

ABULAFIA, ABRAHAM BEN SAMUEL: ([back to article](#))

[Prophetic Kabbalah or Ecstatic Kabbalah]

By : [Kaufmann Kohler](#) [Philipp Bloch](#) [Meyer Kayserling](#) [Paul Wendland](#)

One of the earliest cabalists; born 1240 at Saragossa, in Aragon; died some time after 1291. Very early in life he was taken by his parents to Tudela, in Navarre, where his aged father carefully instructed him in the Bible and Talmud. When eighteen years old his father died, and two years later Abraham began a life of ceaseless wandering. His first journey was to Palestine, whence he intended to start and find the legendary river Sambation and the lost Ten Tribes. He got no further than Acre, however, owing to the desolation wrought in the Holy Land by the last Crusades. He then determined to go to Rome, but stopped short in Capua, where he devoted himself with passionate zeal to the study of philosophy and of the "Moreh" of Maimonides, under the tutelage of a philosopher and physician named Hillel—probably the well-known Hillel ben Samuel ben Eliezer of Verona. Although he always holds Maimonides in the highest estimation, and often makes use of sentences from his writings, he was as little satisfied with his philosophy as with any other branch of knowledge which he acquired. He thirsted after the highest. He was of a communicative disposition, able and eager to teach others. He wrote industriously on cabalistic, philosophical, and grammatical subjects, and succeeded in surrounding himself with numerous pupils, to whom he imparted much of his own enthusiasm. On his

return to Spain he became subject to visions, and at the age of thirty-one, at Barcelona, immersed himself in the study of the book "Yezirah" and its numerous commentaries. This book, and particularly the commentary and method of the German mystic, Eleazar of Worms, exercised a deep influence upon him, and had the effect of greatly increasing his mystical bent. Letters of the alphabet, numerals, vowel-points, all became symbols of existence to him, and their combinations and permutations, supplementing and explaining one another, possessed for him an illumining power most effectively to be disclosed in a deeper study of the divine names, and especially of the consonants of the Tetragrammaton. With such auxiliaries, and with the observance of certain rites and ascetic practises, men, he says, may attain to the highest aim of existence and become prophets; not in order to work miracles and signs, but to reach the highest degree of perception and be able to penetrate intuitively into the inscrutable nature of the Deity, the riddles of creation, the problems of human life, the purpose of the precepts, and the deeper meaning of the Torah. His most important disciple, and one who carried his system further, was the cabalist Joseph Chiquitilla. Abulafia soon left Spain again, and in 1279 wrote at Patras, in Greece, the first of his prophetic books, "Sefer ha-Yashar" (The Book of the Righteous). In obedience to an inner voice, he went in 1280 to Rome, in order to effect the conversion of Pope Nicholas III. on the day before New Year, 5041. The pope, then in Suriano, heard of it, and issued orders to burn the fanatic as soon as he reached that place. Close to the inner gate the stake was erected in preparation; but not in the least disturbed, Abulafia set out for Suriano and reached there August 22. While passing through the outer gate, he heard that the pope had succumbed to an apoplectic stroke during the preceding night. Returning to Rome, he was thrown into prison by the Minorites, but was liberated after four weeks' detention. He was next heard of in Sicily, where he appeared as a prophet and Messiah. This claim was put an end to by a letter to the people of Palermo, which most energetically condemned

Abulafia's conduct. It was written by R. Solomon ben Adret, who strove with all his power to guide men's minds aright in that trying time of hysterical mental confusion. Abulafia had to take up the pilgrim's staff anew, and under distressing conditions compiled his "Sefer ha-Ot" (The Book of the Sign) on the little island of Comino, near Malta, 1285-88. In 1291 he wrote his last, and perhaps his most intelligible, work, "Imre Shefer" (Words of Beauty); after this all trace of him is lost.

Abulafia calls his cabalistic system "prophetic cabala," distinguishing it thus from that of his predecessors, which he considers of lower grade, because it satisfied itself with the characterization of God as *En-Sof* ("the Being without end"), with the *Sefirot* as vague intermediaries, and with the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, and because its method remained essentially speculative. Such is only a preliminary and inferior grade of knowledge; the highest goal is prophetism, assuring men a certain degree of community with God. Means hereunto are afforded by the close study of the names of God, particularly of the four-lettered YHWH, and also by *gematria*, the symbolical employment of letters as numerals. In this the letters of a word are to be considered not only as letters, giving the sound, but as numerals, the sum of which may be replaced by the equal sum of other letters, producing, of course, a new word, which must prove to be identical in significance, or at least allied, with the first word whose sum it equals. Thus Abulafia calls himself sometimes רמאל and sometimes זכריהו, because the total of the letters in each of these words equals 248, which is likewise the total of the letters in his own given name אברהם. In one place, desiring to call himself "Berechiah," he misspells it ברכהיהו in order to make it aggregate 248 (Steinschneider, "Cat. Munich," No. 409). He also employs the processes of *notarikon* (regarding each letter in a word as the initial of some other word, and so making of it an acrostic), of *temurah* (substitution of one letter for another), and of *ziruf* (connecting various letters of the same word). He claims to have

derived his system of letter-symbols from Moses Nahmanides; but he probably drew it, especially the gematria and the play with the names of God and the necessary attendant ascetic life and contemplation—**כוונה**—from the German mysticism of Eleazar of Worms. His view of prophetism or the prophetic gift as the highest goal seems to indicate the influence of Judah ha-Levi's "Cuzari," but his idea of the nature of prophecy itself is rather in accord with Maimonides.

Abulafia's influence upon the further development of the Cabala was rather of a retarding than a fostering nature. He gave it a visionary turn. Owing to his influence there was a growing tendency to juggle with the names of God and angels, and to employ gematria in its most diverse forms. He was the first one, too, to allow the Christian idea of the Trinity to show a faint glimmer in the Cabala.

Abulafia began his fruitful literary activity in 1271; he himself states the number of his writings to be twenty-six, of which twenty-two are "prophetical." Of these the following have been printed: "Sefer ha-Ot" (in the "Grätz-Jubelschrift," Hebrew part, p. 65); **וזהו ליהודה** ("And this is for Judah"), consisting of a reply to Solomon ben Adret's attack, in Jellinek, "Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik," p. 13; "Sheba' Netivot ha-Torah" (The Seven Ways of the Law), and "Imre Shefer," in Jellinek, "Philosophie und Kabbala"; a part of his autobiography from his "Ozar Eden Ganuz" (The Hidden Treasure of Eden), in Jellinek, "B. H.," iii. introduction, p. xl. Jellinek, in his preface to "Sefer ha-Ot," says "In the Spaniard Abraham Abulafia of the thirteenth century Essenism of old found its resurrection. Preaching asceticism and the highest potentiality of the spirit through communion with God, effected by a perfect knowledge and use of His names, he was thoroughly convinced of his prophetic mission, and considered himself to be the God-sent Messiah and Son of God. He differs, however, from the Messiahs who have risen at different times in

his many-sided philosophical training as well as in his perfect unselfishness and sincerity. He addresses himself not to the masses, but to the educated and enlightened, and does not confine his mission to his coreligionists, but is filled with the desire to extend it to the adherents of the Christian church also. It seems that, for the sake of influencing these, he tried to construct a Trinitarian system, though it was a Trinity in form merely, and did not touch the essence of God's personality. Before his vision stood the ideal of a unity of faith, the realization of which he longed to bring about. Imbued with this spirit, his disciples worked in Spain and Italy, emphasizing still more the Trinitarian idea while treating of the 'Ten Sefirot' in order to win the adherents of the Church. Hence the terms Father, Mother, Son, and Holy Ghost, borrowed from the Christian creed, in the cabalistic literature of the thirteenth century. In order to understand Abulafia psychologically and judge him correctly and without bias in the light of history, it must be borne in mind that his cradle was in Spain, the home of religious ecstasy, and that the age in which he lived was that of the Crusades, so favorable to mystic speculation, an age in which many longed to see the barriers separating Judaism, Christianity, and Islam broken down, and in which the Messianic hopes of the Jews found new nourishment in many hearts." K.

Jellinek gives a list of Abulafia's works in the introduction to "Philosophie und Kabbala," p. 7; but it needs correction from Steinschneider, "Catalog," 2d ed., No. 285 *et passim*, Munich. Abulafia's writings are not wanting in excellent ideas and beautiful illustrations, but these are so overgrown with mystic obscurity and abstruseness that a perusal of them is not very edifying.

Bibliography: M. H. Landauer, in *Literaturblatt des Orients*, 1845, pp. 381 *et seq.* (this scholar disinterred Abulafia from his long obscurity);

Jellinek (who devoted a great deal of study to this author), in the works already mentioned and in his *Beiträge zur Gesch. der Kabbala*, pt. ii.;

Steinschneider, *Catalog der Hebr. Handschriften der Staatsbibliothek zu München*, 2d ed., Nos. 28 *et alia*, containing references to *Hebr. Bibl.*;

Grätz, *Gesch. d. Juden*, vii. 7;

Bloch, *Gesch. d. Entwicklung d. Kabbala*, pp. 46 *et seq.*;

Vogelstein and Rieger, *Gesch. d. Juden in Rom*, i. 247 *et seq.* (needs some emendation).P. B.

Ḥayyim Abulafia

Originally published: between 1901-1906

From:

http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view_friendly.jsp?artid=699&letter=A