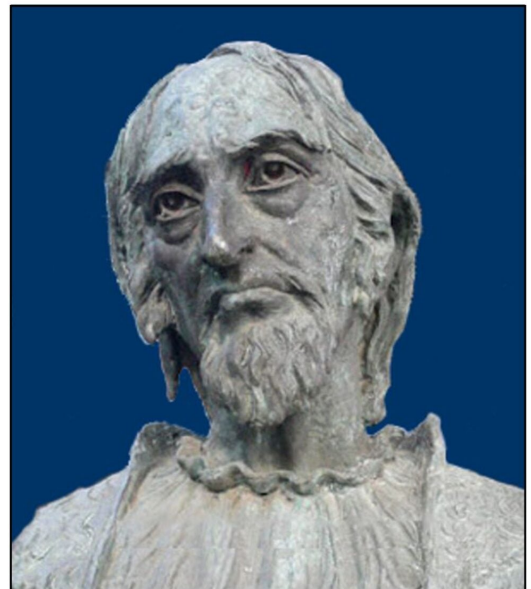
When the soul comes into the One, entering into pure loss of self, it finds God as in nothingness. It seemed to a man that he had a dream, a waking dream, that he became pregnant with nothingness as a woman with child. In this nothingness God was born. He was the fruit of nothingness; God was born in nothingness. (quoted in McGinn, 1981).

## The Zohar

Toward the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, Moses de León (1240-1305), a Kabbalah scholar in Guadalajara, began to publish a set of Aramaic writings that he claimed had been written by the great Hebrew sage Shimon bar Yochai (also known as Rashbi) in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century C.E. Rabbi Shimon is buried in Meron, Galilee, the sight of an annual ecstatic gathering of his adherents. The collection of these texts came to be known as the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Radiance), or more simply the *Zohar*. The legend has that Rashbi withdrew to a cave for 13 years and there, under the inspiration of the prophet Elijah, wrote the *Zohar*. Various lines of evidence suggest, however, that these texts were actually written by Moses de León, and that the Zohar is an example of religious *pseudoepigrapha*, works falsely attributed to a past author:

The quest for truth knows of adventures that are all its own, and in a vast number of cases has arrayed itself in pseudoepigraphic garb. the further a man progresses along his own road in this quest for truth, the more he might become convinced that his own road must have been trodden by others, ages before him. to the streak of adventurousness which was in moses de leon, no less than to his genius, we owe one of the most remarkable works of jewish literature. (Scholem, 1945/1995, p 204)

We have no contemporary portrait of Moses de León. The following illustration shows two modern representations: on the left a print by Arnold Belkin and on the right a bust by Luis Sanguino:



The following is the Zohar's commentary on the first verse of *Genesis*. I have used Matt's 2004 translation but I have in some places used the explanatory annotations in Matt (2002, 2004) instead of the literal translation:

On the authority of the King (i.e., *Ein Sof*), He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed (i.e., the first and most hidden *Sefirah*, *Keter*) from the head of *Ein Sof* – a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness, thrust in a ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all. As a measuring line, yielding radiant colors. Deep within the spark gushed a flow, splaying colors below, concealed within the concealed of the mystery of *Ein Sof*. It split and did not split its aura, was not known at all, until under the impact of splitting, a single, concealed, supernal point shone. Beyond that point, nothing is known, so it is called *Reshit* (Beginning), first command of all.

*The enlightened will shine like the Zohar (radiance, brilliance, splendor) of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12: 3)*

Zohar! Concealed of concealed struck its aura, which touched and did not touch this point. Then this beginning expanded, building itself a palace worthy of glorious praise. There it sowed seed to give birth, availing worlds. The secret is: Her stock is seed of holiness (*Hokhmah*) (Isaiah 6:13). Zohar! Sowing seed for its glory, like the seed of fine purple silk wrapping itself within, weaving itself a palace, constituting its praise, availing all.

With this beginning, the unknown concealed one created the palace. this palace is called *elohim*, god. the secret is: *Be-reshit bara Elohim*, With beginning, \_\_\_ created God.

The final lines in this section propose a complete re-interpretation of Creation. Rather than the usual translation (“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”), the new interpretation proposes that God is created (together with the heaven and the earth) by the unknowable and unnameable force of *Ein Sof*. The Zohar proposes that since *Elohim* follows the verb *bara*, it is the object rather than the subject of the act of creation. This would fit with modern colloquial Hebrew, although there are many examples in the Hebrew of the Torah where the subject follows the verb, e.g. Genesis 1:4, *Wayyar Elohim et-ha’owr*, God saw the light.

Some scholars have remarked about how the expansion of the universe from a “single concealed supernal point” at the beginning of Creation might represent the Big Bang (Friedman, 1995; Matt, 1996b). we should be very cautious in relating science to scripture. Early Kabbalah ideas related the ten *sefirot* to the now obsolete idea that the earth is the centre of a universe surrounded by the sky and eight crystalline spheres carrying the moon, sun, the five known planets, the fixed stars, and the empyrean heaven (Chajes, 2020).

The *Zohar* (Matt, 2004, sections i: 53ab) makes some intriguing comments on the sin of Adam and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The tenth *Sefirah* is called *Malkhut*

(kingdom) and represents the actual world which contains both good and evil. However, the Sefirah also represents *Shekhinah*. This word means “dwelling,” or “presence,” and as such it has come to mean the presence of God within the real world. At another level of interpretation, *Shekhinah* is the female counterpart of *Keter* or the bride of *Tif’eret*. Adam’s eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil brought evil and death into the world and distanced *Shekhinah* from the other *Sefirot*. It was not that God drove Adam out of Eden, but that Adam drove *Shekhinah* out of God. The goal of Judaism is then to repair this cleavage between the Creator and his Creation, to join male and female back together. These concepts were to be expanded in the teachings of Isaac Luria, which will be considered later.

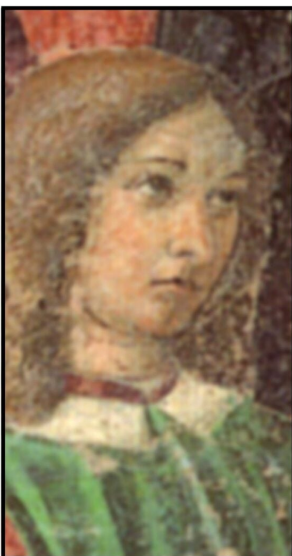
### **Christian Kabbalah**

In the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Renaissance scholars began once again to study scientific, philosophical and religious works written by the Ancients but long unread by teachers only concerned with Christian Scripture. Early Kabbalah writings such as the *Sefir Yetzirah* were some of the sources of knowledge that were thus “reborn” during the Renaissance. Placing these ancient Hebrew writings in the context of Christian philosophy led to the formulation of a Christian Kabbalah (Forshaw, 2016).

Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) in Germany published *De Arte Cabalistica* in 1517. He tried to reconcile some of the ideas of the Kabbalah with Christian theology, and mapped the Christian Trinity to the upper levels of the *Sefirot*. The early 16<sup>th</sup> Century saw the beginning of a campaign to facilitate the conversion of the Jews in the Holy Roman Empire by burning all their books. Reuchlin successfully argued against this (Price, 2011).

The other famous Renaissance scholar of the Kabbalah was

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) (Copenhaver, 2019, 2020; Howlett, 2021; Hanegraaff, 2012, pp 53-68). This young nobleman studied at the universities of Ferrara, Padua and Paris, becoming proficient in French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. He then became a member of the Medici court of Lorenzo the Magnificent in Florence. His beautiful face and long chestnut hair was widely depicted in renaissance art. The illustration below shows him represented (posthumously) in Raphael's *School of Athens* (1511) in the Vatican (upper left), in Cosimo Rosselli's fresco *Miracle of the Sacrament* (1486) (lower left), and holding a medallion of Cosimo de' Medici in an anonymous engraving (right).



In 1486 Pico published a set of 900 *Conclusiones philosophicae, cabalasticae et theologicae* in Rome, and offered to defend these propositions in debate with any scholar who wished to challenge them. He also published a general defense of his conclusions in his *oration on the dignity of man*, which became the foundational text of the new humanism, wherein man became the measure of all things:

For, raised to the most eminent height of theology, whence we shall be able to measure with the rod of indivisible eternity all things that are and that have been. (Caponigri translation, p 27).

Many of Pico's *Conclusions* derived from his readings in the Kabbalah. The following are three examples (from Copenhaver, 2019, Appendix C):

*Ein Sof* is not to be numbered along with other Numerations (*Sefira*) because it is the unity of those Numerations, removed and uncommunicated, not a coordinated unity.

Someone with a deep knowledge of Kabbalah can understand that the three great fourfold names of God contained in the secrets of Kabbalists ought to be assigned to the three persons of the Trinity by a wondrous allocation so that the name אהיה (*Ehyeh*, I am) belongs to the Father, the name יהוה (the tetragrammaton, *Yahweh*) to the Son, the name אדוני (*Adonai*) to the Holy Spirit.

One who has thought deeply about the novenary number of beatitudes that Matthew writes about in the Gospel (*Matthew* 5: 3:12) will see that they fit wonderfully with the novenary of nine Numerations (*Sefirot*) that come beneath the first, which is the unapproachable abyss of the Deity.

Pope Innocent VII considered many of Pico's proposals, particularly those related to the Kabbalah, as heretical. He forbade the proposed debate and banned any subsequent publication of the *Conclusions*.

Pico treated all his different sources – Greek philosophers, Christian theologians, Egyptian magicians and Hebrew sages – as equal. His was a philosophy of “syncretism” (from the Greek *syn* together and *krasis* mix). The Christian Kabbalah thenceforth became part of a tradition of secret knowledge, a strange amalgam of Gnosticism, Hermetism, Alchemy, Astrology, Freemasonry, and Kabbalah. The word “cabal” entered the lexicon to denote a secret society conspiring to bring about political change by means of intrigue.

Hanegraaff (2012) characterized those systems of knowledge that are rejected by the majority yet followed by a secret few as “esotericism” – the “academy’s dustbin of rejected knowledge” (Hanegraaff, 2013, p 13). The popularity of such esoteric systems waxes and wanes. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century various aspects of the occult – spiritualism, Tarot, theosophy – became popular. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century various “New Age” religions made their impact.

## **Safed**

In 1492 the Jews were expelled from Spain and the great flowering of Spanish Kabbalah ceased. Kabbalah scholars moved to other regions of Europe and the Middle East. The city of Safed in Galilee, then part of Ottoman Syria, soon became an important center of Kabbalah learning. Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (1522-1570), also known as Remak, was one of the most important scholars in Safed. His name indicates that his family originally came from Cordoba in Spain. The following is from Cordovero’s *Pardes Rimonim*, “Orchard of Pomegranates” (1548):

In the beginning *Ein Sof* emanated ten *sefirot*, which are of its essence, united with it. It and they are entirely one. There is no change or division in the emanator that would

justify saying it is divided into parts in these various sefirot. ... Imagine a ray of sunlight shining through a stained-glass window of ten different colors. The sunlight possesses no color at all but appears to change hue as it passes through the different colors of glass. Colored light radiates through the window. The light has not essentially changed, though so it seems to the viewer. Just so with the *sefirot*. The light that clothes itself in the vessels of the sefirot is the essence, like the ray of sunlight. That essence does not change color at all, neither judgment nor compassion, neither right nor left. Yet by emanating through the *sefirot*—the variegated stained glass—judgment or compassion prevails. (quoted in Matt, 1996a, p 38).

Cordovero was followed by Isaac ben Solomon Luria (1532-1572), also known as *HaARI*, “the lion.” He did not leave any writings of his own, but his teachings were later recorded by his disciples. He proposed that during Creation *Ein Sof* initially contracted (*tsimtsum*) so as to make space for the universe, and that when light was emanated into the *Sefirot* there was some unavoidable fragmentation (*shevirah*). The task of the faithful is to repair (*tikkun*) what was broken by means of good works, charity, social justice and prayer (Drob, 2000, pp 384-433). Matt (1996a, p 15) summarized these concepts:

Luria taught that the first divine act was not emanation, but withdrawal. *Ein Sof* withdrew its presence “from itself to itself,” withdrawing in all directions away from one point at the center” of its infinity, as it were, thereby creating a vacuum. This vacuum served as the site of creation. . . . Into the vacuum *Ein Sof* emanated a ray of light, channeled through vessels. At first, everything went smoothly; but as the emanation proceeded, some of the vessels could not withstand the power of the light, and they shattered. Most of the light returned to its infinite source, but the rest fell as sparks, along with the shards of the vessels. Eventually, these sparks became trapped in

material existence. The human task is to liberate, or raise, these sparks, to restore them to divinity. This process of *tikkun* (repair or mending) is accomplished through living a life of holiness. All human actions either promote or impede *tikkun*, thus hastening or delaying the arrival of the Messiah.

## **Final Thoughts**

There is much that is foolish in the teachings of the Kaballah. The use of the Kaballah in magic makes for wonderful stories but in reality is nonsense. The use of the Kaballah to predict the future is foolish. Sabattai Zevi (1626-1676) used the Kabbalah to claim that he was the Messiah. After gathering together thousands of followers, he was imprisoned by Sultan Mehmed IV and ultimately converted to Islam. He augmented rather than decreased the sum of human suffering.

The great Kaballah texts are magnificent works of the imagination. They present a view of a universe infused with number and language. In the general sense that we cannot understand or control anything without number and language, these teachings are true. The writings of the Kaballah also provide meditative tools to facilitate individual mystical encounters with the infinite.

Over the past century we have come to consider particular things as dependent on universal principles. Noam Chomsky has shown that different human languages are all related to a universal grammar; Claude Lévi-Strauss has proposed that different human societies all follow some basic rules for how human beings interact with each other. Perhaps the ideas of the Kaballah can provide us with a general structure with which to understand things – a template for the infinite. These issues are well discussed (though ultimately not resolved) in Levi's 2009 paper "Structuralism and Kabbalah:

## Sciences of mysticism or mystifications of science?"

Structural anthropology and Kabbalah, although on cursory appraisal having nothing in common—insofar as they stem from entirely different intellectual domains, the one being a modern social science and the other an ancient form of Jewish mysticism—on deeper examination actually share a number of epistemological and ontological postulates. These include, but are not limited to, the idea that surface diversity conceals an underlying unity, specifically truth is discoverable within a layered model of reality, and that space, time, and matter are characterized by entropy and fragmentation.

Perhaps we might end this post with the concept of *tikkun olam* ("repair of the world") as proposed in the Kabbalah teachings of Isaac Luria. This is one of the most powerful justifications of human ethics: we should be good not to benefit ourselves but to make the world a better place.

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