



PATHS *of*
WISDOM

Cabala in the

**Golden
Dawn**

Tradition

Third Edition

JOHN MICHAEL GREER

AEON

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Dawn Tradition**

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First published 1996 by Llewellyn Publications

This edition published 2017 by

Aeon Books Ltd

118 Finchley Road

London NW3 5HT

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-90465-883-2

Cover and page design by Alex Thornton, www.alexexala.net

Printed in Great Britain

www.aeonbooks.co.uk

Dedication

For S. and R., companions on the journey

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INTRODUCTION

THE HERMETIC CABALA

There was a time, not all that long ago, when the current renaissance of magic in the Western world seemed unthinkable to most people. The esoteric traditions of the West had been banished from sight by the dominant power of a materialist science and technology, and were preserved only in a shadowy underworld of magical lodges about which outsiders knew nothing and usually cared less. In the arenas where ideas were shaped and marketed—the universities, the churches, the media, and the broader realm of public opinion—magic was seen as something done only by primitive tribes, illiterate yokels, and lunatics: a folly civilized people had outgrown.

Times change. Three hundred years of technological advances have shown the other side of the promise of science far too clearly; a culture of supposedly rational scientific planning and action now threatens to produce a world better suited to machines than to human beings, a world in which statistics are the sole reality and efficiency is the only value. In response, a growing number of people have begun to look for less unbalanced, more human approaches to life, new or old ways of meeting the world in a deeper and more fulfilling manner. Some have turned to Eastern traditions, or to the teachings of surviving tribal peoples; some have ventured in wholly new directions; and others, increasingly, have begun to rediscover the ancient wisdom traditions of the Western world itself.

This book is about one form those Western wisdom traditions have taken—one system of theory, experience and practice which is directed toward a deeper understanding of ourselves, and our world. That form or system is called the Hermetic Cabala: more precisely, the Golden Dawn tradition of the Hermetic Cabala.

These are hardly household words to most people nowadays, and it's worth taking a moment to talk about their meaning. What, then, is the Cabala, magical or otherwise? What is, or was, the Golden Dawn? And—perhaps the most important of all—what exactly is meant, in this age, by that troublesome word, 'tradition,' and why does it matter?

The Cabala

The word "Cabala"—also spelled "Kabbalah," "Qabalah," or any of a good half dozen other ways in English—comes from the Hebrew word קבלה,

QBLH, “oral tradition.” In its beginnings, the Cabala was a mystical offshoot of Judaism, a way of interpreting the traditions of Jewish worship and life that went beyond the outward observance of law and ritual to seek for direct personal experience of the spiritual side of things. The traditional Jewish Cabala focused, and still focuses, on interpreting the body of Jewish scripture according to special, mystical senses, and its practices are deeply interwoven with those of ordinary Jewish religious life.

The origins of the Cabala are still uncertain. The first definitely Cabalistic writings date from about 1150, but it is notoriously hard to pin down an oral tradition by way of written sources! Whether the sources of the Cabala are to be found primarily in older Jewish mystical teachings, or whether they include material from outside Judaism, is another point still very much subject to dispute. Cabalistic writings offer little guidance here; according to many of these accounts, the Cabala dates back all the way to the Garden of Eden, where it was revealed to Adam by the angels.

During the course of its history, though, the Cabala came to the attention of people with interests reaching far outside the realm of Orthodox Judaism. The Renaissance, a time of renewal for so many things, saw a major revival of magic—the traditional art of shaping the hidden aspects of human awareness and experience. The surviving magical traditions of the Middle Ages were studied by some of the most brilliant minds of the age, and compared to a wide range of rediscovered wisdom teachings from the ancient world. To many of this new breed of Renaissance magicians, these methods of magical practice had potentials that went far beyond the ordinary understanding of magic: they saw magic as a way of personal and collective transformation that could open up the deeps of spiritual experience to the consciousness of the individual.

The Renaissance magicians’ quest for ancient knowledge came across the Cabala early on, and it was found that many of the ideas central to Cabalistic thought could be combined with magical practice to form a new and powerful synthesis. Into the resulting fusion went compatible material from other sources. The most influential of these was the philosophy found in a collection of ancient writings attributed to the legendary Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus, from whose name the word “Hermetic” derived; additional sources included ancient Greek Neoplatonic philosophy, the mystical mathematics of Pythagoras, the traditions of alchemy, and a whole series of suppressed aspects of Christianity from ancient Gnosticism to the radical theologies of the late Renaissance itself. The result, evolved over several centuries, was a system of philosophy and practice which can be called

the Hermetic Cabala, a system which became the foundation for most of the teachings of Western magic from the Renaissance up to the present day.

The Golden Dawn

Many of these teachings, along with an astonishing array of odds and ends of lost knowledge, were gathered up in the late nineteenth century by an organization of English magicians known as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Like the Cabala itself, the Golden Dawn has murky origins, and its own account of its beginnings is a Gothic tale featuring mysterious manuscripts in cipher and an untraceable German adept, borrowing many of the clichés of the occult novels of the time. Its real genesis seems to have been the work of two men, William Wynn Westcott and Samuel Mathers, both of them Freemasons and practicing magicians with a knack for research and synthesis, who assembled the basic framework of the Order's teachings and drew together a group of talented men and women around it.

Whatever its background, though, the system of magic and mysticism devised by the Golden Dawn's leading lights ranks, in scope, complexity and power, as one of the world's major esoteric teachings. One measure of this lies in its sheer scale. An adept of the Golden Dawn, at the completion of the full course of studies laid out in the Order's papers, was expected to have studied and practiced nearly every branch of occult knowledge known to the Western world, starting with the foundations of Cabalistic and alchemical theory and going from there into ritual magic, clairvoyance, astrology, geomancy, Tarot divination, practical alchemy, the design and consecration of talismans, and more. All these studies were linked together into a coherent structure of theory and practice, founded on the teachings of the Hermetic Cabala, and this was taught step by step to members as they advanced through the different Grades or levels of the Order.

The original Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn blew apart in the first of a series of ruinous schisms in 1900, as its organizational structure proved too brittle to handle the pressures of ordinary human misbehavior. From the ashes rose a series of successor Orders, some following the same course of studies developed by the original Order, others striking out in new directions. In time, much of the once-secret teaching material was published, most notably by Israel Regardie through his massive collection of the Order's papers, *The Golden Dawn*. These publications, along with those of major successor Orders such as Dion Fortune's Fraternity of the Inner Light and Paul Foster Case's Builders of the Adytum, have made the system of magic devised by the Golden Dawn probably the best known of all magical traditions in the Western world.

To speak of a tradition in occult terms nowadays, though, is to court a good deal of confusion. The word routinely gets used as a synonym for “system” or even “style,” sometimes as a deliberate marketing ploy; the Such-and-Such Tradition sounds much more important and dignified than “some ideas I came up with this Thursday,” especially when the latter is a more accurate description! The Golden Dawn tradition is certainly a system, and in a certain sense it defines a style as well—but it goes beyond this, in some important ways.

The word “tradition” comes ultimately from the Latin words *trans*, across, and *dare*, to give; *traditio* meant something given across or, as we would say, handed down. Central to the meaning of both words, Latin and English, is that a tradition is something that is passed on or passed down among people. It is not an individual creation, but a collective one, and usually one developed over time.

Habits of thinking common in our culture tend to be harsh on things of this sort; we tend to value what is original and novel, sometimes to the exclusion of any other factors at all. In the realm of magic, as elsewhere, these attitudes have resulted in a good deal of time spent reinventing the wheel, and a fair number of systems that treat current cultural prejudices as though they were universal truths. More subtly, any system of thought created by a single person is all but certain to share that person’s strengths and weaknesses, imbalances and blind spots. In a system of magical philosophy and practice that aims at personal growth, this can be a serious defect, as it risks reinforcing problems instead of resolving them.

One way to sidestep many of these difficulties is the way of tradition. A traditional system, in the sense of this word we have explored, is the work of many minds and hands over many years, and its imbalances are most unlikely to match those of any given student—or any given age. Followed intelligently (as opposed to rigidly or unthinkingly!) a traditional system can provide a more balanced and healthier framework for the sometimes difficult, sometimes risky, always unexpected path of inward transformation.

How To Use This Book

The heart of the Golden Dawn tradition, the core around which all the intricacies of the Order’s work gathered, is a particular approach to the system of theory and practice we have called the Hermetic Cabala. The purpose of this book is to offer a way into the Hermetic Cabala of the Golden Dawn tradition to the novice who wonders what it’s all about, the practicing magician who seeks a grasp of some of the deeper issues of his or her art, the adept of a

different system who wishes to sample the richness of this one—or, really, to anyone interested in the magical Cabala for any reason. The material given in this book can be studied and practiced by itself, or combined with material from other books on magic; certainly any of the wide range of Golden Dawn-derived methods can be combined with it usefully.

For the beginner, the task of learning the ways of the Hermetic Cabala can offer a significant challenge; there is a great deal of material to be learned, and some unfamiliar ways of looking at the world which need to be absorbed. There are at least two ways of handling the learning process, one traditional, one less so.

The Traditional Approach

In the days when the material we'll be covering was a secret tradition passed down within the lodges of the Golden Dawn and its successor orders, students received the theoretical material contained in this book a bit at a time, and in most cases these same students were practicing basic ritual and meditative work from the very beginning of their studies. Readers who would like to follow a version of this procedure might wish to use these guidelines:

The basic theory of the Tree of Life, the central diagram of the Hermetic Cabala, is given in Chapters One and Two. These should be read first, and the material they cover should be learned as thoroughly as possible; it forms the foundation on which the whole structure of the Golden Dawn's Cabala is built.

The basic principles of practice are covered in Chapter Ten, which should be read next. In many ways, this is the most important chapter in the book.

The first set of practices in this system is the Lesser Ritual of the Pentagram, given in Chapter Eleven, and the first stage of meditation, given in Chapter Thirteen. It is best to read each of these chapters at least as far as the practice in question before beginning, because many of the basic concepts of ritual and meditation are covered in them.

These five readings cover the essentials of the system, and give the novice an opportunity to begin the practical work of magical training at once. The rest of Part I of the book (Chapters Three-Six) should be studied next, and after that the symbolism of the Cabala, which is covered in Part II (Chapters Seven-Nine.) The rest of the material on magical practice, which makes up Part Three (Chapters Ten-Fifteen), can be read at any time.

The Direct Approach

On the other hand, it is entirely possible to begin work on the material in this book by starting at the beginning and reading straight through to the end. This approach has the advantage that theory and symbolism are covered

before the practices based on them are introduced; it has the disadvantage of placing several hundred pages of reading before the first steps in magical practice—and the practice, in a very real sense, is of more importance than any amount of theory.

A Note on Sources and Spellings

There is no one version of the Hermetic Cabala accepted by everyone who works within the Golden Dawn tradition. One sign of a living system is that it grows and changes, and growth and change will inevitably lead different people in different directions. As a result, even the most basic details of theory, symbolism and practice vary from one teacher, book, or school to another.

The approach to the Hermetic Cabala given in *Paths of Wisdom* is based closely on materials developed by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The Golden Dawn's teachings, though, were in some places a hodgepodge, in others self-contradictory, and in still others simply incorrect. I have accordingly made changes where this was necessary, and discussed those changes where that is appropriate. The students who worked with this material in draft form as a correspondence course helped shape it through their questions, comments, and responses, and a handful of others—above all the two to whom this book is dedicated—played a central role in giving it what virtues it possesses.

A few other sources used in *Paths of Wisdom* should be noted here. Spellings and meanings of Hebrew words have been drawn from *Godwin's Cabalistic Encyclopedia* by David Godwin, and the meanings of angelic names are from Gustav Davidson's *A Dictionary Of Angels*—two books that belong on any Cabalist's bookshelf. On the thornier question of the interpretation of the "Path Texts" from the traditional "32 Paths of Wisdom," the translation by William Wynn Westcott (traditional in the Golden Dawn) has been used for the most part, but I have also referred to the translation by the late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan.

Finally, I would like to mention the issue (if it is an issue) of spelling. It has been suggested that in the magical community nowadays, a tradition consists of any three people who all spell the words "Cabala" and "magic" the same way. A great deal of importance has been attached to one or another variation; different spellings have been used as something not far from battle-flags in squabbles between groups. Be that as it may, *Paths of Wisdom* uses the standard dictionary spellings of both these words. Both are (or were) common English terms, and it seems reasonable to treat them as such.