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William J. Hamblin

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** “Everything Is Everything”: Was Joseph Smith Influenced by Kabbalah?

**Author(s)** William J. Hamblin

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**Abstract** Review of “Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection” (1994), by Lance S. Owens.

Lance S. Owens. "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection." *Dialogue* 27/3 (1994): 117-94.

Reviewed by William J. Hamblin

### **"Everything Is Everything": Was Joseph Smith Influenced by Kabbalah?**

For everything has everything in itself, and sees everything in everything else, so that everything is everywhere, and everything is everything and each thing is everything.

Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.8.4<sup>1</sup>

The Mormon History Association recently awarded Lance S. Owens's "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection" its Best Article Award for 1995.<sup>2</sup> With such an imprimatur the

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<sup>1</sup> Translation mine. The Loeb translation reads: "Each therefore has everything in itself and sees all things in every other, so that all are everywhere and each and everyone is all." Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1978-84), 5:248-49. Stephen MacKenna's translation reads: "And each of them contains all within itself, and at the same time sees all in every other, so that everywhere there is all, and all is all and each all." *The Enneads* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 414. I would like to thank Becky Schulthies for assistance in researching this paper, and George Mitton and Daniel Peterson for helpful comments. I would also like to thank Robert L. Millet, Stephen E. Robinson, and Larry E. Dahl.

<sup>2</sup> All parenthetical citations are to Owens's article unless otherwise indicated. A shorter, popularized version of Owens's paper appeared as "Joseph Smith: America's Hermetic Prophet," *Gnosis: A Journal of the Western Inner Traditions* 35 (Spring 1995): 56-64. It is interesting to compare Owens's presentation of his theory to a non-Mormon, New Age audience with that found in *Dialogue*. The Mormon History Association Best Article Award is mentioned in *The Mormon History Association Newsletter* (Summer 1995): 1. Recently, D. Michael Quinn has uncritically accepted Owens's thesis; see *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1994), 265 n. 1, 639, 643, 649.

article deserves a closer critical evaluation than it has apparently heretofore received.<sup>3</sup> Owens's basic thesis is that

Through his associations with ceremonial magic as a young treasure seer, [Joseph] Smith contacted symbols and lore taken directly from Kabbalah. In his prophetic translation of sacred writ, his hermeneutic method was in nature Kabbalistic. With his initiation into Masonry, he entered a tradition born of the Hermetic-Kabbalistic tradition. These associations culminated in Nauvoo, the period of his most important doctrinal and ritual innovations. During these last years, he enjoyed friendship with a European Jew [Alexander Neibaur] well-versed in the standard Kabbalistic works and possibly possessing in Nauvoo an unusual collection of Kabbalistic books and manuscripts. By 1844 Smith not only was cognizant of Kabbalah, but enlisted theosophic concepts taken directly from its principal text in his most important doctrinal sermon, the "King Follett Discourse." (p. 119)

Although important elements of his attempt to link Joseph Smith to kabbalism are new, Owens's overall conclusions broadly parallel those found in D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* and John L. Brooke's recent *The Refiner's Fire*.<sup>4</sup> Owens feels that Brooke's work is "a well constructed summary of this little understood intersection" of hermeticism, alchemy, and radical Christianity.<sup>5</sup> He sees Brooke's work as "a valuable contribution" showing that "the [hermetic/alchemical] tradition's parallels in Mormonism are many and striking." For Owens, Brooke's is "a seminal work, a study that will be considered by every scholar who henceforth attempts to retell the story

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<sup>3</sup> Owens anticipated a "violent response from traditionalists" (p. 119), perhaps tacitly recognizing that his thesis is not immune to criticism.

<sup>4</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987); John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Lance S. Owens, "The Divine Transmutation," review of *The Refiner's Fire*, by John L. Brooke, *Dialogue* 27/4 (1994): 187.



of Joseph Smith."<sup>6</sup> Owens feels Brooke "draws similar conclusions" to his own (p. 160 n. 83). However, neither Quinn's, Brooke's, nor Owens's methods and conclusions are beyond criticism, and Owens's work suffers from many of the same problems found in Brooke.<sup>7</sup> As this study will show, because of numerous problems with evidence and analysis, none of Owens's major propositions have been substantiated.

### Problems with Sources

Owens's article begins with a lengthy introduction to the "occult" sciences.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, over half of his article (pp. 117–54) is a rather pedestrian review of secondary sources on the matter.

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<sup>6</sup> Owens, "The Divine Transmutation," 188, 190. Owens is not entirely positive about Brooke's work. He criticizes Brooke for "pursuing the trail of counterfeiting" (p. 190), and for "entirely ignor[ing] the less world-affirmative elements of both classical and Renaissance hermeticism" (p. 188). Nonetheless, Owens's overall review is quite positive. Cf. Owens's comments in a similar vein in "America's Hermetic Prophet," 63–64. Owens does not cite Brooke in his article, since Brooke's work appeared only as Owens's article was going to press (p. 160 n. 83). As will be noted below, Owens relies on Quinn extensively and uncritically.

<sup>7</sup> On Brooke, see William J. Hamblin, Daniel C. Peterson, and George L. Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace: or Loftes Tryk Goes to Cambridge," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 3–58. An abridged version of this essay appeared in *BYU Studies* 34/4 (1994–95): 167–81, along with a review by Davis Bitton on pages 182–92. Unpublished reviews by Grant Underwood ("A Brooke Review") and David Whitaker ("Throwing Water on Brooke's Fire") at the 1995 Mormon History Association were also quite negative, as were those by Philip L. Barlow, "Decoding Mormonism," *Christian Century* (17 January 1996): 52–55, and Richard L. Bushman, "The Secret History of Mormonism," *Sunstone* (March 1996): 66–70. It is interesting to note that the positive reviews of Brooke's book tend to be from people who are not specialists in Mormon studies. For reviews of Quinn, see Stephen E. Robinson, *BYU Studies* 27/4 (1987): 88–95; and Stephen D. Ricks and Daniel C. Peterson, "The Mormon as Magus," *Sunstone* (January 1988): 38–39; a detailed review of Quinn's *Early Mormonism* awaits the second edition, promised for winter 1996 (*Signature Books 1996 Catalog*, 8).

<sup>8</sup> It is unfortunate that Owens uses the misleading term *occult* to describe the esoteric tradition. In modern parlance *occult* often conjures up images of demonic black magic, while its original meaning was merely "hidden" or "esoteric." For a late twentieth-century audience kabbalism and hermeticism are much better described as esoteric rather than occult.

Unfortunately, the background material presented by Owens is often dated or misrepresented. Owens's use of sources, both primary and secondary, is problematic at a number of levels. First, he ignores nearly all earlier writings by Latter-day Saint scholars on the significance of the possible parallels between Latter-day Saint ideas and the Western esoteric tradition. There is, in fact, a growing body of Latter-day Saint literature that has examined some of these alleged parallels, and presented possible interpretations of the relationship between the esoteric tradition and the gospel. Why is Nibley not even mentioned by Owens, despite the fact that he has been writing on this subject for four decades?<sup>9</sup> Robert F. Smith's discussion of many of these issues is ignored.<sup>10</sup> A recent publication, *Temples in the Ancient World*, contains much material that could have been considered by Owens.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps Owens feels that such studies by "traditionalists" (i.e., believers [p. 119]) are not worthy of his attention. If so, it still provides him no excuse for his failure to consult many of the most recent and important works on the Western esoteric tradition

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<sup>9</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, "Prophets and Gnostics," and "Prophets and Mystics," in *The World and the Prophets*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987 [1st ed. 1954]), 63-70, 98-107; "One Eternal Round: The Hermetic Version," in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 379-433, a speech originally presented in 1989 that covers much of the same ground as does Owens, though in less detail and with different conclusions. Nibley's forthcoming book, also tentatively entitled *One Eternal Round*, will further develop this theme. Much of Nibley's other work also abounds with references to early Gnosticism, which has important links to the hermetic and alchemical traditions of late antiquity.

<sup>10</sup> Robert F. Smith, "Oracles and Talismans, Forgery and Pansophia: Joseph Smith, Jr. as a Renaissance Magus." This 191-page unpublished manuscript (dated August 1987) was widely circulated through the Latter-day Saint "underground." Although idiosyncratic, it is informed and perceptive and contains a number of interesting ideas. It should at least have been consulted by someone studying the relationship between Mormonism and the esoteric traditions.

<sup>11</sup> Donald W. Parry, ed., *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994); my article, "Temple Motifs in Jewish Mysticism," 440-76, examines some of the antecedents to Kabbalah and briefly alludes to the possible connections between Kabbalah and Masonry, 461-63. Cf. Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace," 55 n. 95 and 57 n. 98, for additional references to Latter-day Saint studies that should have been consulted by Owens.

by leading non-Mormon scholars. Despite the fact that serious academic study of the esoteric tradition is a relatively recent phenomenon, many of Owens's secondary sources are over a quarter of a century old—some over a century old.

The absence of any discussion of astrology is interesting, since one of Owens's major sources, D. Michael Quinn, lays some stress on it.<sup>12</sup> Does Owens feel that Quinn's claims of astrological influences on Joseph Smith are unfounded? If so, he should have mentioned this. For his understanding of Christian Kabbalah, Owens relies almost entirely on two books by Frances Yates, both of which are nearly two decades old and neither of which deals directly with Christian kabbalism (pp. 127–34).<sup>13</sup> Owens's bibliography on hermeticism is equally inadequate, again citing only Yates (pp. 129–34). He quotes the *Hermetica* either in the dated and inadequate translation of Walter Scott, or from secondary sources.<sup>14</sup> None of the recent, often revolutionary studies are

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<sup>12</sup> Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 58–66, 71–78, 213–19, and other references in the index.

<sup>13</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge, 1979), and *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). Both of these books discuss Christian Kabbalah, but it is not their focus. Basic introductory works on Christian kabbalism not consulted by Owens include: Joseph L. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944); Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Antoine Faivre and Frederick Tristram, *Kabbalistes chrétiens* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979); François Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la renaissance*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Arma Artis, 1985). For a basic introduction, see G. Mallery Masters, "Renaissance Kabbalah," in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ed. Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (New York: Crossroads, 1995), 132–53, with bibliography on 151–53. On the general intellectual context in which Christian kabbalism arose, see Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1983), especially 71–98.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Scott, ed. and trans., *Hermetica*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924–36; reprint, Boston: Shambala, 1985). Owens fails to note that this source is a reprint of a sixty-year-old work, giving the impression that it represents recent scholarship. Since Scott worked before the establishment of the critical edition—A. D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière, ed. and trans., *Corpus Hermeticum*, 4 vols., 3rd. ed. (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1972 [1st ed. 1946–54])—his translation is unreliable. As Brian P. Copenhaver notes, "scholars have



referenced.<sup>15</sup> On John Dee, Owens's only source is the three-decades-old work by Peter French (p. 133), again ignoring the recent flourishing of Dee studies.<sup>16</sup> Rosicrucian studies fair no better. Owens would have us believe that "the best recent scholarly summary of the Rosicrucian movement is Francis [*sic*] Yates" (p. 138 n. 48), ignoring the recent revolution in Rosicrucian studies.<sup>17</sup> Even in his discussion of Freemasonry (pp. 149–54),

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generally confirmed Reitzenstein's harsh verdict on the text [of Scott], which is a jungle of excisions, interpolations and transpositions so distantly related to the manuscripts that Scott's translation can only be regarded a translation of Scott, not of the Hermetic authors," *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), liii. Note, however, that Scott's three volumes of commentary "remain indispensable" (*ibid.*). Owens's main secondary source is Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, a superb though now dated study.

<sup>15</sup> Two indispensable new studies are Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), and Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, which provides a brief intellectual history of the study of the Hermetica, with full bibliography (pp. xlv–lix). Elizabeth Ann Ambrose, *The Hermetica: An Annotated Bibliography* (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1992) is also important.

<sup>16</sup> Peter French, *The World of an Elizabethan Magus* (New York: Dorset, 1972). While this is an excellent work, much more has been done since: Nicholas Clulee, *John Dee's Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1988); William H. Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); R. W. Barone, "The Reputation of John Dee: A Critical Appraisal" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1989). Recent editions of primary sources on Dee's esoterica include Gerald Suster, *John Dee: Essential Readings* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1986); Christopher Whitby, ed., *John Dee's Actions with Spirits*, 2 vols. (New York: Garland, 1991). I would like to thank George Mitton for assistance on these and several subsequent notes.

<sup>17</sup> Owens refers to Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1972). At a recent conference on the Rosicrucian Enlightenment (Cesky Krumlov, Czech Republic, September 1995), a leading Rosicrucian scholar, Adam McLean, noted that Yates's work, though pioneering and brilliant, is now a quarter century old and is being superseded by the discovery and interpretation of many new documents (lecture given 11 September 1995, tape recording in the possession of George L. Mitton). Especially important is the work of Carlos Gilly and others at the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica at Amsterdam, which is expected to result in major new studies on Rosicrucian origins. Provisionally, see Carlos Gilly, ed., *Cimelia Rhodostaurtica: Die Rosenkreuzer im Spiegel der zwischen 1610 und 1660 entstandenen Handschriften und Drucke* (Amsterdam: Pelikaan, 1995). See also studies by Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology and Rituals of an Occult Order*, 2nd

which is quite important to his overall thesis, Owens relies on dated studies and late nineteenth-century Masonic mythologies (p. 149 n. 65),<sup>18</sup> ignoring the seminal recent work of Stevenson and others.<sup>19</sup>

Owens's failure to use the broad range of recent studies on the esoteric tradition is compounded by an occasional uncritical evaluation of the limited secondary sources he does use.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, for the most part, Owens's account of the Western esoteric tradition does not rely on primary sources, or even translations of primary sources, but on secondary summaries, which he often misunderstands or misrepresents. This unfamiliarity with both the primary and secondary sources may in part explain the

ed. (London: Crucible, 1987), and his *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason* (Leiden: Brill, 1992). For additional bibliography see also Roland Edighoffer, "Rosicrucianism: From the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century," in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, 186–209.

<sup>18</sup> Owens's major sources are Douglas Knoop and G. Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1949); Robert F. Gould, *The History of Freemasonry*, 4 vols. (New York: Yorston, 1885–89); Robert Macoy, *General History, Cyclopaedia and Dictionary of Freemasonry* (New York: Masonic, 1872).

<sup>19</sup> David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: The Scottish Century 1590–1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and his *The First Freemasons: Scotland's Early Lodges and Their Members* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989); John Hamill, *The Craft: A History of English Freemasonry* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1986); R. William Weisberger, *Speculative Freemasonry and the Enlightenment* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1993); Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> Owens maintains that "Smith's best overall biography remains Fawn M. Brodie" ("America's Hermetic Prophet," 64 n. 3), in spite of the negative reviews the book has received. For a semicentennial retrospective analysis of Fawn Brodie, with full references to reviews, see Louis C. Midgley, "F. M. Brodie—'The Fasting Hermit and Very Saint of Ignorance': A Biographer and Her Legend," pages 147–230 in this issue of *FARMS Review of Books*. Note the warning of Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, 271 n. 18—hardly a Latter-day Saint "apologist"—"Some may wonder why I rarely cite Brodie. . . . Brodie's biography is flawed by its inattention to crucial archival materials and by her penchant for filtering evidence and analysis through the perspective that the Mormon prophet was either a 'parapath' who believed his own lies or a fraud." Other examples of Owens's uncritical approach to both primary and secondary sources will be given below.

numerous errors that occur throughout his article (discussed below).

I am certainly not advocating bibliography padding,<sup>21</sup> but the absence of a number of important recent studies from Owens's notes—many of which transform our understanding of the issues Owens raises—should alert readers to the need to approach many of his interpretations skeptically and carefully.<sup>22</sup>

### Errors of Fact

The need for care and skepticism is confirmed by the numerous errors of fact that occur in Owens's general history of esotericism in the West.

- Owens maintains that Christian Kabbalah began "first with the Florentine court of Lorenzo de Medici at the end of the fifteenth century" (p. 120). However, according to Scholem, "historically, Christian Kabbalah sprang from two sources. The first was the christological speculations of a number of Jewish converts who are known to us from the end of the 13th century until the period of the Spanish expulsion [of the Jews]."<sup>23</sup> The second and most important source was Pico della Mirandola's circle in the late fifteenth-century Platonic Academy of the Medicis at Florence, mentioned by Owens. Owens's claim that "Jewish Kabbalists . . . assisted [Pico della Mirandola] in translating a considerable portion of Kabbalistic literature into Latin" (p. 130) is misleading. In fact Pico took no part in the translation, which was largely the

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<sup>21</sup> Particularly egregious examples can be found in Quinn's *The Mormon Hierarchy* and his "Ezra Taft Benson and Mormon Political Conflicts," *Dialogue* 26/2 (1993): 1–87.

<sup>22</sup> It is also clear from his work that Owens does not read Latin, Aramaic, or Hebrew, *sine qua non* for the study of Kabbalah and the Western esoteric traditions. As will be noted below, this is most significant when Owens is forced to rely on an early twentieth-century English translation of the *Zohar* in attempting to understand what Alexander Neibaur and Joseph Smith could have allegedly learned from the original Aramaic.

<sup>23</sup> Gershom G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), 197. Thus the origins of the earliest elements of Christian Kabbalah are nearly contemporary with the origins of the movement as a whole. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala*, 17–19, and Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens*, 2–23, mention several pre-Pico Christian kabbalists. The best study of Pico is Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*.



work of “the very learned [Jewish] convert [to Christianity] Samuel ben Nissim Abulfaraj . . . also known as Flavius Mithradates.”<sup>24</sup>

- Owens asserts—with no evidence—that “the *Tabula smaragdina* [Emerald Tablet] probably dates to the first or second century C.E.” (p. 132 n. 31). In reality, “the *Kitab Sirr al-Khaliqa wa Şan‘at al-Tabi‘a* (Book of the Secret of Creation and the Art of Nature) . . . contains the first occurrence of the *tabula smaragdina* (Ar. *lawh al-zumurrud*).” This text is part of a group of esoteric and alchemical works associated with Jabir ibn Hayyan (Latin: Geber) dating to the ninth—not the first—century.<sup>25</sup>

- Owens makes an unsupported claim that the alchemists’ “‘philosopher’s stone’ [was] the antecedent of Joseph Smith’s ‘seer’s stone’” (p. 136). In fact, the philosopher’s stone (*lapis philosophorum*) was thought to have been composed of primordial matter, the *quintessentia*—the fifth element after air, water, fire, and earth. Unlike Joseph’s seer stone, it was not really a literal “stone” at all, but primordial matter (*materia prima*)—“this stone therefore is no stone,” as notes a famous alchemical text.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes described as a powder the color of sulfur, the philosopher’s stone was used for the transmutation of matter and had little or nothing to do with divination. Indeed, the use of stones and mirrors for divination antedates the origin of the idea of the

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<sup>24</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 197. The translation by Flavius Mithradates totaled some 5500 manuscript pages, of which about 3000 survive in archives; Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter*, 10. These materials were never published.

<sup>25</sup> Syed N. Haq, *Names, Natures and Things: The Alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan and his Kitab al-Ahjar (Book of Stones)* (Boston: Kluwer, 1994), 29; cf. 204. Didier Kahn, *Hermes Trismegiste: La “Table d’Emeraude” et sa tradition alchimique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994), provides a modern study of the various permutations the Emerald Tablet has undergone. The classical study is J. Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der hermetischen Literatur* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1926). For general background on Jabir, see “Djabir b. Hayyan,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. B. Lewis et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 2:357–59.

<sup>26</sup> *Turba Philosophorum*, cited in C. G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 42–43.

philosopher's stone. There is no relationship beyond the fact that both happen to be called a stone.<sup>27</sup>

- Owens's description of the "blossoming [of Kabbalah] in twelfth-century Spain" is misleading. Kabbalism originated in late twelfth-century Provence in southern France; Kabbalah in Spain "blossomed" in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>28</sup>

- Owens maintains that the "symbols [of the sun, moon, and stars] combined on the façade of the Nauvoo Temple to embody in sacred architecture a vision of Divinity *unique* to Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, and alchemy" (p. 137, emphasis added). Furthermore, after discussing symbolism of the sun, moon, angels, trumpets, sacred wedding, beehives, and the all-seeing eye, Owens asserts—without even the semblance of a footnote—that "these are the propagating sources of the symbols finally carved in stone upon Joseph's Nauvoo Temple. To this Hermetic-alchemical tradition and its *unique* vision *alone* did [these symbols] pertain, from it *alone* came an assertion of their sacred import. Early Mormonism's affinity for and incorporation of the same symbolic motifs strongly evidences its *intrinsic* link with the Hermetic tradition" (p. 145, emphasis added). Unique? Alone? Intrinsic?

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<sup>27</sup> For general descriptions of the philosopher's stone, see Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, 42–48, and index under *lapis* (p. 672) and *prima materia* (p. 681); Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), esp. 160–68; Richard Cavendish, *The Black Arts* (New York: Capricorn, 1967), 143–80, gives a popularized summary. Divination through reflective surfaces is much older than the idea of the philosopher's stone; see Theodore Besterman, *Crystal-Gazing: A Study in the History, Distribution, Theory and Practice of Scrying* (Hyde Park: University Books, 1965), 9–15, 40–51, 72–91, for references to evidence, much of which dates earlier than alchemy and the philosopher's stone. John Dee and Edward Kelly used an Aztec obsidian divination mirror (now in the British museum) for scrying (*ibid.*, 20–21). Ancient Olmecs used polished iron mirrors for divination; see John B. Carlson, "Olmec Concave Iron-Ore Mirrors: The Aesthetics of a Lithic Technology and the Lord of the Mirror," in *The Olmec and Their Neighbors*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1981), 117–47, esp. 126–27. See Justin Kerr and Bruce M. White, *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* (Princeton: The Art Museum of Princeton University, 1996), 233, 254, for fine color photographs. These pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican examples could hardly have been influenced by the philosopher's stone.

<sup>28</sup> Gershom G. Scholem, *Origins of Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

Really? Owens seems to be claiming that no other religions ever used the sun, moon, stars, trumpets, and angels as sacred symbols. Can none of these things be found, for example, in the Bible? And was there really an all-seeing eye or a beehive on the Nauvoo Temple? If so they seem to have escaped the attention of all art historians.<sup>29</sup>

- Owens's unsubstantiated claim that "Albertus Magnus (1193–1280) became an adept of alchemy and authored numerous alchemical works" (p. 135) is misleading. Albertus's third book of his *Mineralium* does discuss alchemy—as any medieval book on natural science would. But nearly all other alchemical works ascribed to Albertus are pseudepigraphic.<sup>30</sup> *Contra* Owens (p. 152), the alchemical *Philosophia naturalis* was not written by Albertus, but is a pseudepigraphon.

- Thus Owens's claim that Albertus Magnus provides "one of the earliest allegorical representations of the symbols . . . [of the] compass and the square" (p. 152, fig. 10) is simply wrong.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Laurel B. Andrew, *The Early Temples of the Mormons: The Architecture of the Millennial Kingdom in the American West* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), notes the existence of an all-seeing eye in a drawing of the Nauvoo Masonic hall, but not on the Nauvoo Temple (pp. 86–90). An all-seeing eye can be found on the central tower of the west façade of the Salt Lake Temple (*ibid.*, 111 fig. 43).

<sup>30</sup> Some of the numerous Albertus alchemical pseudepigrapha are briefly discussed by Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), 2:517–92, esp. 569–73 (another seminal work on the Western esoteric tradition that Owens could have read to his benefit). For general background and bibliography on Albertus, see Joseph Strayer, *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York: Scribner's, 1982), 1:126–30. Numerous esoteric works were attributed to Albertus in the Middle Ages; the most famous is the *Liber Secretorum: The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus of the Virtues of Herbs, Stones and Certain Beasts*, ed. Michael R. Best and Frank H. Brightman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>31</sup> There are many archaic examples of the cosmological use of the compass that are older than the 1650 *Philosophia naturalis*: see, for example, the 1625 *Viatorium Spagyricum*—reproduced by C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 372—a 1484 tombstone on which a skeleton wields the square and compass, reproduced in Christian Jacq and François Brunier, *Le message des bâtisseurs de cathédrales* (Paris: PLON, 1974), and W. H. Rylands, "Symbolism on Tombs," *Quatuor Coronati* 8 (1895): 86; a fifteenth-century Flemish miniature shows Zoroaster in his study, with the square and compass, reproduced in *Encyclopedia of World Religion* (London:



• Owens claims that the concept that “God was once as man now is . . . could, by various exegetical approaches, be found in the Hermetic-Kabbalistic tradition” (pp. 178–79). It is understandable that he provides neither primary nor secondary evidence for this assertion, since no hermetic or kabbalistic texts make such a claim. Unlike Latter-day Saint concepts of God and divinization, the metaphysical presuppositions of both hermeticism and kabbalism are fundamentally Neoplatonic.<sup>32</sup> “Kabbalistic psychology . . . developed among the Spanish Kabbalists and in the *Zohar* in the wake of Neoplatonic psychology.”<sup>33</sup> “One can distinguish at least four main streams that converged to give shape to medieval kabbalah . . . images and motifs culled from the aggadic-midrashic literature, Merkavah mysticism, theosophic-mythic speculation preserved in texts like *Sefer ha-Bahir*, and Neoplatonism.”<sup>34</sup>

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Octopus, 1975), 136; God using a compass in creation is found in the Bible *Moralisée* (thirteenth century) in W. Kirk MacNulty, *Freemasonry: A Journey through Ritual and Symbol* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 33; or the Holkham Bible (fourteenth century), reproduced in Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi, *Kabbalah: Tradition of Hidden Wisdom* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 34. Examples could be further multiplied. As a cautionary example of the dangers of assuming that parallel equals causality, one can usefully study the funerary silk banner of Fan Yen Shih from Astana in eighth-century China, which includes an example of the symbolic use of both the compass and the square in a cosmic setting; for an illustration, see Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time* (Boston: Gambit, 1969), 273. Are we to assume a causal relationship between this Chinese example and those of Freemasonry? I would like to thank Michael Lyon for drawing my attention to these examples. Todd Compton has provided evidence of pre-Masonic use of other Masonic symbols; see “The Handclasp and Embrace as Tokens of Recognition,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 1:611–42, and “The Whole Token: Mystery Symbolism in Classical Recognition Drama,” *Epoche* 13 (1985): 1–81.

<sup>32</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 42–46, with numerous other references in the index.

<sup>33</sup> Gershom G. Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 252.

<sup>34</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 273; Wolfson's index entry for Neoplatonism includes numerous similar passages. It should also be noted that kabbalistic and hermetic metaphysics were

For the hermeticists and other mystics in the broader Neoplatonic tradition, God is the ineffable font of the emanation of all reality. Human "deification" is possible because humans are ultimately simply emanations of God.<sup>35</sup> Deification means to abandon the physical body and for the mind to ascend and again become part of God's Mind;<sup>36</sup> both God and the divine part of humans are incorporeal.<sup>37</sup> Thus the soul "cannot be deified while in a human body," but must pass through a series of reincarnations into higher and higher forms of being before reaching divinity.<sup>38</sup> Divinization is possible because human "mind . . . comes from the very essence of god. . . . In humans this mind is god."<sup>39</sup>

All this is radically different from Joseph Smith's understanding of the nature of God and human deification. From the perspective of the mystical movements of the Neoplatonic tradition, human deification can be called *henosis* (being made one [with God] = Latin *unio mystica*, mystical union [with God], Hebrew *sod ha-yihud*, the mystery of unification [with God]), as distinct from *theosis* or *theopoesis*: being made a god. Wolfson further clarifies this important distinction:

There is another model of mystical experience [besides the *unio mystica* and *henosis* typical of Neoplatonism and Kabbalah] that is germane to [early] Jewish and later Christian apocalyptic as well as to the Hekhalot sources, a model that from its own vantage

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not the same, despite the fact that their presuppositions were both fundamentally Neoplatonic. Occasional non-Neoplatonic forms of mysticism are found among kabbalists—see Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

<sup>35</sup> This pantheism is discussed in *Corpus Hermeticum* (hereafter *CH*), 12:21–23 = Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 48. For the kabbalistic understanding of emanation, see *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, ed. Isaiah Tishby, trans. David Goldstein, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1:273–83.

<sup>36</sup> *CH* 1:24–26 = Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 5–6, notes, discussion, and references 119, 121.

<sup>37</sup> *CH* 4:6–7 = Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> *CH* 10:6–8 = Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 31–32, notes, discussion, and references 157–58; quotation from *CH* 10:6.

<sup>39</sup> *CH* 12:1 = Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 43.

point involves the narrowing of the gap between human and divine. The model to which I refer, rooted in ancient Near Eastern and Mesopotamian mythology rather than Neoplatonic ontology and epistemology, is that of the ascension to heaven and transformation into an angelic being who occupies a throne alongside the throne of glory [of God].<sup>40</sup>

Latter-day Saint concepts of divinization bear more parallels to the more archaic and non-Neoplatonic *theosis* models, while kabbalistic and hermetic theories of divinization derive from Neoplatonic *henosis* models. But however hermeticists may have conceived of deification, none would ever have made the claim that "God was once as man now is" (pp. 178–79), as Owens asserts. The God of the Neoplatonic traditions was the eternal, ineffable, unchanging One, and was certainly never incarnate.<sup>41</sup>

Fundamental errors of this type suggest that readers should use caution in taking Owens as their guide through the arcana of the Western esoteric traditions.

### Assertions and Lack of Evidence

Such errors of fact are compounded by another striking feature of Owens's article—his numerous unsubstantiated assertions. He readily admits that some of his "hypotheses [are] tied to a thin heritage of fact: it is a type of connection that appears likely but

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<sup>40</sup> Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 84 n. 46. Cf. Hamblin, "Temple Motifs in Jewish Mysticism," for further discussion from a Latter-day Saint perspective, with additional sources and bibliography. On Christian ascent literature, see Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), which includes a study of *1 Enoch*, *Testament of Levi*, *2 Enoch*, *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Ascension of Isaiah*, and *3 Baruch*, most of which can be found in English translation (and with references to editions and studies) in James H. Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983–85).

<sup>41</sup> For the hermetic understanding of deification see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 95–115. There is an interesting statement in the *Hermetica*: "the human on earth is a mortal god but that god in heaven is an immortal human" (*CH* 10:25 = Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 36; cf. *CH* 12:1 = Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 43). This is not to say that God was ever an incarnate human, but that human souls are fragments or emanations of the One.



which cannot be documented with certainty" (p. 160). Phrases like "a few tentative evidences suggesting" (p. 164), "such contacts remain beyond easy documentation" (p. 173), and "although there is no evidence" (p. 184) abound throughout his work—but not with anything near the frequency with which we should find them.

The speculative and hypothetical nature of Owens's thesis is demonstrated by his extensive use of the word *perhaps* and its many synonyms, and his frequent use of rhetorical questions in his attempts to link Joseph with the esoteric tradition. Such tentative language is only occasionally found in the first part of his article, which is mainly concerned with a summary of the history of the esoteric traditions.<sup>42</sup> Once Owens begins to discuss Latter-day Saint history (pp. 154–91), however, the *probablys* become ubiquitous. Every page of text has at least one example of such language—one page has a phenomenal nine!<sup>43</sup> His frequent failure to provide evidence for his propositions leads to repeated unsupported assertions that are far too common to enumerate fully. A few examples must suffice.

• Owens's standard of evaluating evidence is frequently intolerably weak and broad. For example, he claims that a "depiction of the [tree of the] *Sefiroth* [from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Latin books] *alone* could have conveyed a wealth of ideas about an emanational structure in the divine life . . . which were like those developed in Mormon theology" (p. 165, emphasis added). I challenge anyone unfamiliar with Kabbalah to look at the sefirotic tree from the *Portae Lucis* (p. 124, fig. 1) and from that *alone* explain the Neoplatonic emanationist theosophy of the kabbalists. More importantly, how could anyone possibly derive

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<sup>42</sup> For example, see pages 119–20, 129 n. 21, 131, 134, 150.

<sup>43</sup> Examples of such language include: most likely, may have, probably, could have, might have, possibility, possible, probable, suggests, and apparently. The nine examples on page 184 are: might, although there is no evidence, probable (twice), may have, suggests, perhaps (three times), and probably. In this, as in many other things, Owens suffers from following Quinn's and Brooke's overly speculative methodology; on Quinn, see Robinson, review of *Early Mormonism*, by D. Michael Quinn, *BYU Studies* 27/4 (1987): 88–95.

Mormon metaphysics—that, *contra* Owens, are not emanationist—from this illustration alone?<sup>44</sup>

- Although far less problematically or extensively than Brooke, Owens also ignores obvious biblical antecedents to Latter-day Saint thought in favor of alleged hermetic or alchemical antecedents. Owens informs us that “Paracelsus also prophesied of the coming of the prophet ‘Elias’ as part of a universal restoration, another idea possibly affecting the work of Joseph Smith” (p. 163 n. 90). Quite true. But why does Owens fail to mention the strong biblical tradition of the return of Elijah/Elias, the clear source for this idea for both Paracelsus and Joseph Smith?<sup>45</sup>

- “By the dawn of the nineteenth century,” Owens assures us, “the Hermetic tradition had developed *sub rosa* several elements characteristic of an incipient heterodox religion” (p. 157). The only evidence given to support this statement is comments of Meric Casaubon (1599–1671) and a secondary statement *about* Robert Fludd (1574–1637), both of whom lived in the *seventeenth*, not the nineteenth, century. Was there an incipient heterodox hermetic religion in the United States in the early nineteenth century? If so, it is Owens’s responsibility to provide evidence of its existence from nineteenth-century North America, not two hundred years and a continent away. I will argue below that precisely the opposite was the case.

## The Decline of the Western Esoteric Tradition

Owens insists that “*any* backwoods rodsman divining for buried treasures in New York in 1820 *may have known* about the [esoteric] tradition” and that “there *undoubtedly* existed

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<sup>44</sup> Owens’s argument in this section rests on the hidden and unsubstantiated assumption that Joseph somehow had access to, and was influenced by, rare sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Latin esoteric texts. If Joseph did not have access to such texts, how was he supposed to have seen and been influenced by a picture of the Tree of the Sefirot?

<sup>45</sup> The *loci classici* on the return of Elijah are Malachi 4:5–6 and Matthew 16:14; 17:3, 12. Note that Elias is the Greco-Latin form of Elijah; see Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, “Mormon in the Fiery Furnace,” 39–43, on Brooke’s more egregious failure to examine the biblical antecedents of Mormon thought. One is reminded of the Doctour of Phisik in Chaucer—“his studie was but litel on the Bible” (*Canterbury Tales*, 1:438).

individuals [in the early nineteenth-century United States] who were deeply cognizant of Hermeticism, its lore, rituals, and aspirations. And this group *probably* included an occasional associate of treasure diggers" (p. 159). Elsewhere Owens asserts that "there *must have* been more than a few" people in frontier New York who had been influenced by the hermetic, kabbalistic, and alchemical traditions (p. 165, emphasis added to all these citations). Evidence, please! Who *exactly* were these individuals? What *exactly* did they know? How *exactly* did they gain their unusual knowledge? *Exactly* when and where did they live? With whom *exactly* did they associate? What *exactly* did they teach their associates? What evidence—any evidence at all—does Owens provide for any of his speculations?

In fact, two recent surveys of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hermeticism by Joscelyn Godwin and Antoine Faivre mention *no* hermeticists in North America before the beginnings of the Spiritualist movements in 1848.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, from Godwin we find that the profile of the typical eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European hermeticist was that of a wealthy, highly educated, Latin-reading dilettante who was disaffected from Christianity and idled away his time in small cliques of like-minded hedonists—hardly the circles in which the poverty-stricken, ill-educated, and deeply Christian Joseph Smith moved. If there were as many hermeticists in the early nineteenth-century United States as Owens claims, why do the histories of Godwin and Faivre fail to mention them? More importantly, why does Owens himself fail to name even one prominent North American hermeticist who was active in the first half of the nineteenth century?<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

<sup>47</sup> In a private conversation with Joscelyn Godwin (Cesky Krumlov, Czech Republic, September 1995), I asked if there were any hermeticists practicing in North America before the occult revival after 1848. He replied that there were few, if any, because there were almost no hermetic books in the United States; they were too rare and expensive and were limited to libraries or wealthy collectors in Europe. If Owens wishes to argue that such esoteric texts were accessible on the frontier of the United States it is his responsibility to provide



The significance and influence of the esoteric traditions had dramatically declined by the mid-eighteenth century in the wake of the Enlightenment—an intellectual movement about which Owens is strangely silent. Indeed, one could argue that Joseph Smith lived in precisely the time (the early nineteenth century) and place (the frontier regions of the New World) in which knowledge of the Western esoteric traditions had *less* significance and impact than at any other time or place in Western civilization since the invention of printing. In other words, I am arguing that before the Enlightenment and after the occult revival of the late nineteenth century, esoteric lore was more accessible than during the period between the Enlightenment and the beginnings of the occult revival. Furthermore, the frontier regions of the New World (as opposed to Europe) were the least likely to have books or materials on esoteric subjects.<sup>48</sup>

As is well known, hermeticism entered a period of serious decline following Isaac Casaubon's demonstration in 1614 that the hermetic texts dated to after Christianity, not before Plato.<sup>49</sup> Thereafter, although a few scholars ignored the implications of Casaubon's study, "by the eighteenth century, Casaubon's debunking of hermetic antiquity had entered canonical accounts of intellectual history."<sup>50</sup> Thus "after 1630, no new or reprinted Greek editions [of the *Hermetica*] appeared until Parthey's *Poemander* of 1854," after which an interest in the *Hermetica* revived, "much of it provoked by the theosophical movements of the late nineteenth century."<sup>51</sup> Thus Joseph Smith lived in the period of the *least* influence of the *Hermetica* on Western intellectual and religious thought since the Renaissance.

The pattern with Kabbalah is precisely the same. In the wake of the messianic and mystical excesses of the Sabbatean

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some evidence. Owens's preposterous attempt to transform Luman Walter into a hermeticist will be discussed below.

<sup>48</sup> Herbert Leventhal provides a study of the relative decline of the esoteric world view in English colonies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; see *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), esp. 10, 262–71; see also the quotation on p. 277 below.

<sup>49</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 348–403, 422–47; Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 1, nn. 63–64, provides more recent bibliography.

<sup>50</sup> Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, li, with full bibliography in nn. 65–66.

movement, Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1776) and others subjected the *Zohar* to the strictest intellectual and theological scrutiny.<sup>52</sup> Although originally a believing kabbalist, Emden, in his study *Mitpaḥat Sefarim*<sup>53</sup> effectively “divested Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai [second century A.D.] and his disciples completely of the authorship of the *Zohar*.” Instead it was shown to be the work of “Rabbi Moses de Leon [died 1305], or contemporaries of his.”<sup>54</sup> The effect among Jews was similar to that of Casaubon’s redating the *Hermetica*—it seriously undermined the antiquity, authority, and importance of the text. Thereafter, “Scholars of the Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) period [c. 1770s–1880s], apart from one or two, . . . regarded the kabbalah as a black stain on the fabric of pure Judaism. . . . Their fierce opposition to kabbalah [was] full of contempt and disdain.”<sup>55</sup> Neibaur, Owens’s supposed candidate for the role of Joseph Smith’s kabbalistic mentor, lived squarely in the middle of this Jewish Enlightenment.

Owens speculates at great length about possible Rosicrucian influences on Joseph Smith (pp. 138–54), asserting (with absolutely no evidence) that Luman Walter was influenced by Rosicrucian ideas (p. 162). Once again, however, Owens ignores the annoying fact that the Rosicrucian movement was effectively dead at the time of Joseph Smith. In England “the Gold and Rosy Cross appears to have had no English members and was virtually extinct by 1793.”<sup>56</sup> There was no “independent, formalized Rosicrucian order functioning in England in the 1830s.”<sup>57</sup> The situation was the same in the United States. McIntosh is skeptical

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<sup>52</sup> On the Sabbatean movement, the standard study is Gershom G. Scholem, *Sabbetai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). For background on Jacob Emden, see Moshe Shraga Samet, “Emden, Jacob,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth, (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972, hereafter *EJ*), 6:721–24; and Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:38–43.

<sup>53</sup> Jacob Emden, *Mitpaḥat Sefarim* (Altona: Be-vet ha-mehaber, 1768).

<sup>54</sup> Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:42. The major arguments both for and against the antiquity of the *Zohar* are summarized by Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:55–96.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:43. Tishby surveys the most important works on the *Zohar* published during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, 1:43–50.

<sup>56</sup> Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, 121.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

about alleged Rosicrucian influences on Pennsylvania German mystical communities (such as that in Ephrata), but even if they existed, these influences were very mild and the movements had all but disappeared by the early nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup> “The first man, however, to promote Rosicrucianism widely in America was Paschal Beverly Randolph” who “began his occult activities about 1858,”<sup>59</sup> a bit late to have influenced Joseph Smith. Even this was largely pseudo-Rosicrucianism, having only a vague similarity to its alleged seventeenth-century antecedents. As Randolph himself admitted, “very nearly *all* that I have given as Rosicrucianism originated in my soul; and scarce a single thought, only suggestions, have I borrowed from those who in ages past, called themselves by that name.”<sup>60</sup>

Thus Joseph Smith was alive precisely during the period of the *least* influence of Kabbalah, hermeticism, and Rosicrucianism, all of which had seriously declined by the late eighteenth century—before Joseph’s birth—and would revive only in the late nineteenth century, after Joseph’s death. Owens never recognizes these developments, but instead consistently quotes sources earlier and later than Joseph Smith as indicative of the ideas supposedly found in Joseph’s day.

### The Fallacy of Semantic Equivocation

Owens’s entire thesis also suffers repeatedly from semantic equivocation—using a term “in two or more senses within a single argument, so that a conclusion appears to follow when in fact it does not.”<sup>61</sup> Owens does not adequately recognize the fact that the semantic domain of words can vary radically from individual to individual, through translation, by shifts in meaning through

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<sup>58</sup> McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, 129. Edighoffer, “Rosicrucianism,” 203–9, briefly charts the fate of various Rosicrucian movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth century; it becomes obvious that they disappeared in the late eighteenth century and reappeared only in the late nineteenth.

<sup>59</sup> McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians*, 129–30; cf. Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, 247–61. Claims of alleged Rosicrucian influence—such as those made by Owens—need to be viewed with a good deal of skepticism.

<sup>60</sup> Cited by Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, 259.

<sup>61</sup> David Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 274.



time, or because of idiosyncratic use by different contemporary communities.<sup>62</sup> For Owens it is often sufficient to assert that he feels that kabbalistic or hermetic ideas “resonate” with his understanding of Latter-day Saint thought (p. 132). Thus, in an attempt to demonstrate affiliations between the Latter-day Saint world view and that of esotericists, Owens presents a number of ideas that he claims represent parallels between his understanding of the kabbalistic and hermetic traditions and his view of Latter-day Saint theology, but that, upon closer inspection, turn out to be only vaguely similar, if at all.

Rigorous thought is possible only when definitions of words are explicit, precise, narrow, and unambiguous. Owens’s methodology repeatedly uses language imprecisely, amorphously, broadly, and ambiguously. Although he is better informed on this matter than Brooke—who makes not the slightest effort to define his technical terms<sup>63</sup>—Owens still seems largely unaware of the raging debate in academic circles concerning the definition of magic and the immense technical literature on the subject. Instead, he informs us that “one is ill-advised to argue here with Quinn’s general approach or definition of magic and its world view,” including the claim that “its intent is often coercive” (p. 156). In reality there is absolutely no scholarly consensus on the meaning of magic.<sup>64</sup> Like Brooke, Owens also makes no effort to define hermeticism, despite the fact that serious questions have been raised about its nature and scope. The term *hermeticism*

is given more clarity and autonomy [by some modern scholars] than the [historical] currents it describes, and

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<sup>62</sup> I am reminded of a conversation I had in September 1995 with a New Age esotericist in Cesky Krumlov, Czech Republic. She was astonished when I mentioned the messiology of kabbalism, asking me what the Messiah had to do with kabbalism. As we discussed the matter further, I came to realize that, for her, kabbalism was simply a New Age meditative technique in which the *sefirot* were used as symbols for focusing the mind, while for me Kabbalah was a complex, centuries-old historical phenomenon encompassing a wide range of texts, ideas, and practices in both Judaism and Christianity.

<sup>63</sup> See Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, “Mormon in the Fiery Furnace,” 10–13.

<sup>64</sup> John Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac and Jacob,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 46–66, provides an extensive survey of the wide range of scholarly definitions of magic.

hence an explanatory function far beyond what it can deliver. "Hermeticism" is a notoriously slippery concept. . . . "It still remains to show that Hermeticism ever functioned as an important, independent world view."<sup>65</sup>

Scholarship based on such nondefinitions is an utterly fruitless endeavor.

Owens frequently implicitly redefines kabbalistic and hermetic terms in a way that would have been foreign to both the original esoteric believers and to early Latter-day Saints. In an effort to make ideas seem similar, he is forced to severely distort both what esotericists and Latter-day Saints believe. I have neither the time nor the inclination to examine carefully Owens's instances of semantic equivocation in their entirety. I will focus on a major example—Owens's use of the words *prophet* and *revelation*.<sup>66</sup>

As with most of his technical terms, Owens never provides us with an unambiguous definition of *prophet* or *revelation*; we are forced to search for implicit meanings. Owens often uses the words in a fundamentally un-Mormon way. When Owens says that the nature of the revelations of Joseph and those of the kabbalists is essentially the same, he is speaking from his own modern Jungian perspective—not that of either the kabbalists or the Latter-day Saints. For Owens it seems a *prophet* is one who has a transcendent psychological experience with God, and *revelations* are the intuitions about life and the universe one derives from such experiences.

In many ways Owens's functional definition of *prophet* is closer to that of a mystic. This allows kabbalistic mystical revelations to be seen as similar to Owens's revisionist understandings of

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<sup>65</sup> Sherman, *John Dee*, 20, citing Charles B. Schmidt, "Reappraisals in Renaissance Science," review of *Hermeticism and the Scientific Revolution*, by Robert S. Westman and J. E. McGuire, *History of Science* 16 (1978): 208.

<sup>66</sup> Interested readers should carefully examine Owens's use of the terms *gnostic* (pp. 121–22), *vision* (p. 123), *plurality of gods* (p. 126), *divine mother* (p. 126), *sacred marriage* (p. 126), *the origins of the human soul* (p. 132), and *proxy* (p. 136), among many others. Owens's discussion of *prophets* in the esoteric traditions can be found on pages 120–26.

Joseph Smith's revelatory experiences: prophet = mystic.<sup>67</sup> Thus it is possible to conclude, since Joseph was a prophet/mystic and kabbalists are mystics/prophets, that the experiences of Joseph and the kabbalists represent different manifestations of the same phenomenon. But kabbalists' own descriptions of their mystical experiences are fundamentally dissimilar to Joseph's descriptions of his prophetic experiences.

Now it is true that some kabbalists claimed transcendent mystical experiences, which they sometimes called "prophecy." Moshe Idel describes one such example.

Abulafia [1240–91] describes this system [of Kabbalah] with two basic terms: *prophetic Kabbalah* and the *Kabbalah of Names*. The former term (which I have generally translated as ecstatic Kabbalah in the body of this work) refers to the goal of this mystical path: namely, the attainment of "prophecy" or "ecstasy," i.e., manifestations of revelation and union with the Divine (*devequt*), designated by the classical term *prophecy* (*nev<sup>2</sup>uah*) in the absence of any other more suitable, comprehensive term.<sup>68</sup>

Idel makes an important point: Abulafia (and by extension other kabbalists) believed that their mystical experiences were similar to, if not precisely the same as, the experiences of the biblical prophets, and thus called these experiences "prophecy." But the ecstatic mystical experiences of the kabbalists, even though sometimes *called* prophecy, bear little resemblance to the

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<sup>67</sup> Attempts to understand Joseph Smith as a mystic are not new to Latter-day Saint studies; Hugh Nibley showed the fallacy of viewing Joseph's experiences as *mystical*, "Prophets and Mystics," 98–107. For a basic bibliography of such efforts, see Louis C. Midgley, "The Challenge of Historical Consciousness: Mormon History and the Encounter with Secular Modernity," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, 2:532 n. 56. Cf. Midgley's discussion of Jan Shipps's evolving understanding of this idea in "The Shipps Odyssey in Retrospect," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/2 (1995): 242–46.

<sup>68</sup> Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 8, the best introduction to Abulafia. Note that "Abulafia was considered by the Christian Kabbalist Johannes Reuchlin as a pillar of Christian Kabbalah. . . . Christian Kabbalah is based to a considerable extent upon the thought of Abulafia, whose writings were translated into Latin and Italian" (*ibid.*, 10).



experiences of Joseph Smith. Modern scholars such as Idel recognize a fundamental distinction between the prophetic experiences described by biblical prophets and those of the kabbalists. Recognizing the idiosyncratic use of the word *prophecy* by the kabbalists, Idel consistently uses the term *prophecy* in quotations throughout his book when referring to the experiences of Abulafia, preferring the term *ecstasy*.<sup>69</sup> Owens would have us believe that the substance of the experiences of Joseph and the kabbalists was similar because they used the same word to describe their fundamentally different experiences.

Owens's approach thus obscures significant differences between the Mormon understanding of revelation and that of the kabbalists. For example, Owens describes Joseph's revelatory experiences in kabbalistic terms as "numinous and uniquely individual experience[s]" that were "personal and self-contained" (p. 161). This, of course, ignores the fact that many of Joseph's visions were shared by others—the experience of the Three Witnesses, the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood, the revelation of section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants, and the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, to name just a few.<sup>70</sup>

It is important to distinguish between the nature of the visionary experiences of the earlier biblical and Merkavah "mystics"—that more closely parallel the experiences of Joseph Smith—from those of the later kabbalists.<sup>71</sup> Owens fails to make this necessary and most significant distinction. Kabbalistic visions were generally had by individuals alone (seldom, if ever, with groups simultaneously seeing the same thing), were induced by mystical "techniques,"<sup>72</sup> were transmitted from master to disciple, and

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<sup>69</sup> Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 8, 55, 57, etc.

<sup>70</sup> For the testimony of the Three Witnesses, see Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); concerning the Aaronic Priesthood, Doctrine and Covenants 13, *HC* 1:39–42, *Joseph Smith—History* 68–73, Doctrine and Covenants 76, *HC* 1:245–52; concerning the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, Doctrine and Covenants 110, *HC* 2:435–36.

<sup>71</sup> Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 13–124.

<sup>72</sup> Among the kabbalistic techniques for obtaining mystical unification with God we find: chanting or reciting the Divine Names (Idel, *Mystical Experience*, 14–22), recombination of the letters of the Divine Name (*ibid.*, 22–24, Idel, *Kabbalah*, 97–103), controlling breathing (Idel, *Mystical Experience*,

were fundamentally nonmaterialistic. Many of Joseph's prophetic experiences were materialistic and empirical. He saw divine and angelic beings with real bodies of flesh and bone. He was physically touched by these beings. They gave him real material objects (e.g., the golden plates). As noted above, on occasions these heavenly messengers were seen and heard by several people simultaneously, who all reported seeing the same thing. Kabbalistic visions ("prophecies") were of the "imagination" and "intellect" in the Neoplatonic sense.<sup>73</sup> God, being pure Intellect, was apprehended by pure intellectual faculties. God could not be seen with our physical eyes or touched with our hands.<sup>74</sup> For the kabbalists, when God revealed himself, you would "imagine" the "image" of God in your "imagination." Unlike the modern naturalistic understanding, thus "imagining" God would be superior, not inferior, to a materialistic vision. Thus the goal of the kabbalists was to obtain "the total unity between man's intellect and the supreme Being, whether this is understood as God or as the Active Intellect."<sup>75</sup> This understanding is radically different from that of Mormonism.

Another form of reductionism and semantic equivocation in which Owens indulges is his attempt to define revelation as a fundamentally psychological phenomenon. For Owens, revelation is

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24–28), visualizations of the letters of the Divine Names (ibid., 30–33), contemplation of the navel (ibid., 34–35), listening to music (ibid., 53–64), ritual weeping (Idel, *Kabbalah*, 75–88), and visualization of colors (ibid., 103–11). None of these practices, as mystical techniques, can be found in Mormonism. These techniques could be seen as attempts to compel God to reveal himself. Joseph Smith, on the other hand, maintained that although man may see God, "it shall be in his [God's] own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will" (D&C 88:68).

<sup>73</sup> Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, deals extensively with these types of distinctions. The *imagination* was where images could be formed in the mind, while the *intellect* was the site of pristine intellection without the senses or visual imagery. From this viewpoint, pure intellection of God is superior to imagining God, and both are superior to materialistic understandings such as those held by Joseph Smith.

<sup>74</sup> This, of course, is the opposite of the Latter-day Saint view. See, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 130:22 and the useful study by David L. Paulsen, "The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives," *BYU Studies* 35/4 (1995–96): 6–94.

<sup>75</sup> Idel, *Abulafia*, 13.

Jungian “archetypal manifestations consistent with a recurrent type of ‘revelatory’ experience” (p. 161).<sup>76</sup> Owens provides an explanation for historical causality that ignores the possibility of real revelation: “Whether this [Joseph’s translation] was a reflection of Joseph’s contact with Kabbalah or just of Joseph remains an open question” (p. 166), he informs us. That it could have been true revelation seems a closed question. Owens does not explicitly deny the existence of revelation, he merely redefines what revelation means: “Men can have experiences,” he assures us, “call them intuitions or visions—that carry revelatory power and the savor of divine origin” (p. 123 n. 12). The admission that such visions could be “empirical psychological realities” (p. 126) should not be seen as a ringing endorsement of the Prophet Joseph, since “empirical psychological realities” include events that have no ontological basis outside human brain chemistry.

Owens’s terminological muddle on this point is further confused by his reading of Harold Bloom (pp. 118–19). For Owens, “Bloom’s intuition [links] the prophet’s [Joseph Smith’s] visionary bent with the occult aspirations of Jewish Kabbalah” (p. 118).<sup>77</sup> As I understand Bloom, he reductionistically equates prophecy with poetry, artistic genius, and a good imagination. By thus expanding and conflating the definitions of both poetry and prophecy, Bloom maintains that good poets are frequently prophets,<sup>78</sup> prophets are simply literary geniuses, and religion is “spilled poetry.”<sup>79</sup> While Bloom the agnostic speaks metaphorically—since there are no real prophets, their *revelations* are necessarily a form of literature—Owens wishes to historicize Bloom’s

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<sup>76</sup> As in this passage, Owens has the annoying habit of frequently putting the term *revelation* in quotations—that seems to imply that the “revelations” are only so-called. Owens describes himself as a “Jungian” in “America’s Hermetic Prophet,” 64. His paper manifests many of the well-known weaknesses of Jungian methodology when applied to historical questions.

<sup>77</sup> For reviews of Bloom from a Latter-day Saint perspective, see M. Gerald Bradford, ed., “Four LDS Views on Harold Bloom,” *BYU Studies* 35/1 (1995): 173–204.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Harold Bloom’s understanding of Dante as a “prophet,” in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 81, 88, 93, 97, 101.

<sup>79</sup> Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 80.



literary “intuition” (p. 118), maintaining that “careful reevaluation of historical data suggests there is both a poetic and an unsuspected factual substance to Bloom’s thesis” (p. 118). For Owens, Joseph didn’t merely have a creative poetic imagination like the kabbalists—as claimed by Bloom—he was historically influenced by them!

A final significant problem related to semantic equivocation is the blurring of the distinctions between kabbalism and hermeticism, as if they were a single system of thought. Some branches of the Western esoteric traditions were indeed conflated by Renaissance magi based on their theory of *prisca theologia*—the primordial revelation of God to pagan philosophers.<sup>80</sup> But even if we were to concede that Joseph indeed read Jewish kabbalistic texts, as Owens alleges, this would not provide evidence for knowledge of the Hermetica. Although some Christian kabbalists did indeed merge hermeticism with Kabbalah in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, traditional Jewish kabbalists were not greatly influenced by Christian hermeticism. Thus Joseph could not have been influenced by any “hermetic” ideas from reading Jewish kabbalistic texts. *Contra* Owens, Herbert Leventhal noted,

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw the gradual disintegration of the “Elizabethan world picture” [which included the hermetic and esoteric world view as major components] in the American colonies. It no longer existed as a gestalt, as a unified set of interlocking and mutually supporting ideas. A person who believed in one aspect of it did not necessarily, or even probably, believe in the rest.<sup>81</sup>

Sophisticated researchers must carefully distinguish the individual paths of historical development of different branches of the Western esoteric tradition. Attention must always focus on primary texts in their original historical contexts. Instead, Owens syncretistically synthesizes the mythology of modern esotericists, modern academic theories, Renaissance *prisca theologia*, medieval

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<sup>80</sup> On the idea of the *prisca theologia*, see Daniel P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1972); cf. Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 17–18, 58.

<sup>81</sup> Leventhal, *In the Shadow of the Enlightenment*, 262.

kabbalism, and ancient hermeticism with reckless abandon. As will be demonstrated below, he seldom pays adequate attention to the historical and linguistic contexts of primary texts. Indeed, he seldom deals with primary texts at all. The validity and significance of his proposed parallels are seriously undermined by his failure to define his terms properly and to contextualize ideas. Only those fundamentally unfamiliar with the early modern esoteric tradition will find Owens's assertions plausible.

### Problems of Causality

Granting, for the sake of argument, that Owens can establish legitimate parallels between Latter-day Saint and esoteric ideas, we must now turn to the question of the nature of the relationship and the potential causes of such alleged parallels. Like Brooke, Owens suffers from unrestrained parallelomania, making little effort to distinguish between analog and causal antecedent. Owens's methodology in dealing with parallels suffers from precisely the same flaws previously noted in Brooke.

Throughout his entire book, Brooke is plagued with the problem of analogue versus causal antecedent, which he himself recognizes on occasion. The problem of causality has been well summarized by Jonathan Z. Smith: "Homology [causal antecedent] is a similarity of form or structure between two species shared from their common ancestor; an analogy is a similarity of form or structure between two species not sharing a common ancestor." Brooke would have done well to follow Jonathan Smith's excellent analysis of the problem.

It is agreed that the statement "*x* resembles *y*" is logically incomplete . . . [because it] suppress[es] the] multi-term statement of analogy and difference capable of being properly expressed in formulations such as: "*x* resembles *y* more than *z* with respect to . . . ;" or, "*x* resembles *y* more than *w* resembles *z* with respect to . . . ."

That is to say, the statement of comparison is never dyadic, but always triadic; there is always

an implicit “more than,” and there is always a “with respect to.”

Brooke’s [and Owens’s] great methodological failure is that he does not clearly identify the “more than” or “with respect to” in his alleged parallels between Mormonism and hermeticism.<sup>82</sup>

For Owens and Brooke the assertion of any alleged parallel between hermetic and Mormon ideas—most of which are either very weak, based on misunderstandings, or derived from biblical antecedents—is sufficient to allow us to assume causality. Indeed, causality between the alleged parallels is almost always assumed; it is almost never argued or demonstrated.

Again, like Brooke, Owens’s entire thesis is an extended exercise in the fallacy of the perfect analogy; he is constantly asserting that if one parallel can be demonstrated between Mormonism and hermeticism, then the entire systems must somehow be interrelated.<sup>83</sup> Again, referring to a parallel discussion on Brooke,

Brooke is a rhetorical master at the fallacy of perfect analogy, which “consists in reasoning from a partial resemblance between two entities to an entire and exact correspondence. It is an erroneous inference from the fact that A and B are similar in some respects to the false conclusion that they are the same in all respects.” Readers should be on the lookout for frequent use of an extended version of this fallacy. Brooke repeatedly argues as follows: Item 1 has characteristics A and B; item 2 has characteristics B and C; item 3 has characteristics C and D; therefore, since 1 and 2 share one characteristic (B), and 2 and 3 share one characteristic (C), 1 and 3 must share some characteristics. But

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<sup>82</sup> Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, “Mormon in the Fiery Furnace,” 44–45; cf. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 47 n. 15, 51. Scholars positing parallels between Mormonism and either Joseph’s nineteenth-century environment or antiquity should carefully study this essay.

<sup>83</sup> Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, “Mormon in the Fiery Furnace,” 45; cf. Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, 247.



the A and B of 1 have nothing whatsoever to do with the C and D of 3.<sup>84</sup>

Again paralleling Brooke, Owens fails to acknowledge, let alone explain, the existence of the far more numerous differences between Mormonism and the Western esoteric traditions.<sup>85</sup> Owens also ignores the far more detailed, precise, and extensive resemblances between Latter-day Saint esoteric ideas and the esoteric doctrines, texts, and rituals of the ancient world, which offer much more complete parallels than does late medieval and early modern esotericism.<sup>86</sup> Why is it that the elements in kabbalistic thought that most closely parallel Joseph's ideas are those that also occur in more archaic thought, while the unique medieval accretions—like gematria, *sefirot*, emanations, etc.—are never explicitly mentioned by Joseph Smith?<sup>87</sup> Owens neither recognizes this phenomenon nor attempts to explain it.

Owens's brief discussion of causality is weak and incomplete. He sees four possible explanations for his alleged parallels:

1. Joseph "had significant interactions with the Hermetic-Kabbalistic mythos," but this possibly had no "impact on his religious-making vision" (p. 160).

2. The alleged parallels maybe "synchronous rather than causal" (p. 160), which essentially means they are "pure happenstance" (p. 161).

3. The parallels represent Jungian "archetypal manifestations consistent with a recurrent type of 'revelatory' experience" (p. 161).

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84 Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace," 45.

85 *Ibid.*, 55–58.

86 For Brooke's problems in this regard, see Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace," 55–57. This is not necessarily to argue that the ancient parallels are complete and absolute, nor is it to argue a causal connection. Rather, it is simply to point out that the argument of a causal relationship between Mormonism and Western esotericism cannot be understood until the nature and cause of the parallels between Mormonism and ancient esotericism are elucidated.

87 On the ideas of gematria, see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 337–43. On *sefirot*, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:269–370; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 96–116; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 205–25; and below, p. 300 n. 140. On emanationism, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:273–83; and above, pp. 263–64.

4. Joseph's ideas derive from "independent, personal cognition or 'revelation'" (p. 161).<sup>88</sup>

In all this Owens ignores two other obvious explanations: that both esoteric and Latter-day Saint ideas derive from a similar source, e.g., the Bible, or that Joseph Smith received true revelation, as opposed to some ill-defined type of Jungian "personal cognition."

### Alleged Examples of Joseph Smith and Hermeticism

Turning at last directly to Joseph Smith, Owens maintains that Joseph was intimately connected with folk magic during his early life (pp. 161–62). He provides three examples of Joseph's alleged relationship with folk magic: magical artifacts held as heirlooms by Hyrum Smith's descendants (pp. 161–62); Luman Walter(s) as Joseph's supposed occult mentor (pp. 162–63); and Joseph's relation with Freemasonry as a possible conduit of esoteric knowledge (pp. 166–73). On the first two points Owens is entirely derivative from Michael Quinn. On none of these points does he provide any substantial new evidence. Each will be analyzed below.

*Magical Artifacts.* Relying entirely on Quinn's flawed work, Owens insists that Joseph Smith or members of his immediate family owned a magical talisman, a ceremonial dagger, and parchments early in their lives.<sup>89</sup> Based on Quinn's claims, Owens maintains the following seven propositions:

1. Joseph himself owned these items (p. 161).
2. His possession dates to his early days of "treasure seeking" (p. 162).
3. He used them for magical purposes (p. 162).
4. He made them himself or commissioned them (p. 161).
5. He therefore must have used magic books to make them (p. 162).

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<sup>88</sup> Owens's syntax is unfortunately ambiguous here. It is unclear whether he intends *personal cognition* to be in grammatical apposition to *revelation* or something distinct from it. Note again the use of quotation marks around the word *revelation*.

<sup>89</sup> Based on Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 57, 65–72, 96–111. See n. 7 in this paper for references to reviews of Quinn's work.

6. He therefore must have had an occult mentor to help him with the difficult process of understanding the magical books and making these items (p. 162).

7. This occult mentor transmitted extensive arcane hermetic lore to Joseph beyond the knowledge necessary to make the artifacts (p. 163).

In reality, Owens's seven propositions are simply a tissue of assumptions, assertions, and speculations. There is no contemporary primary evidence that Joseph himself owned or used the parchments or dagger; one late source *claims* he had a talisman in his pocket at the time of his death.<sup>90</sup> We do not know why Joseph had the talisman, or even if he really did. And we do not know—if he had it—what he thought of it. We do not know when, how, or why these items became heirlooms of the Hyrum Smith family. Again, there is no contemporary primary evidence that mentions Joseph or anyone in his family using these artifacts—as Quinn himself noted, “possession alone may not be proof of use.”<sup>91</sup> There is no evidence that Joseph ever had any magic books. There is no evidence that Joseph ever had an occult mentor who helped him make or use these items.

The methodology used by Owens is a classic example of what one could call the miracle of the addition of the probabilities. The case of Quinn and Owens relies on a rickety tower of unproven propositions that do not provide certainty, rather a geometrically increasing improbability. Probabilities are multiplied, not added. Combining two propositions, each of which has a 50% probability, does not create a 100% probability, it creates a 25% probability that both are true together. Allowing each of Owens's seven propositions a 50% probability—a very generous allowance—creates a .0078% probability that the combination of all his seven

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<sup>90</sup> It is, of course, possible that the Bidamon talisman (and perhaps other Bidamon artifacts) did not in fact belong to Joseph Smith. Charles Bidamon may have been a modern counterpart of the medieval relic mongers, who—for the right price—could dredge up a lock of hair or bit of bone of any required early saint. The question of the authenticity of some of the Bidamon artifacts is worth further study.

<sup>91</sup> Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 57.



propositions is true.<sup>92</sup> And this is only one element of a very complex and convoluted argument, with literally dozens of similar unverified assertions. The result is a monumentally high improbability that Owens's overall thesis is correct.

Based on the evidence of these artifacts alone, it is just as plausible to speculate that these items were obtained from Masonic friends or European converts late in the Nauvoo period; that they were owned by Joseph's friends or family rather than by Joseph himself; that they were essentially heirlooms, good-luck charms, or ornaments for Masonic pageantry; or that neither Joseph nor anyone associated with him had any idea what they were "really" made for.<sup>93</sup> If there were some solid contemporary primary evidence from Joseph or other early Mormons of magical activity—like Mark Hofmann's forged "Salamander Letter"<sup>94</sup>—then these artifacts might provide useful circumstantial confirmation. But there is no such solid corroborating contemporary primary evidence!

Owens makes an important point on this matter. *Contra* Quinn, Owens observes that:

the treasure digger's "magic world view" . . . must be distinguished from the more complex Hermetic vision.

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<sup>92</sup> Assigning each proposition a probability of 20% yields an overall probability of .0000128%; 10% probability = .0000001%. Owens's overall argument exhibits several examples of attempted addition of probabilities.

<sup>93</sup> For example, it is possible that the artifacts described by Quinn (*Early Mormonism*, 65–72, 96–111) were not used by the Smith family but were confiscated by them from other saints who are known to have been condemned for practicing magic (see Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace," 18, for several examples). Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 239, discusses the confiscation and destruction, by George A. Smith, of magical items in the possession of early English converts. Such items could have been put in a trunk, forgotten, and rediscovered decades later by another generation who had no idea where they had originally come from or what they had been used for. I am not, of course, arguing that such was actually the case, only that it is just as plausible as the speculations of Quinn, Brooke, and Owens.

<sup>94</sup> On the Hofmann forgeries, see Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989). Robinson, review of *Early Mormonism*, 94, astutely notices the "huge salamander-shaped hole" in Quinn's theory.

. . . What a young Joseph Smith could have learned from a rodsman, ensconced only in a [folk] magic world view, is less important to his religious development than the kinds of ideas a Hermetic initiate might have stimulated. (pp. 159–60)

The real question, of course, is whether Joseph ever encountered such a “Hermetic initiate”—and whether such people even existed on the American frontier. If Owens’s assertion that Joseph would have required a hermetic mentor to use the artifacts is true—and it is nothing but an assertion—it should be seen as evidence not that Joseph had such an occult mentor, but rather that he did not make or use the magical items in question.

*Luman Walter(s) as an Occult Mentor.* In order to provide a “Hermetic initiate” as a source for Joseph’s alleged expertise in hermeticism, Owens resurrects the dubious proposition that Joseph studied magic with Luman Walter (pp. 162–63). In this matter Owens is again completely dependent upon Quinn, but goes beyond even Quinn’s exaggeration of the evidence.<sup>95</sup> The difference between the little that is actually known about Walter and his ever-expanding role as the occult mentor of Joseph Smith is quite striking—rather a case of the distinction between the Walter of history and the Luman of faith.

The Luman of faith is a Renaissance magus with “considerable knowledge of Hermetic traditions” (p. 162), who “stood in a tradition dominated by the medical and esoteric writings of Paracelsus [1493–1541], steeped in alchemy, and associated closely with Rosicrucian philosophy” (p. 162). The Walter of history was an obscure “drunken vagabond,” a frontier snake-oil salesman who used hocus-pocus to con the superstitious.<sup>96</sup> The Luman of faith was a master of Paracelsian medicine. The Walter of history would have studied medicine—assuming he did so at all—in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. But Paracelsian medicine, the supposed conduit of esoteric lore to Walter, had been superseded among physicians by the early eighteenth

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<sup>95</sup> Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 82–84.

<sup>96</sup> The very limited evidence concerning Luman Walter is summarized by Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 81–84; needless to say, I disagree with Quinn’s interpretation of the significance of the evidence.

century.<sup>97</sup> Even nonprofessionals were aware of the collapse of Paracelsianism, as witnessed by the discussion of the issue in the 1818 novel *Frankenstein*.<sup>98</sup> It is as unlikely that Walter—assuming he had any medical training at all—would have studied Paracelsus as it is that a modern medical school would be teaching phrenology.<sup>99</sup> The Luman of faith was an intimate acquaintance of Joseph who revealed to Joseph arcane magical secrets;<sup>100</sup> not only does proximity equal contact—since they could have met, they must have met—but unsubstantiated contact proves undemonstrated influence.<sup>101</sup> The Walter of history lived in Sodus, New

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<sup>97</sup> Paracelsianism flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; see Allen G. Debus, *The French Paracelsians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and his *The English Paracelsians* (London: Oldbourne Press, 1965). Paracelsianism declined dramatically in the early eighteenth century; see Debus, *French Paracelsians*, 183–208. Lester S. King, *Transformations in American Medicine* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), does not mention Paracelsianism as an element in American medicine in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Likewise, Lester S. King, *The Medical World of the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 60, 71, mentions Paracelsus only as someone whose ideas had been rejected by the late eighteenth century.

<sup>98</sup> Mary W. Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), part 1, chapter 2, 40.

<sup>99</sup> Owens's assertions that Neibaur and his father also could have been influenced by Paracelsianism and hermeticism because they had studied medicine (pp. 174–75) or that John Bennett was obviously interested in hermeticism because he had studied medicine (p. 170) fail on precisely the same grounds.

<sup>100</sup> Owens attempts to turn a highly debatable proposition—that young Joseph ever even knew Luman Walter—into historical certainty: Walter was “known to have been in Joseph’s and his family’s circle of acquaintances prior to 1827” (p. 162).

<sup>101</sup> This is a classic manifestation of the fallacy of the possible proof, which “consists in an attempt to demonstrate that a factual statement is true or false by establishing the possibility of its truth or falsity,” Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, 53. As an analogous example of this fallacy, I am on the mailing list of a New Age bookstore in Salt Lake City, which I have visited on occasion. Should this contact be seen as evidence that I am a follower of New Age philosophy? I am not. The problem of contact being seen as evidence for influence was vividly illustrated by my misunderstanding of Owens’s relationship with *Gnosis* magazine—a New Age publication. In the Spring 1995 issue of *Gnosis* (in which Owens published his “American Prophet”), Lance S. Owens is listed as a “Contributing Writer.” I assumed that this implied that Owens shared the New Age presuppositions of *Gnosis*. In private correspondence I was informed by



York, almost a two-day journey (25 miles) from Palmyra; only virulent anti-Mormons claim Joseph Smith and Walter ever met. So different are the Luman of faith and the Walter of history that one wonders if this is not a case of Joseph Smith being influenced not by Luman Walter, but by a different man of the same name.

*Freemasonry as an Alleged Conduit of the Esoteric Traditions.* The relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism is too complex to be dealt with in detail here. Although Owens adds nothing new to former discussions, it is worth recognizing Owens's methodological muddle on the subject. For a correct understanding of the relationship between Joseph Smith and Freemasonry, it is vital first to clearly distinguish between the various types of Freemasonry, especially between the esoteric and nonesoteric forms. Next, we must establish when and where the different types of Freemasonry existed, and what ideas were universal or unique to a particular branch. Finally, it is important to identify which types of Freemasonry were accessible to Joseph Smith, and when.<sup>102</sup>

With this in mind, Owens's assertion that Joseph had an "almost twenty-year association with Masons" (p. 169) is highly misleading in light of the fact that Joseph himself was a Mason for only the last two years of his life.<sup>103</sup> The fact that Hyrum Smith became a Mason in the 1820s tells us nothing about Joseph's knowledge of, or attitudes about, Freemasonry, beyond the bare proposition that he knew it existed and was probably not ill-disposed to the movement.<sup>104</sup>

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Owens that this is not the case. Here we find far more evidence of Owens being closely associated with the New Age movement than we have for Joseph Smith's alleged association with hermeticists. Yet Owens insists that he does not share New Age presuppositions. Might not the same be true of Joseph Smith?

<sup>102</sup> Michael W. Homer, "'Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry': The Relationship between Freemasonry and Mormonism," *Dialogue* 27/3 (1994): 1-116, is useful and provides helpful bibliography, but frequently fails to follow these methodological imperatives.

<sup>103</sup> See, further, the comments in Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, "Mormon in the Fiery Furnace," 52-58.

<sup>104</sup> Witness the endless confusion and contradiction on the issue of the so-called "Gadianton Masons." Many critics of the Book of Mormon agree that the Gadiantons are just Masons in disguise, but no one can come up with a coherent explanation of why Joseph—if he authored the book—never used the Book of

Owens is completely uncritical in his assertions about the potential of Freemasonry to transmit esoteric knowledge to Joseph. While providing no evidence, he asserts that Albert Pike's 1871 "views [on the esoteric background of Freemasonry] reflected lore already established in Masonry during the [Nauvoo] period" (p. 168). If this is so he should demonstrate it with evidence from the early 1840s rather than 1871. Following Michael Homer, Owens asserts that "the Scottish Rite developed by [the same Albert] Pike was an evolution of the eighteenth-century French Masonic *Rite de Perfection*, which in several degrees was influenced by Kabbalah" (p. 168).<sup>105</sup> This is an intriguing claim, since "the actual existence of this Rite [of Perfection] has been placed in doubt." The evidence for the supposed *Rite de Perfection* consists of "a 'traditional' list [of grades] which was published by Masonic writers (*maçonnologues*) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."<sup>106</sup> We are thus expected to believe that Joseph was influenced by a form of Masonry that apparently did not even exist! But even if Pike in the late nineteenth century was copying a real—as opposed to mythological—French Masonic rite of the eighteenth century, how can Pike's late nineteenth-century esoteric version of Freemasonry possibly have influenced Joseph Smith?

In a similar *ante hoc* claim, Homer also appeals to the Rite of Adoption as a possible source of influence on Joseph Smith.<sup>107</sup> John Brooke has made a similar argument, to which we have responded elsewhere:

Brooke indulges in another *ante hoc* fallacy by claiming that the Mormon temple ceremony could have been influenced at its origin by "the European

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Mormon as a Masonic exposé. On the failure of the "Gadianton Mason" theory, see Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books and FARMS, 1990), 174–224.

<sup>105</sup> Owens failed to provide a reference to his citation of Homer (p. 168 n. 108); see Homer, "Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry," 94.

<sup>106</sup> Daniel Ligou, ed., *Dictionnaire de la Franc-Maçonnerie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987), 1020.

<sup>107</sup> Homer, "Similarity of Masonry," discusses Adoptive Masonry on 29, 40, 94.

Lodges of Adoption,” despite the fact that “the Rite of Adoption . . . has never been introduced into America.” (A failed attempt was first made in 1855.)<sup>108</sup>

Owens has wisely avoided explicitly claiming Adoptive Masonry as a possible antecedent for celestial marriage, hinting instead that plural marriage was introduced into Mormonism under the influence of Cagliostro’s “Egyptian” Masonic rites, because Cagliostro introduced women—not polygamy—into his organization (p. 153). This avoids the appearance of anachronism, but not the reality, since Cagliostro’s “Egyptian” Masonry was itself Adoptive. Thus Cagliostro’s “Egyptian” Masonry was also not found in the contemporary United States, and indeed had been suppressed in Europe shortly after the fall of Napoleon, two decades before Joseph became a Mason!<sup>109</sup> How Joseph could have been influenced by esoteric French or Italian Masonic orders, thousands of miles away, which did not exist when Joseph was initiated, remains a mystery.<sup>110</sup>

Unfortunately for Owens’s thesis, Joseph was initiated into one of the least esoteric systems of Freemasonry, the York rite.<sup>111</sup> Owens tacitly recognizes that Joseph’s direct contacts with Freemasonry were insufficient to account for its alleged hermetic

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<sup>108</sup> Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, “Mormon in the Fiery Furnace,” 52; cf. Albert Mackey, *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* (Chicago: Masonic History, 1921), 1:29.

<sup>109</sup> After a decade of preliminary attempts, the Rite of Egypt (*Rite de Misraim*) was founded by Cagliostro in Venice in 1788 and was introduced in France after 1810, where it was linked with anti-Royalist Bonapartist circles. As such, it was suppressed in 1820 and briefly revived between 1838 and 1841. Ligou, *Dictionnaire de la Franc-Maçonnerie*, 13, 178–81, 1018–19. On Cagliostro, see *ibid.*, 176–84, and Massimo Introvigne, “Arcana Arcanorum: Cagliostro’s Legacy in Contemporary Magical Movements,” *Syzygy: Journal of Alternative Religion and Culture* 1 (Spring/Summer 1992): 117–35.

<sup>110</sup> It is possible that late eighteenth-century English Freemasons were first influenced by developments on the Continent, then either translated or orally transmitted this lore to English Masons, who then somehow passed it on to American frontier Masons in the mid-nineteenth century. If Owens wishes to maintain such a causal development, he needs to demonstrate it with contemporary primary sources, not simply assert it.

<sup>111</sup> Also known as Blue Lodge. Owens himself acknowledges that the basic three degrees of the York rite into which Joseph was initiated had few “layerings of esoteric accretions” (p. 169).



influence. He therefore asserts that “[John C.] Bennett may very well have brought something more than [York] Blue Lodge Masonry to Nauvoo” (p. 172), and that “the Masonry [Bennett] brought to Nauvoo had several unusual occult aspects” (p. 170). Does Owens provide any evidence for these assertions? Simply a further assertion that “Bennett’s interests, including religion, medicine, the military, and Masonry, suggest a person inclined towards investigating the more esoteric aspects of Masonry” (p. 170). Just why interest in religion, medicine, and the military suggests an inclination toward esotericism is never explained.

For an intelligent discussion of these issues to be undertaken we need specific evidence of which Masonic rites were used in Nauvoo, when, by whom, what the rites contained, and what lore they claimed. Because some Masonic rite, somewhere in Europe, in a non-English context, decades before or after Joseph was born, had some esoteric content, we cannot therefore conclude that Joseph Smith in Nauvoo in 1842 was influenced by these ideas. Owens’s thesis requires us to believe that Joseph was influenced by forms of Freemasonry that did not exist in the United States, that had ceased to exist before his birth, that developed only after his death, or—as in the case of the *Rite de Perfection*—that probably didn’t even exist at all.

### Joseph Smith and Kabbalah

We now come to the heart of Owens’s article, the contention that Joseph was influenced by Kabbalah. This is the only part of his argument for which he provides new evidence and analysis. But, like the rest of his thesis, this argument evaporates under critical scrutiny. Owens’s thesis is that Alexander Neibaur possessed a library of kabbalistic texts that he read with Joseph Smith, or, at the very least, that Neibaur discussed the ideas found in the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic books with Joseph. The basic argument runs as follows:<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> I have slightly rearranged the order of Owens’s presentation to clarify the logical relationship of the arguments.

1. Neibaur knew Hebrew and tutored Joseph in that language (pp. 174, 177).<sup>2</sup> Neibaur mentions or cites from kabbalistic texts in an article in *Times and Seasons* (pp. 175–76).<sup>113</sup>

These first two propositions are indisputable; beyond this Owens increasingly enters a domain of airy speculation.

3. Neibaur had actually read the texts he cites in *Times and Seasons*—specifically the *Zohar*—rather than excerpting them from a secondary source (pp. 176–78).<sup>114</sup>

4. Neibaur therefore had the actual texts mentioned in the *Times and Seasons* in his possession in Nauvoo (pp. 119, 176–77).

5. Since Neibaur had this kabbalistic library, and taught Joseph Hebrew, Neibaur therefore taught Joseph Kabbalah (pp. 177–78).

6. Influence of these kabbalistic ideas can be found in Joseph's King Follett discourse (pp. 178–84).

Owens's position on the precise degree of Joseph's direct exposure to Kabbalah is ambiguous. There are three options: Neibaur had read kabbalistic texts and simply told Joseph about some of the ideas found therein; Neibaur read kabbalistic texts to or with Joseph; Neibaur introduced Joseph to the texts, which Joseph read and interpreted on his own. Owens's rhetoric consistently emphasizes Joseph's direct contact with Kabbalah. "Neibaur had read to Joseph from" the *Zohar* (p. 178) and Joseph "contacted symbols and lore taken directly from Kabbalah" (p. 119). He "confronted" the *Zohar* (p. 178), "quotes almost word for word" (p. 178), and "agrees, word for word," with it (p. 180). Joseph's words are "almost identical with the *Zohar's* phrasing" (p. 181), and the *Zohar* contains "exactly Joseph Smith's reading" (p. 181). The "old Bible" to which Joseph referred in the King Follett discourse was the *Zohar*

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<sup>113</sup> Alexander Neibaur, "The Jews," *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 June 1843): 220–22; 4 (15 June 1843): 233–34.

<sup>114</sup> Owens does recognize the possibility that Neibaur could have taken notes from kabbalistic books he read in England and therefore did not have the texts in Nauvoo, or that Neibaur could have obtained his information from a secondary source (p. 176). As noted below, his paper consistently argues for direct access to kabbalistic texts.

(p. 183). All this rhetoric strongly implies that Owens believes that Joseph had direct access to a copy of the *Zohar*.<sup>115</sup>

### Could Joseph or Neibaur Have Read Kabbalistic Texts—Specifically the *Zohar*?

Owens recognizes that the “study [of Kabbalah] at this basic level required some knowledge of Hebrew, access to original Hebrew Kabbalistic texts . . . [and] an adept Kabbalist as a guide” (p. 165). Consistently throughout his article, Owens speaks of the importance of the knowledge of Hebrew for a study of the *Zohar* (pp. 161, 165, 176). This is very odd, since the *Zohar*—the kabbalistic text Owens claims Joseph quoted “almost word for word” (p. 178)—was written largely in Aramaic, not Hebrew.<sup>116</sup> Yet neither the importance nor even the existence of Aramaic in the kabbalistic tradition is ever mentioned by Owens. Although Hebrew and Aramaic are related languages—rather like Spanish and Italian—they are nonetheless distinct. Indeed, “the Aramaic of the *Zohar* has no linguistic parallel” and is an “artificial construction.”<sup>117</sup> Hebrew and Aramaic are different enough that both medieval kabbalists and modern scholars have actually translated the Aramaic *Zohar* into Hebrew!<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> In a personal Internet communication, Owens insists that he never intended to claim that Joseph had personally read the *Zohar*. If this was Owens’s original position, he unfortunately did not make it clear in his article.

<sup>116</sup> Of the 24 major divisions of the *Zohar* discussed by Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 216–19, only one, the *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, “is a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic” (*ibid.*, 217; cf. 226). The rest of the *Zohar*, excepting quotations from older Hebrew texts, was written in Aramaic (*ibid.*, 226). Cf. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:64–68.

<sup>117</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 226.

<sup>118</sup> “The question of translating the *Zohar* into Hebrew had already arisen among the Kabbalists of the 14th century.” Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 239. Scholem cites eight partial or complete translations of the *Zohar* that were made through the early nineteenth century (*ibid.*, 239–40); none were published. The modern edition of Yehudah Ashlag (Jerusalem: Press of the Research Center, 1945–58) includes a Hebrew translation; Isaiah Tishby also translated selections into Hebrew—Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 238, 240, (1957–61); Tishby’s work has been translated into English—Tishby (*The Wisdom of the Zohar*); see xxi–xxxi for a discussion of its translation history. Note also the existence of a large number of Aramaic Targums, translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic; see Stephan A.



Would Joseph Smith's introductory knowledge of Hebrew have allowed him to read the *Zohar* in Aramaic? There is one piece of evidence that could indicate that it might.<sup>119</sup> Portions of ten chapters of the Old Testament are in Aramaic (called Chaldean in the early nineteenth century).<sup>120</sup> A student of Old Testament Hebrew might learn enough Aramaic to deal with these verses. In a reprint from a newspaper, Joseph Smith is quoted as having said, "as a Chaldean might exclaim: Beram etai elauh beshmayauh gauhah rauzeen. (Certainly there is a God in heaven to reveal secrets.)"<sup>121</sup> This citation is from Daniel 2:28, which is in Aramaic, an indication that some basic study of Chaldean/Aramaic might have occurred at Kirtland or Nauvoo in relation to these Aramaic biblical passages. Does this demonstrate that Joseph Smith knew enough Aramaic to read the untranslated *Zohar*?

A contextual reading of the *Times and Seasons* article shows that this passage is a political attack on Joseph Smith reprinted from the *Globe* newspaper, to which Joseph responded in the previous article in *Times and Seasons*. The *Globe* is not favorable to Joseph; it calls him one of the "quadrupeds" in a political "menagerie" in the subsequent paragraph. The *Globe* presents this Aramaic quotation as a statement by Joseph Smith. But where did the *Globe* get this passage? Was it from a printed essay? Was it transcribed from a speech? Or are these words put into Joseph's mouth by his enemies? Part of the thrust of the article is to mock Joseph's lack of education, saying ironically—in the next line—"Joseph is unquestionly [*sic*] a great scholar as well as financier."

Assuming this is an authentic quotation from Joseph—and it is not at all clear that it is—what does it tell us of his knowledge of Aramaic? In fact, the passage is a misquotation. The word transcribed as *gauhah* should read *gaulah* (*gale*<sup>3</sup>). Somehow the "L" has dropped out. It may be that a transcriber misheard the statement (if it was spoken), or it may be a typographical error by an editor. On the other hand, it could be an indication that Joseph did

Kaufman, "Aramaic," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:173–78.

<sup>119</sup> I would like to thank Clark Goble for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>120</sup> Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Daniel 2:4–7:28, along with a few scattered words and phrases.

<sup>121</sup> *Times and Seasons* 5 (18 April 1844): 511.

not know Aramaic well, and was in fact mispronouncing or misquoting. Since Hebrew and Aramaic use the same script, it is quite possible to pronounce Aramaic without being able to read it well, in the same way that someone today can pronounce Latin without being able to understand it. Since Joseph was quoting a biblical text for which an English translation was available, it would be possible for him to work from the King James Version to the Aramaic without knowing Aramaic well. Joseph similarly occasionally quoted Latin in his Nauvoo-period speeches. Are we to assume that he knew Latin well, or was he merely using such quotations as rhetorical flourishes according to the oratorical custom of his day?

But even assuming Joseph could read biblical Aramaic, the dialect of biblical Aramaic is different from that of the *Zohar*.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, the *Zohar* is a very arcane and complicated text. A basic knowledge of biblical Aramaic would not necessarily be sufficient to allow someone to read it. On the other hand, this passage from the *Globe* is at least some evidence—though relatively weak—that Joseph could read some Aramaic. Ironically, although this supports Owens's thesis, it does not help his original paper since he didn't present this evidence or even deal with the distinction between Hebrew and Aramaic at all. The question still remains: even if Joseph knew sufficient Aramaic to read the *Zohar*, did he have access to a copy of the *Zohar*?

Another question is never addressed by Owens: did Neibaur know Aramaic? The study of Aramaic was part of a traditional rabbinic education because much of the Talmud is in Aramaic. Did Neibaur receive a traditional rabbinic education and therefore know enough Aramaic to read the *Zohar*? In fact, there are good indications that he did not. Traditional Jewish education in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century began with the *Heder* (primary school), for students from about age five to thirteen, in which Hebrew, the Torah, and introductory Mishnah were taught. Some rudimentary biblical Aramaic was occasionally introduced, but hardly enough to prepare one for the arcana of the *Zohar*. Formal Aramaic instruction was for the most part reserved for students fourteen and older in the *yeshivah*, which focused largely on

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<sup>122</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 226.

the Aramaic Talmud, and which was intended as preparation for the rabbinate.<sup>123</sup>

However, beginning in the late eighteenth century, European Jewish education underwent a major transformation as part of the *Haskalah*—the Jewish Enlightenment (c. 1770s–1880s).<sup>124</sup> In new *Haskalah* schools, although study of Hebrew and the Torah were retained, “the traditional study of Mishnah and Talmud was abandoned, even in the secondary schools.”<sup>125</sup> Did Neibaur attend a traditional yeshivah from the age of fourteen to seventeen, when he entered medical school (p. 174), or did he attend one of the new *Haskalah* schools, which had abandoned the study of Aramaic and the Talmud for more secular studies? The fact that Neibaur at age seventeen had learned enough Latin to be admitted into the Berlin medical school is an excellent indication that he had attended a *Haskalah* school where Latin could be studied, rather than a yeshivah. If Neibaur studied in a yeshivah from fourteen to seventeen, how did he learn enough Latin to enter medical school? If not, how did he learn enough Aramaic to study the *Zohar*? Since we know that Neibaur knew Latin (p. 174), it would appear that he must have studied in a *Haskalah* school, and therefore did not study Aramaic extensively.

Another important impact of the *Haskalah* education system was that its graduates were emancipated from the ghetto, received secular university degrees, assimilated to mainstream gentile society, and went on to important secular careers in the middle class. Many abandoned Judaism and converted to Christianity.<sup>126</sup> In this regard Neibaur is also a classic example of a *Haskalah* Jew—he attended a gentile university, embarked on a career as a dentist, converted to Christianity, and assimilated to gentile society. And, as Scholem notes, there was a “fervent assault on the Kabbalah by the *Haskalah* movement in the 19th century.”<sup>127</sup> Indeed, as noted above, the study of the *Zohar* was decreasing in both Christian and

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<sup>123</sup> William W. Brickman, “Education,” in *EJ* 6:382–466, esp. 413–26; the article provides a general background on the history of Jewish education.

<sup>124</sup> Yehuda Slutsky, “*Haskalah*,” in *EJ* 7:1433–52.

<sup>125</sup> Brickman, “Education,” in *EJ* 6:422.

<sup>126</sup> Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

<sup>127</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 86; cf. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:28.



Jewish circles in the late eighteenth century, at which time “students of the *Zohar* declined in number, and the Kabbalah became once more, particularly in the East, a secret doctrine confined to restricted circles.”<sup>128</sup> Thus we find Owens claiming that Neibaur and Joseph were influenced by kabbalistic ideas during precisely the period of kabbalism’s least influence—between its decline in the mid-eighteenth century and its revival in the late nineteenth.

Finally, although Neibaur had some early Jewish education in which he learned Hebrew, he stopped Jewish education at the age of seventeen to pursue secular studies at the University of Berlin, converting to Christianity at about twenty (p. 174); thus, even if he had attended a traditional yeshivah, his study of Jewish Aramaic literature must have remained fairly superficial. Furthermore, according to traditional kabbalistic practice, initiates into the mysteries of Kabbalah were to be at least thirty years old and well versed in rabbinic literature.<sup>129</sup> So why would any kabbalist have taught Neibaur—a teenage yeshivah dropout who converted to Christianity at age twenty—the sacred mysteries of the *Zohar*, which were not to be taught to anyone younger than thirty? As Owens himself notes, kabbalistic texts are so arcane that students invariably need an “adept Kabbalist as a guide” (p. 165). Thus, even if Neibaur could read Aramaic well—which is unlikely—it does not demonstrate that he had read the *Zohar*, only that he was capable of reading it.<sup>130</sup>

Although it is impossible to know for sure, the scant evidence indicates that neither Neibaur nor Joseph Smith had more than a basic knowledge of biblical Aramaic. The fact that Joseph was tutored by Neibaur in languages indicates that whatever the level

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<sup>128</sup> Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:29; on the decline of Christian Kabbalah, see *ibid.*, 1:27.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:29.

<sup>130</sup> There is, however, one piece of evidence that Neibaur might have known some Aramaic. In his *Times and Seasons* article he states “The place where those who roll themselves . . . is Mount Olivet, according to the Chaldaic translation [i.e., Targum] 8:5, Song of Solomon. Solomon prophesies there that at the resurrection, Mount Olivet will open itself so that the righteous may come out of it” (Neibaur, “The Jews,” 222). I will argue below that Neibaur was citing a secondary source here. I would like to thank Clark Goble for bringing this passage to my attention.

of Joseph's knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic, it was inferior to Neibaur's. It is unlikely that either man had a sufficient grasp of Aramaic to delve into the extremely arcane, abstruse, and untranslated *Zohar*.<sup>131</sup> Since Neibaur converted to Christianity before the requisite age of thirty, it is highly unlikely that he ever studied Kabbalah. But, granting for the sake of argument that either Neibaur or Joseph knew Aramaic sufficiently well, the question still remains—is there any evidence that they in fact actually read the *Zohar*?

### Did Neibaur Have a Kabbalistic Library?

Owens argues that Alexander Neibaur “apparently . . . [owned] an impressive library of Kabbalistic writings” and “evidently new [*sic*] Kabbalah and its principal written works” (p. 173). Owens repeatedly asserts different versions of this idea: Neibaur “not only knew something of Kabbalah, but apparently possessed a collection of original Jewish Kabbalistic works in Nauvoo” (p. 175). Neibaur “probably both possessed the [kabbalistic] texts and had a general knowledge of their contents” and “had access to the works he quoted” (p. 176). These possibilities are eventually turned into actualities when Owens speaks unequivocally of the kabbalistic “books Neibaur possessed” (p. 177). Owens admits that “where and how Neibaur first came in contact with Kabbalah remains a mystery” (p. 174).

One explanation for this “mystery” is, of course, simply that he never studied Kabbalah at all. What evidence does Owens present that Neibaur had this alleged kabbalistic library? No kabbalistic books have survived. No one in Nauvoo ever saw or mentioned these alleged books. Despite their undoubtedly great

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<sup>131</sup> Wirszubski maintains that “Pico [della Mirandola] could write an exercise in Hebrew prose composition moderately well. But to read a kabbalistic book in the original his mastery of Hebrew would have had to be of an entirely different order which would take years to acquire. . . . It is quite out of the question that Pico could at that time [1486] have read an untranslated kabbalistic book unaided.” *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 4 (Wirszubski is not discussing the Aramaic *Zohar* here, but Hebrew kabbalistic texts). If Pico, one of the greatest polymathic scholars of the Renaissance, was unable to read kabbalistic texts after his introductory study of Hebrew, why should we assume Joseph Smith would have been able to?

value and bulk, they are not mentioned in Neibaur's estate. Neither Neibaur nor anyone else ever quoted from them before or after the *Times and Seasons* article. No *uniquely* kabbalistic ideas or terms surface in Latter-day Saint thought. For all intents, these rare valuable books—important enough to supposedly transform Latter-day Saint doctrine in the King Follett Discourse—simply vanished off the face of the earth. And all this study of kabbalistic texts was purportedly going on at precisely the time Joseph was exhibiting the Egyptian papyri. If, as alleged, Joseph believed the *Zohar* was the “old Bible” (p. 183), why did Joseph not exhibit the *Zohar* and other rare kabbalistic texts along with the Egyptian papyri?

Owens's argument is that since Neibaur quotes kabbalistic texts in his *Times and Seasons* article, he must have had direct access to those texts. There is, of course, a counterexplanation—that Neibaur obtained the information he presents in his article from a secondary source.<sup>132</sup> Owens maintains that “a single uncited compilation of kabbalistic materials containing this wide collection of citations has not yet been brought to my attention” (p. 176 n. 127). Let me assist. The probable source for Neibaur's information is the *Sefer Nishmat Hayyim* of Manasseh ben Israel (1604–1657), originally published in 1651.<sup>133</sup> Manasseh was a brilliant man, “regarded in the world of scholarship as the leading representative of Hebrew learning,”<sup>134</sup> who founded the first Hebrew printing press in Amsterdam in 1626. He wrote the *Nishmat* in the prime of his intellectual life. Manasseh's *Nishmat* is

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<sup>132</sup> Owens recognizes this possibility (p. 176 n. 127), along with the options that Neibaur studied the texts in Europe, but did not have them with him in Nauvoo.

<sup>133</sup> For basic background on Manasseh (or Menasseh) ben Israel, see Yosef Kaplan, Henry Mechoulam, and Richard H. Popkin, *Menasseh ben Israel and His World* (Leiden: Brill, 1989); Jesse Ross, “A Study of Manasseh ben Israel's ‘Nishmath Hayyim’” (master's thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1931); Judah J. Slotki, *Menasseh ben Israel: His Life and Times* (London: Jewish Religious Educational Publications, 1953); Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh ben Israel* (1935; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975); Manasseh ben Israel, *Sefer Nishmat Hayim* (1651; reprint, Brooklyn: Saphrograph, 1984 or 1985). In personal correspondence with me Owens suggested that Manasseh's work might be a possible secondary source for Neibaur's article.

<sup>134</sup> Cecil Roth, “Manasseh ben Israel,” in *EJ* 11:856.



the first text quoted by Neibaur in his *Times and Seasons* article. All other texts cited by Neibaur date from before 1651, and therefore could have been read and quoted by Manasseh. A comparison of Manasseh's sources used in the *Nishmat* shows that most of the sources cited by Neibaur were also used by Manasseh.<sup>135</sup> Finally, Manasseh's *Nishmat* was reprinted in 1841, the year Neibaur left England for Nauvoo, and would therefore have been easily accessible in a contemporary edition.<sup>136</sup>

Owens's theory requires that Neibaur have access to dozens of rare Hebrew books, some available only in editions that were two or three hundred years old. Neibaur must have read all these books and personally selected those passages relating to the theme of his short essay. After all this immense labor, for some unexplained reason Neibaur never refers to or cites from this extensive library of rare books again. Furthermore, for some arcane reason never explained by Owens, Neibaur appears to have studied only books published before 1651, ignoring all the more accessible and inexpensive works published in the subsequent two centuries! The alternative theory requires that Neibaur have access to only one book, reprinted in the year before he published his article, a book by a world-famous Jewish scholar who wrote an entire book on the subject of Neibaur's short essay, who had been an international book dealer, and who is known to have read and cited nearly all the works mentioned by Neibaur. Thus only one book need have been misplaced or overlooked in Neibaur's estate, rather than an entire kabbalistic library.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ross, "A Study of Manasseh ben Israel's 'Nishmath Hayyim,'" 10–23, provides a list of the main sources used in Manasseh's *Nishmat*, which can be compared with the sources cited by Neibaur in the *Times and Seasons* (see appendix). Ross notes that Manasseh quotes from all the standard Talmudic literature and the *Zohar*.

<sup>136</sup> Manasseh ben Israel, *Sefer Nishmat Hayim* (1651; reprint, Stettin: Schrentzel, 1841).

<sup>137</sup> I have neither the time nor the inclination to read Manasseh's entire work searching for the possible references cited in Neibaur's *Times and Seasons* article. Further research in this direction could conclusively demonstrate one way or another if the *Nishmat* was Neibaur's major or sole source for his article.

## Did Joseph Smith Cite the *Zohar* in the King Follett Discourse?

The heart of Owens's thesis is that Joseph Smith was influenced by the *Zohar* in developing the ideas found in the King Follett discourse (pp. 178–84). The King Follett discourse focuses on a number of unique Latter-day Saint doctrines: the possibility of human deification, the plurality of gods, the hierarchy and council of the gods, and the idea that God was once as man is now.<sup>138</sup> In his attempt to establish parallels between Kabbalah and the King Follett Discourse, Owens takes both the *Zohar* and Joseph's sermon out of context and seriously distorts their ideas. He provides two examples from the King Follett discourse in which he claims Joseph is quoting "almost word for word from the first section of the *Zohar*" (p. 178). These examples are highly problematic, and will be analyzed in detail.

*Genesis 1:1 and the Creation.* Owens asserts that Joseph derived his interpretation of Genesis 1:1, at least in part, from the *Zohar*, which "agrees, word for word, with Joseph's reading" (p. 180), and is "exactly Joseph Smith's reading" (p. 181). A careful analysis of these texts demonstrates that Owens is, at best, exaggerating. The entire passage from the *Zohar* will be cited in order to provide a full context for the ideas that allegedly influenced Joseph. The portions of the text that Owens quotes are

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<sup>138</sup> The King Follett Discourse is available from several different publications: Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl, *The Prophet Joseph Smith's King Follett Discourse: A Six Column Comparison of Original Notes and Amalgamations* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1983) (hereafter Cannon), provides six parallel columns of the four journal sources, the standard edition (= *Time and Seasons*, *HC*, and *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*), and Stan Larson's amalgamated text; Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18/1 (1978): 193–208 (hereafter Larson), which is also in the Cannon and Dahl collection. Critical editions of the journal sources can be found in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980); the standard text was first published in *Times and Seasons* (15 August 1844), reprinted in *HC* 6:302–17, and in *TPJS*, 342–62. For general background on the King Follett Discourse, see Donald Q. Cannon, "The King Follett Discourse: Joseph Smith's Greatest Sermon in Historical Perspective," *BYU Studies* 18/1 (1978): 179–92; Van Hale, "The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse," *BYU Studies* 18/1 (1978): 209–25.

highlighted in bold face. Readers can decide for themselves how much this passage “resonates” with Latter-day Saint thought when read in its proper context.<sup>139</sup>

At the outset the decision of the King [Keter = Crown = En Sof, the first *sefira*]<sup>140</sup> made a tracing in the supernal effulgence, a lamp of scintillations, and there issued within the impenetrable recesses of the mysterious limitless a shapeless nucleus enclosed in a ring, neither white nor black nor red nor green nor of any colour at all. When he [Crown = En Sof] took measurements, he fashioned colours to show within and within the lamp there issued a certain effluence from which colours were imprinted below. The most mysterious Power [Crown = En Sof] enshrouded in the limitless cave, as it were, without cleaving its void, remaining wholly unknowable until from the force of the strokes there shone forth a supernal and mysterious point [*Hokhmah* = Wisdom = second *sefira*]. Beyond that point [Wisdom] there is no knowable, and therefore it [Wisdom] is called *Reshith* (beginning), the creative utterance which is the starting-point of all.

**It is written: *And the intelligent shall shine (yazhiru) like the brightness (zohar) of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever (Dan. 12:3). There was indeed a “brightness” (Zohar). The Most Mysterious [Crown =***

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<sup>139</sup> In order to match Owens’s translation, I will use Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, trans., *The Zohar*, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (London: Soncino, 1984); the first edition, with the same pagination, was published from 1931–34. References to the *Zohar* will be made to the *editio princeps* pagination, with the Sperling and Simon pages following an equal sign. A superior translation of much of the *Zohar*, with very useful notes and commentary can be found in Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, which I have used in my interpretation. For the original Aramaic text I have used *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Jerusalem: Yavd ha-Sefarim, 1994).

<sup>140</sup> The *sefirot* are ten emanations of divine will, authority, creative power, or spiritual force, which were first mentioned in the *Sefer Yetzira* (sixth century A.D. or earlier), and which were the objects of extensive discussion and speculation in kabbalistic literature. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:269–370; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 23–26.



En Sof] **struck its void, and caused this point to shine. This “beginning”** [*reshith* = Wisdom] **then extended, and made for itself a palace** [*Binah* = Palace = third *sefira*] **for its honour and glory.** There [in Palace = *Binah*] it [Beginning = Wisdom] sowed a sacred seed which was to generate for the benefit of the universe, and to which may be applied the Scriptural words “the holy seed is the stock thereof” (Is. 6:3). Again there was *Zohar* [brightness] in that it sowed a seed for its glory, just as the silkworm encloses itself, as it were, in a palace of its own production which is both useful and beautiful. Thus by means of this “beginning” [*bereshith* = Wisdom] the Mysterious Unknown [En Sof] made this palace [Aram. *heykala*, lit. “temple” = *Binah*]. **This palace** [*Binah*] **is called *Elohim*, and this doctrine is contained in the words, “By means of a beginning** [Wisdom] **(it) [En Sof] created *Elohim*** [Palace = *Binah*].” The *Zohar* [brightness] is that from which were created all the creative utterances through the extension of the point of this mysterious brightness. Nor need we be surprised at the use of the word “created” [*bara*] in this connection, seeing that we read further on, “And God created [*bara*] man in his image” (Gen. 1:27). A further esoteric interpretation of the word *bereshith* is as follows. The name of the starting-point of all is *Ehyeh* (I shall be). The holy name when inscribed at its side is *Elohim*, but when inscribed by circumscription is *Asher*, the hidden and recondite temple,<sup>141</sup> the source of that which is mystically called *Reshith*.<sup>142</sup> The word *Asher* [i.e., the letters *Aleph*, *Shin*, *Resh* from the word *bereshith*] is anagrammatically *Rosh* [head], the beginning which issues from *Reshith* [Wisdom]. So when [15*b*] the point [Beginning = Wisdom] and the temple [Palace = *Binah*

<sup>141</sup> The Aramaic reads *heykala*, literally “temple,” or “palace,” as translated here. However, Sperling and Simon occasionally translate this term as “palace” (as above), which makes the relationships in their translation unclear.

<sup>142</sup> The *Zohar* is here speculating on the name of God, “*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* = I am who I am,” found in Exodus 3:14.

= Elohim] were firmly established together, then *bereshith* combined the supernal Beginning [En Sof] with Wisdom. Afterwards the character of that temple [Temple/Palace = Binah = Elohim] was changed, and it was called "house" (*bayith*). The combination of this with the supernal point which is called *rosh* gives *bereshith*,<sup>143</sup> which is the name used so long as the house was uninhabited. When, however, it [*bayith* = Binah = Elohim] was sown with seed [by Wisdom] to make it habitable, it was called *Elohim*, hidden and mysterious. The *Zohar* [brightness] was hidden and withdrawn so long as the building was within and yet to bring forth, and the house was extended only so far as to find room for the holy seed. Before it had conceived and had extended sufficiently to be habitable, it was not called *Elohim*, but all was still included in the term *Bereshith*. After it had acquired the name of *Elohim*, it brought forth offspring from the seed that had been implanted in it.<sup>144</sup>

Could Joseph possibly have formulated the ideas in the King Follett discourse from this passage in the *Zohar*? Even the bold-face passages selectively taken out of context by Owens bear little resemblance to Joseph's King Follett Discourse:

I will go to the very first Hebrew word—BERESHITH—in the Bible and make a comment on the first sentence of the history of creation: "In the beginning. . ." I want to analyze the word BERESHITH. BE—in, by, through, and everything else; next, ROSH—the head; ITH. Where did it come from? When the inspired man wrote it, he did not put the first part—the BE—there; but a man—an old Jew without any

<sup>143</sup> The Hebrew letters B-Y-T (*bayith*) when anagrammatically added to R-<sup>o</sup>-Sh (*rosh*) can spell B-R-E-<sup>o</sup>-Sh-Y-T = *be-re 'shith* = in the beginning.

<sup>144</sup> *Zohar*, 1:15a-15b = 1:63-64. See also Tishby's translation with extensive annotation in *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:309-13. Tishby's essays on En Sof, emanation, and the *sefirot* are all extremely useful. *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:229-55, 269-307. The eventual offspring of the feminine/mother Palace = Binah = Elohim are the seven other *sefirot*.

authority—put it there. He thought it too bad to begin to talk about the head of any man. It read in the first: “The Head One of the Gods brought forth the Gods.” This is the true meaning of the words. ROSHITH [BARA ELOHIM] signifies [the Head] to bring forth the Elohim.<sup>145</sup>

A comparative chart of the two readings gives the following:

Joseph reads Genesis 1:1 as follows:

<i>rosh</i> [ <i>ith</i> ]	<i>bara</i>	<i>elohim</i>
the Head [God]	brought forth	the gods

The *Zohar* interprets Genesis 1:1 as follows:

<i>be</i>	<i>reshith</i>	<i>bara</i>	<i>elohim</i>
by means of	the Beginning	[it] created	the palace
	#2 Hokhmah	#1 Keter =	#3 Binah
	= Wisdom	En Sof	

Contrary to Owens’s claim that the *Zohar*’s interpretation is “exactly Joseph Smith’s reading” (p. 181), I find that Joseph’s understanding is quite different.

1. Joseph drops the Hebrew particle *be*, because it was added by “an old Jew without any authority.”<sup>146</sup> The *Zohar* retains the particle, understanding it in an instrumental sense—“by means of”—rather than the usual temporal sense—“at the time of” (both are within the normal range of Hebrew usage).<sup>147</sup>

2. Joseph transforms *reshith* into its triliteral Semitic root *rosh*, dropping the *ith* (presumably because it, too, was added by the Jew without authority). He understands *rosh* to mean “the Head [God].” The *Zohar* retains *reshith*, understanding it as a proper

<sup>145</sup> King Follett Discourse: Cannon, 37; *Writings of Joseph Smith*, 345, 350–51, 358; Larson, 202; *TPJS*, 348. I am citing the Larson version.

<sup>146</sup> King Follett Discourse: Cannon, 37–38; *Writings of Joseph Smith*, 358; Larson, 202; *TPJS*, 348. One might reasonably ask why Joseph would have considered the *Zohar* to be the authoritative “old Bible” when it kept the unauthoritative *be*.

<sup>147</sup> For the grammar of the Hebrew particle *be*, see Emil Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed. (1910; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 379–80.



name, "Beginning," a metaphorical reference to the second *sefira*, Wisdom. For the *Zohar* the "Head God" would be the first *sefira*, Keter/En Sof, not the second *sefira*, Wisdom/Beginning.

3. Joseph understands *bara* to mean to "bring forth" or to "organize." He explicitly rejects *ex nihilo* creation.

The learned doctors who are preaching salvation say that God created the heavens and earth out of nothing. . . . You ask them why, and they say, "Doesn't the Bible say He created the world?" And they infer that it must be out of nothing. The word create came from the word BARA, but it doesn't mean so. What does BARA mean? It means to organize; the same as a man would organize and use things to build a ship. Hence, we infer that God Himself had materials to organize the world out of chaos—chaotic matter—which is element and in which dwells all the glory. Element had an existence from the time He had.<sup>148</sup>

Although the *Zohar* has a complicated understanding of creation by emanation, its fundamental understanding of *bara* is "to create" *ex nihilo*. "When the Holy One, blessed be He, created His worlds, He created them from nothing, and brought them into actuality, and made substance out of them; and you find the word *bara* (He created) used always of something that He created from nothing, and brought into actuality."<sup>149</sup> Thus Joseph's understanding of creation is exactly opposite that of the kabbalists.

4. Joseph and the *Zohar* each have a different subject for the verb *bara*. Joseph sees *rosh*, the "Head [God]," as creating, while the *Zohar* understands an implied pronoun *it*, referring to the first *sefira*—Keter/Crown/En Sof—as doing the creating, *by means of* the Beginning (*reshith*), a metaphor for the second *sefira* Wisdom. For the *Zohar* "the Beginning"—*reshith*—is not the grammatical subject of the verb *bara*, while for Joseph it is.

<sup>148</sup> King Follett Discourse: Cannon, 45–48; *Writings of Joseph Smith*, 345, 350–51, 358; Larson, 203; *TPJS*, 348.

<sup>149</sup> *Zohar Hadash, Bereshit*, 17b, in Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 2:572; see 2:549–55 for a discussion of the complexities of the kabbalistic understanding of creation.

5. The only similarity between these two interpretations is that, for both, *elohim* is the object rather than the subject of the verb.<sup>150</sup> But even there, Joseph understands *elohim* as the object of the sentence, and interprets it literally as “gods.” While the *Zohar* also sees *elohim* as the object of the sentence, it interprets it quite metaphorically as “palace,” referring to the third emanation, the *sefira* Binah (Understanding).

When read in context and understood correctly, it is very difficult to see how this passage from the *Zohar* “agrees word for word” (p. 180) or is “exactly” (p. 181) like Joseph’s interpretation. Indeed, I am baffled as to how anyone could be expected to read this passage from the *Zohar*, and come up with Joseph Smith’s understanding of creation and the nature of God.

*Plurality of Gods.* Owens next alleges that Joseph’s concept of the plurality and hierarchy of the gods derives—at least in part—from his reading the *Zohar*. Speaking of Joseph’s understanding of the word *elohim*, Owens maintains that

Smith translates *Elohim* in the plural, as “the Gods.” The word is indeed in a plural Hebrew form, but by the orthodox interpretative conventions Joseph was taught in his Kirtland Hebrew class . . . it is read as singular. In the *Zohar*, however, it is interpreted in the plural. This is witnessed throughout the *Zohar* and appears clearly in the following paragraph from the opening sections of the work,<sup>151</sup> where the phrase “Let us make man” (Gen. 1:26) is used as the basis for a discussion [in the *Zohar*] on the plurality of the gods: “ ‘Us’ certainly refers to two, of which one said to the other above it, ‘let us make,’ nor did it do anything save with the permission and direction of the one above it, while the one above did nothing without consulting

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<sup>150</sup> It should be noted that Joseph’s reading is standard English syntax with Hebrew vocabulary.

<sup>151</sup> Owens provides no evidence for his assertion that the term *elohim* is consistently used with plural verbs in the *Zohar*. The idiosyncratic use of *elohim* in the *Zohar* is discussed below (see pp. 308–11). In the KJV Bible, when the verb associated with *elohim* is singular, it is generally translated as “God.” When the verb is plural, *elohim* is generally translated as “gods,” or occasionally “angels.”

its colleague. But that which is called 'the Cause above all causes,' which has no superior or even equal, as it is written, 'To whom shall ye liken me, that I should be equal?' (Is. 40:25), said, 'See now that I, I am he, and Elohim is not with me,' from whom he should take counsel. . . . Withal the colleagues explained the word Elohim in this verse as referring to other gods." Within this passage is both the concept of plurality and of the hierarchy of Gods acting "with the permission and direction of the one above it, while the one above did nothing without consulting its colleague." This interpretation is of course echoed in the King Follett discourse and became a foundation for all subsequent Mormon theosophy.<sup>152</sup> (p. 182)

Owens's analysis here is replete with difficulties. Owens claims that the passages he quotes are a commentary on Genesis 1:26. While it is true that this passage is found in the general section on Genesis 1:26 (*Zohar* 1:22a–24b = 1:90–97), the specific text cited by Owens is actually—in typical *Zoharic* fashion—a lengthy digression on Deuteronomy 32:39 (*Zohar* 1:22b–23a = 1:92–94), which reads "See now that I, I am he, and *elohim* is/are not with me." Here is the entire passage in question, with the sections quoted by Owens in bold type.

R[abbi] Simeon then proceeded, taking as his text: *See now that I, I am he, and Elohim is not with me, etc.* (Deut. 32:39). He said: "Friends, here are some profound mysteries which I desire to reveal to you now that permission has been given to utter them. Who is it that says, 'See now that I, I am he'? This is the Cause which is above all those on high, that which is called the Cause of causes [Wisdom = *Hokhmah*]. It is above those other causes [the *Sefiroth*], since none of those

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<sup>152</sup> Citing *Zohar* 22b–23a = 92–94. Owens's page references from the *Zohar* are inaccurate. He claims that the passage is from 1:23b (p. 182 n. 143), while in fact the material before the ellipses is from 1:22b = 93 and the material after the ellipses is from 1:23a = 94; cf. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:258–59. Incidentally, despite Owens's rhetoric, it is not at all clear that Mormonism has a "theosophy."



causes does anything till it obtains permission from that which is above it, as we pointed out above in respect to the expression, 'Let us make man' [in Gen. 1:26]. **'Us' certainly refers to two, of which one [Wisdom] said to the other above it [En Sof], 'let us make', nor did it [Wisdom] do anything save with the permission and direction of the one above it, while the one above did nothing without consulting its colleague. But that which is called 'the Cause above all causes' [Crown = Keter = En Sof], which has no superior or even equal, as it is written, 'To whom shall ye liken me, that I should be equal?' (Is. 40:25), said, 'See now that I, I am he, and Elohim [the third Sefirah Binah] is not with me' [Deut. 32:39], from whom he should take counsel, like that of which it is written, 'and God said, Let us make man'.**"

The colleagues here interrupted him and said, "Rabbi, allow us to make a remark. Did you not state above that the Cause of causes [Hokhmah/Wisdom] said to the Sefirah *Kether* [En Sof], 'Let us make man'?"

He answered, "You do not listen to what you are saying. There is something that is called 'Cause of causes' [Hokhmah], but that is not the 'Cause above all causes' [En Sof] which I mentioned, which has no colleague of which it should take counsel, for it is unique, prior to all, and has no partner. Therefore it [Crown = Keter = En Sof] says: 'See now that I, I am he, and Elohim is not with me', of which it should take counsel, since it has no colleague and no partner, nor even number, for there is a 'one' which connotes combination, such as male and female, of whom it is written, 'for I have called him one' (Is. 51:2); but this [En Sof] is one without number and without combination, and therefore it is said: 'and Elohim is not with me'."

They all rose and prostrated themselves before him, saying, "happy the man whose Master agrees with him in the exposition of hidden mysteries which have not been revealed to the holy angels."

He proceeded: "Friends, we must expound the rest of the verse [Deuteronomy 32:39], since it contains many hidden mysteries. The next words are: *I kill and make alive, etc.* That is to say, through the *Sefiroth* on the right side I make alive and through the *Sefiroth* on the left side I kill; but if the Central Column [of the Tree of the Sefirot] does not concur, sentence cannot be passed, since they form a court of three. Sometimes, [23a] even when they all three agree to condemn, there comes the right hand which is outstretched to receive those that repent; this is the *Tetragrammaton*, and it is also the Shekinah, which is called 'right hand', from the side of [the Sefira] *Hesed* (kindness). When a man repents, this hand saves him from punishment. But when the Cause which is above all causes [En Sof] condemns, then 'there is none that delivers from my hand'." [Deut. 32:39]

**Withal the colleagues explained the word *Elohim* in this verse [Deut. 32:39] as referring to other gods,<sup>153</sup> and the words "I kill and make alive" as meaning "I kill with my Shekinah him who is guilty, and preserve by it him who is innocent."**

What, however, has been said above concerning the Supreme Cause [En Sof] is a secret which has been transmitted only to wise men and prophets. See now how many hidden causes there are enveloped in the *Sefiroth* and, as it were, mounted on the *Sefiroth*, hidden from the comprehension of human beings: of them it is said, 'for one higher than another watcheth' (Eccl. 5:7). There are lights upon lights, one more clear than another, each one dark by comparison with the one above it from which it receives its light. As for the Supreme Cause [En Sof], all lights are dark in its presence.

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<sup>153</sup> The 1994 Aramaic edition of *Sefer ha-Zohar* I consulted has almost an additional page of Aramaic text before and after this passage that is not found in the Sperling and Simon translation, again indicating the importance of consulting the original texts Smith and Neibaur supposedly read, rather than relying on a translation from almost a century later.

Another explanation of the verse "Let us make man in our image after our likeness" was given by the colleagues, who put these words into the mouth of the ministering angels. Said R. Simeon to them, "Since they [the angels] know what has been and what will be, they must have known that he [Adam] was destined to sin. Why, then, did they make this proposal [to create Adam]? Nay more, Uzza and Azael [two angels, who eventually fell] actually opposed it [the creation of Adam]. For when the *Shekhinah* said to God 'Let us make man', they [Uzza and Azael] said, 'What is man that thou shouldst know him? Why desirest thou to create man, who, as thou knowest, will sin before thee through his wife? Who is the darkness to his light, light being male and darkness female?'"<sup>154</sup>

The passage from the *Zohar* cited by Owens before the ellipses is, in fact, a digression within a digression, referring back to the original theme of the entire section of the commentary, Genesis 1:26. Owens uses ellipses to cut an entire page of the text in the English translation, during which time the theme shifts to Deuteronomy 32:39. The antecedent of "this verse" in Owens's post-ellipses phrase "withal the colleagues explained the word Elohim in *this verse* as referring to other gods" is not Genesis 1:26 as Owens claims (p. 182), but Deuteronomy 32:39!

In context it is quite clear that the *Zohar* makes no mention of the hierarchy or council of the gods mentioned by Joseph;<sup>155</sup> the *Zohar* speaks instead of the participation of the *sefirot* (emanations), the ministering angels and the *Shekhinah* (literally the "dwelling," but roughly the Holy Spirit), none of which are mentioned by Joseph. The exact antecedent of the phrase "other gods" in this passage is ambiguous. It may well be a technical term from the Old Testament referring not to the true God, but to

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<sup>154</sup> *Zohar*, 22b–23a = 1:92–94. Cf. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:258–59.

<sup>155</sup> King Follett Discourse: Cannon, 37; *Writings of Joseph Smith*, 345, 350–51, 358; Larson, 202–3; *TPJS*, 348, and the book of Abraham 4 and 5 for information on the council of the gods.



the false pagan gods.<sup>156</sup> *Contra* Owens, who claims that *elohim* in the *Zohar* refers to a plurality of gods (pp. 182–83), the term *elohim* has a technical meaning in the *Zohar*. “The name *Elohim* is often used for three *Sefirot* jointly: *Binah* [#3 Understanding], *Gevurah* [#5 Power], and *Malkhut* [#10 Sovereignty].”<sup>157</sup> Another set of code names for the *sefirot* includes

a range of ten names [of God] . . . [which] are applied particularly to the ten *sefirot*. The names in the order of the *sefirot* are: *Ehyeh* [= I; #1 Crown], *Yah* [= shortened form of YHVH; #2 Wisdom], *YHVH* with the vocalization of *Elohim* [= YeHoViH; #3 Understanding], *El* [= God; #4 Love], *Elohim* [= God/gods; #5 Power], *YHVH* [= Yahweh/Jehovah; #6 Beauty], *YHVH Zeva’ot* [= Yahweh of Armies, translated in the KJV as “Lord of Hosts”; #7 Eternity], *Elohim Zeva’ot* [= God of Hosts; #8 Majesty], *Shaddai* [= Almighty; #9 Foundation], *Adonai* [= Lord; #10 Sovereignty].”<sup>158</sup>

Thus, when properly understood, this passage does not refer to a plurality of gods, but to specific *sefirot* that are given the name *elohim* by the kabbalists.

For the kabbalist, these names of God, including *elohim*, do not represent ontologically separate divine beings—as in Joseph Smith’s understanding—but different powers or emanations of the single divine reality. “The Torah can be seen as a great storehouse of the names of God in different combinations, all of which

<sup>156</sup> The *loci classici* are Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7 “thou shalt have no *other gods* before me.” The phrase *other gods* (Hebrew *elohim akherim*) is ubiquitous throughout the Old Testament (see, for example, Deuteronomy 6:14; 17:3; 28:36; Judges 2:19; 1 Kings 14:9; Robert Young, *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 723c, provides many other references), almost always referring to false pagan deities.

<sup>157</sup> Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:294.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:269, cf. 269–307 for a detailed discussion of the *sefirot* in the *Zohar*. “There is hardly any mention of *Sefirot* [by that name in the *Zohar*], apart from the later sections. Instead we have a whole string of names: ‘levels,’ ‘powers,’ ‘sides’ or ‘areas’ (*sitrin*), ‘worlds,’ ‘firmaments,’ ‘pillars,’ ‘lights,’ ‘colors,’ ‘days,’ ‘gates,’ ‘streams,’ ‘garments,’ ‘crowns,’ and others” (Tishby 1:269). Note that the term *elohim* is not included in Tishby’s list of the usual names for the *sefirot*.

designate specific forces of emanation.”<sup>159</sup> Although some Jewish opponents of kabbalism accused them of polytheism, the kabbalists themselves rejected this criticism. The *sefirot* were not separate gods, but were emanations or instruments of God. Kabbalists frequently described the relationship between God and the *sefirot* metaphorically as the relationship between a coal and its flame or a lamp and its light.<sup>160</sup>

*Anthropomorphism.* Another significant difference between the kabbalistic and Joseph’s understanding of God is divine anthropomorphism.<sup>161</sup> Joseph Smith’s understanding of God is explicitly and unrepentantly anthropomorphic. “God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret! . . . If you were to see Him today, you would see Him in all the person, image, fashion, and very form of a man, *like yourselves*.”<sup>162</sup> Although kabbalistic literature uses anthropomorphic language extensively, the kabbalists were insistent that such language was strictly metaphorical and did not literally describe the nature of God. As the fourteenth-century kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla explains it

There is no creature that can know or understand the nature of the thing called “hand” or “foot” or “ear” [of God] and the like. And even though we are made in the image and likeness [of God], do not think for a moment that “eye” [of God] is in the form of a real eye, or that “hand” [of God] is in the form of a real hand. . . . Know and understand that between Him and us there is no likeness as to substance and shape, but the forms of the limbs that we have denote that they are made in the likeness of signs that indicate secret,

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<sup>159</sup> Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:293–94.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:237–46. Plotinus also uses the metaphor of the relation of a scent to perfume bottle, *Enneads*, 5.1.6.

<sup>161</sup> Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:286.

<sup>162</sup> King Follett Discourse: Cannon, 27–33; *Writings of Joseph Smith*, 344, 349, 357; Larson, 200–201; *TPJS*, 345–47; cf. Doctrine and Covenants 130:22. Cf. Paulsen, “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment,” for many further examples.

celestial matters, which the mind cannot know except through a kind of reminder.<sup>163</sup>

No two concepts of God could be further apart.

In summary, Owens misleadingly presents his own misreading as if it were the original intent of the *Zohar*. For Owens's thesis to have any validity we are thus required to believe that Joseph derived support for his concept of God from Owens's own late twentieth-century misreading of an early twentieth-century English translation of a document that the kabbalistic adept Neibaur supposedly read to Joseph from the Aramaic original!

*What Is the "Old Bible"?* Owens offers a final instance of alleged influence of the *Zohar* on Joseph Smith.

In the King Follett Discourse, Joseph stated that he would go to the "old Bible." In Kabbalistic lore, the commentary of the *Zohar* represented the oldest biblical interpretation, the secret interpretation imparted by God to Adam and all worthy prophets after him. . . . Was then the "old Bible" he [Joseph] used the *Zohar*? (p. 183)

Besides the obvious problem that a rhetorical question does not equal evidence, it is in fact quite clear that the term "old Bible" was generally used by early Latter-day Saints to refer to the Old Testament, just as Joseph Smith does in the King Follett Discourse. Joseph insisted that he could prove his doctrines "from

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<sup>163</sup> Cited by Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:286-87; Tishby concludes that for a kabbalist "to take the [anthropomorphic] symbols literally as denoting the actual essence of God is considered to be a form of idolatry" (p. 287). Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, provides numerous details and references to the various views of anthropomorphism throughout ancient and medieval Jewish thought, providing evidence that the more archaic Jewish thought was more anthropomorphic (and therefore closer to Joseph Smith's), while later talmudic and medieval Jewish thinkers reinterpreted early Jewish anthropomorphic language metaphorically. For example, Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 84-85, maintains that those who believe in divine corporeality "hate" God. They are worse than idolaters; they are infidels. I would like to thank Daniel C. Peterson for this reference.



the Bible.”<sup>164</sup> “I suppose I am not allowed to go into an investigation of anything that is not contained in the Bible,” Joseph continued. “If I should, you would cry treason, and I think there are so many learned and wise men here who would put me to death for treason. I will, then, go to the old Bible and turn commentator today.”<sup>165</sup> Joseph then proceeded with his exegesis of Genesis 1:1 that Owens maintains was based on the *Zohar*. Are we to believe that Joseph Smith said that if he used sources other than the Bible people would “cry treason,” and then promptly proceeded to quote from the *Zohar* in order to avoid this criticism?

Early Latter-day Saints clearly understood the term “old Bible” to refer to the Old Testament or even the Bible as a whole. Orson Hyde disagreed with the view that “that Old Bible was for the Jews, and has nothing to do with us; that is the Old Testament.” Because of this, he maintained, “the Christian world by their prejudices have driven us away from the Old Bible, so we must now appeal to the New Testament.”<sup>166</sup> Heber C. Kimball used the phrase in the same sense: “Was there any revelation that we should come to the mountains? Yes, and there were predictions in the old Bible that we should come here.”<sup>167</sup> John Taylor even used the phrase to refer to the New Testament: “any man that has the testimony of Jesus has the spirit of prophecy; for ‘the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy?’ so says the old Bible.”<sup>168</sup>

*The Absence of Uniquely Kabbalistic Ideas.* The great methodological problem of Owens—again mirrored in Brooke’s method—is his failure to provide parallels between *unique* kabbalistic ideas and Latter-day Saint thought.<sup>169</sup> There are hundreds of uniquely hermetic, alchemical, and kabbalistic authors, people,

<sup>164</sup> King Follett Discourse: Cannon, 29–30; *Writings of Joseph Smith*, 345; Larson, 201; *TPJS*, 346.

<sup>165</sup> King Follett Discourse: Cannon, 37; *Writings of Joseph Smith*, 345; Larson, 202; *TPJS*, 358.

<sup>166</sup> Orson Hyde, 6 October 1856, *JD* 2:79–80.

<sup>167</sup> Heber C. Kimball, 9 February 1862, *JD* 9:374; with reference to Isaiah 2:2.

<sup>168</sup> John Taylor, 23 August 1857, *JD* 5:147, citing Revelation 19:10.

<sup>169</sup> Hamblin, Peterson, and Mitton, “Mormon in the Fiery Furnace,” 39–43.

books, and terms. Why is it that not a single one of these appears in the writings of Joseph Smith or other early Latter-day Saints? Why are Joseph's alleged references to esoteric thought always vague and allusive, never specific and concrete? Why do the alleged parallels between Joseph and esoteric thought generally find biblical antecedents, to which Joseph often explicitly refers?

Owens's claim that Joseph was influenced by the *Zohar* offers an excellent test in our search for unique kabbalistic ideas. When Owens insists that the "interpretation of Genesis 1:1 [that influenced Joseph] is not deeply hidden in the *Zohar*, but constitutes its opening paragraphs" (p. 181), he is seriously misrepresenting the structure of the *Zohar*. He repeatedly asserts that the passages he examines are "from the opening sections of the" *Zohar* (p. 182), or "from the first section of the *Zohar*" (p. 178). In reality the passages cited by Owens cannot possibly be described as constituting the "opening paragraphs" of the *Zohar*. They are, in fact, one-fourth of the way into the first volume—pages 93 and 94 of a 376-page translation.

Owens's thesis requires us to believe that Neibaur or Joseph waded through forty-five pages<sup>170</sup> of arcane esoteric Aramaic (ninety-four pages in English translation) to have arrived at the passages that allegedly influenced Joseph. If Joseph accepted the *Zohar* as the authoritative "old Bible" (p. 183), and had read forty-five pages of Aramaic to get to the passages he is "quoting almost word for word" (p. 178), should we not find some evidence of the unique ideas from the other pages that Joseph or Neibaur must have read to get to the passages Owens claims he quotes? Where in the thought of Joseph Smith, for example, are the following ideas from the *Zohar*:

- the importance of Rabbi Simeon (1:1a = 1:3, ff.)<sup>171</sup>
- speculations on the mystical interchangeability of *mi* (who) and *mah* (what), and *eleh* (these), and *elohim* (god/gods) (1:1b–1:2a = 4–7)

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<sup>170</sup> The early printed editions of the *Zohar* are referenced by one number for both the *recto* and *verso* pages. Thus page 23a from which Joseph supposedly quotes, is in fact the forty-fifth page of the *Zohar*.

<sup>171</sup> In the following citations, the first reference is to the *editio princeps* of the *Zohar*, while the second is to the Sperling and Simon translation.

- the story of the personification of the Hebrew Alphabet and the selection of the letter *aleph* for the creation (1:2b–3b = 1:9–13)
- the “six chief supernal directions” (1:3b = 1:13)
- the celestial lamp (1:3b = 1:14)
- the celestial ascent of Rabbi Hiya and his encounter with the angelic R. Simeon (1:4a–4b = 1:15–18)
- the importance of esoteric interpretation of the Torah (1:4b–5a = 1:19–21)
- the miraculous appearance of Rabbi Hamnuna to Rabbis Eleazar and Abba, and his esoteric teachings (1:5b–7a = 1:22–28)
- the idea of the higher and lower gardens of Eden (1:7a = 1:29)
- Elisha’s use of the seventy-two mystical names to resuscitate the son of the Shunammite widow (1:7b = 1:30–31)
- speculations on the bride and *Shekinah* (1:8a–9a = 1:32–37)
- angelic ignorance of Aramaic (1:9a–9b = 1:38–39)
- the seven levels of hell (1:9b = 1:39)
- the archangel of the gentiles (1:10a = 1:41–42)
- kabbalistic demonology (1:9b = 1:39–40, 1:10b = 1:43–44)
- the heavenly academy (1:10b = 1:44)
- the fourteen precepts of the Torah and their relationship to creation (1:11b–14b = 1:47–60)
- how the study of the Torah transforms men into angels (1:12b = 1:52)
- the importance of phylacteries (1:13b–14a = 1:57–58)
- the importance of having intercourse on the Sabbath without using candles (1:14a–14b = 1:60)
- the mystical origins of the Hebrew letters and vowels (1:15b = 1:65).<sup>172</sup>

Are we really to believe that Joseph selected only these items from the *Zohar* for which he himself provided biblical support, ignoring these and many other ideas that are unique to that document?

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<sup>172</sup> The *Zohar* goes on in a similar vein for almost another thirty translated pages before reaching the passage Joseph allegedly cites. Examples of uniquely kabbalistic ideas could thus be further multiplied.



But let us momentarily grant, for the sake of argument, that Joseph or Neibaur somehow got a copy of the *Zohar* in the Nauvoo period and misread the Aramaic in precisely the same manner that Owens has misread the English translation 150 years later. Is such a proposition at all helpful in explaining the origin of the idea of plurality of gods in Latter-day Saint theology? In 3 Nephi 28:10, published in 1830, we learn that “ye [the righteous Nephites] shall sit down in the kingdom of my Father; yea, your joy shall be full, even as the Father hath given me fulness of joy; and ye shall be even as I [Christ] am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one.” That the faithful shall be even as Christ and the Father certainly implies human deification, and thereby plurality of gods. Are we to assume that the *Zohar* influenced the writing of the Book of Mormon?<sup>173</sup> How do the alleged kabbalistic influences on Joseph in 1844 explain Doctrine and Covenants 76:57–58? “And [those in the Celestial Kingdom] are priests of the Most High, after the order of Melchizedek, which was after the order of Enoch, which was after the order of the Only Begotten Son. Wherefore, as it is written, *they are gods*, even the sons of God.” This passage was revealed in February 1832, several years before Joseph began studying Hebrew, and a decade before his alleged studies in the *Zohar*. Why is the concept of the plurality of gods found in 1832, if it derives from the *Zohar*? Furthermore, this phrase is explicitly drawn from Christ’s exposition of Psalm 82:6 as found in John 10:34–35. If someone insists on looking beyond revelation for the origin of the idea of the plurality of gods, then John 10:34–35 and Psalm 82:6 are without question Joseph’s sources for this doctrine.<sup>174</sup>

In light of all this, Owens’s claims of “substantial documentary evidence” (p. 119) to support his thesis seem exaggerated at best.

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<sup>173</sup> I would like to thank Daniel C. Peterson for calling this passage to my attention.

<sup>174</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 121:28 also does not fit Owens’s theory: “A time [shall] come in the which nothing shall be withheld, whether there be one God or many gods, they shall be manifest.” This passage was written in March 1839, again several years before Joseph’s alleged kabbalistic studies. Van Hale provides a useful summary of many additional sources that refer to Joseph’s doctrines of human deification and the plurality of gods, “The Doctrinal Impact of the King Follett Discourse,” 224–25.

## Alleged Kabbalistic Influences in Early Utah Mormonism

Owens provides several examples of what he feels represent kabbalistic influences on post-Nauvoo Mormon thought.

*The Seal of the Priesthood.* Owens maintains that the all-seeing eye in the "Seal of the Priesthood" was drawn from hermetic sources of the seventeenth century (p. 147 fig. 7), ignoring the much more accessible Great Seal of the United States, our national seal since 1782.<sup>175</sup> Discussing the relationship of the "All Seeing eye" (also called the "providential eye") of the United States Great Seal and Masonic symbolism, Patterson and Richardson conclude, "it seems likely that the designers of the Great Seal and the Masons took their symbols from parallel sources, and unlikely that the seal designers consciously copied Masonic symbols."<sup>176</sup> As a symbol of the omniscience and providence of God, the all-seeing eye was fairly ubiquitous in the early nineteenth century. With a crown placed over it you have a symbol that God is King, or of the Kingdom of God. No links with obscure, rare, and expensive seventeenth-century books need be posited.

*Adam-God as Adam Kadmon.* Owens claims that "the Adam-God doctrine may have been a misreading (or restatement) by Brigham Young of a Kabbalistic and Hermetic concept relayed to him by the prophet [Joseph Smith]" (p. 184). The major support Owens provides for this claim is that in gematria the names Adam and Jehovah both equal 45 (p. 127).<sup>177</sup> Using standard gematria, Adam/ADM does equal 45 (alef = 1, dalet = 4, mem = 40). However, Jehovah = Yahweh = YHWH does not equal 45, but 26 (yod = 10, he = 5, vav = 6, he = 5). The equation of YHWH with

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<sup>175</sup> See Richard S. Patterson and Dougall Richardson, *The Eagle and the Shield: A History of the Great Seal of the United States* (Washington: Department of State, 1976), 529–32; the seal has been on the back of all one dollar bills since 1935. Marcus von Wellnitz, "The Catholic Liturgy and the Mormon Temple," *BYU Studies* 21 (1981): 3–35, mentions the use of all-seeing eye imagery in Catholic religious art.

<sup>176</sup> Patterson and Richardson, *The Eagle and the Shield*, 532.

<sup>177</sup> Gematria is a system of replacing numbers for the letters of a name (A = 1, B = 2, etc.), combining and recombining the numbers, and speculating about the mystical implications of the resultant numbers. See Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 337–43.

ADM is derived from a special system of gematria known as “filling (*millui*),” in which you take the spelling of the names of the letters that make up the name, do a standard gematria on the spellings, and get a new number.<sup>178</sup> Under one system of “filling” the gematria of the names of the letters of YHWH can equal forty-five. Are we to believe that Joseph Smith secretly transmitted such an idea to Brigham Young? The real question here is what primary sources were available in the early 1840s—to which Joseph had access—that expounded this idea? To demonstrate that Joseph did “filling” gematria on the name of Adam, it is not sufficient to find a modern secondary source that briefly describes it.

Owens further maintains that Adam was seen by Brigham Young as the kabbalistic *Adam Kadmon*, the Primordial Man (p. 184). The fact that Adam of Eden and Adam Kadmon have the same name is not, however, as significant as it may seem. Owens once again either misunderstands or misrepresents the kabbalistic doctrine. ADM/Adam in Hebrew simply means *man* or *human*. It is generally not a proper name in the Bible. Adam Kadmon, the Primordial Man of kabbalism, is not Adam the first man of the Garden of Eden. The Adam of the Bible was called by kabbalists by a different name: “*Adam Ha-Rishon* [Adam the First], the Adam of the Bible, corresponds on the anthropological plane to Adam Kadmon, the ontological primary man.”<sup>179</sup> “The first being which emanated from the light [En Sof] was Adam Kadmon, the ‘primordial man’. Adam Kadmon is nothing but a first configuration of the divine light which flows from the essence of En Sof.”<sup>180</sup> Once again the metaphysical assumptions of Kabbalah—in contradistinction to Mormonism—are fundamentally Neoplatonic. From the En Sof emanates a great light, which becomes Adam Kadmon. From this Primordial Man ensue further emanations, culminating in “the last reflection of Adam Kadmon, who makes his appearance in the lowest form of ‘making’

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<sup>178</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 341–42. As Scholem notes, there are several different forms of “filling.”

<sup>179</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1946), 279, cf. 278–80.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.



(*‘asiyah*) as Adam, the first man of Genesis.”<sup>181</sup> Adam is the earthly reflection, on the material plane, of the supernal Adam Kadmon—this is how kabbalists interpret man being in the image of God. But Adam of the Garden is not ontologically the same being as Adam Kadmon, nor is either of the two Adams the ontological equivalent of God.<sup>182</sup> In light of all this, how Brigham Young’s ideas about Adam-God can be seen as based on kabbalistic thought is a bit mind-boggling.

*Orson Hyde and the Tree of the Sefirot.* Owens finally claims that a diagram of the “Kingdom of God” done by Orson Hyde in 1847 (p. 156 fig. 12) was in fact, “the most essential symbolic element of Kabbalah, the ‘mystical shape of the Godhead’ contained in the image of the [Tree of the] *Sefiroth* as redrawn by a principal and influential seventeenth-century Christian kabbalist, [Robert] Fludd” (p. 187). This is sheer fantasy. First, Hyde’s diagram doesn’t look anything like the Tree of Sefirot. Second, Hyde never calls it a Tree of Sefirot. In his article, Hyde never mentions anything kabbalistic or hermetic. Here is Hyde’s own description of the meaning of his diagram:

The above diagram shows the order and unity of the kingdom of God. The eternal Father sits at the head, crowned King of kings and Lord of lords. Wherever the other lines meet, there sits a king and a priest unto God, bearing rule, authority, and dominion under the Father. He is one with the Father, because his kingdom is joined to his Father’s and becomes part of it.<sup>183</sup>

Hyde’s article goes on in the same vein. Why should any of this be thought to have anything to do with Kabbalah?

## Conclusions

In summary, Owens’s thesis cannot bear the weight of critical scrutiny. He demonstrates an unfamiliarity with many important

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<sup>181</sup> Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 115.

<sup>182</sup> See discussion by Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:295–98.

<sup>183</sup> Orson Hyde, “A Diagram of the Kingdom of God.” *Millennial Star* 9 (15 January 1847): 23.

secondary sources and recent scholarship, which leads to numerous errors of fact and interpretation. Because of lack of evidence to support his thesis, he frequently resorts to unrestrained assertion and speculation. He often fails to define his terminology precisely and engages in semantic equivocation in an attempt to make fundamentally dissimilar ideas and practices seem similar. He does not adequately recognize nor deal with the complex methodological problems of the relationship between parallelism and causality. He provides no solid primary evidence to demonstrate that Joseph Smith had a profound knowledge of the esoteric traditions. He fails to distinguish between Hebrew and Aramaic, or to demonstrate that either Neibaur or Joseph had sufficient knowledge of Aramaic to read the *Zohar*. There is no evidence that Neibaur owned a kabbalistic library, while there is a simple counter-explanation for the appearance of references to kabbalistic texts in his *Times and Seasons* article. Owens's interpretation of the King Follett Discourse suffers from a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of both Joseph Smith's ideas and those found in the *Zohar*. A careful and critical analysis demonstrates only vague parallels between Joseph's ideas and those of the *Zohar*.

Owens provides no examples of *uniquely* kabbalistic ideas in the writings of early Mormons—the methodological imperative if Owens's case is to be substantiated. He ignores the fact that many of the ideas Joseph supposedly derived from Kabbalah antedate Neibaur's arrival in Nauvoo. The ideas that Joseph allegedly borrowed from kabbalism are also found in biblical texts, which Joseph Smith is known to have studied intensely. Since Joseph consistently offered biblical precedent to support his revelations and teachings, why do we need kabbalism to explain the development of his thought?

Throughout his article Owens employs some interesting forms of rhetorical legerdemain in an attempt to bolster his flimsy case. He is selective in which evidence he presents and which he ignores. He repeatedly conflates ideas from several different traditions and periods by simply asserting that they are all part of one metatradition. He ignores the possibility of explaining his alleged parallels by recourse to biblical or other shared antecedents. His relatively few references to primary sources are

frequently misrepresentations or misunderstandings. He often simply asserts his conclusions with no supporting evidence.

My friend Matt Moore aptly described Owens's theory as another attempt in the grand tradition of Quinn and Brooke at *historia ex nihilo*—the creation of history out of nothing. His efforts to pull a magic rabbi out of his hat to bolster environmental explanations of Joseph Smith's revelations are simply smoke and mirrors. While some in the audience may applaud, most will immediately be able to "bust" the trick.



## Appendix: Sources Mentioned by Alexander Neibaur<sup>184</sup>

At the end of his article, Owens lists books supposedly found in Neibaur's "library" (p. 191). In order to demonstrate the availability of many of these texts through a common source, I have prepared the following list of the texts mentioned by Neibaur, rearranged according to thematic categories. A bullet by the text name indicates that the text is known to have been cited in Manasseh's *Nishmat*.

### 1. Traditional Rabbinic and Talmudic Sources (Most Cited by Manasseh)<sup>185</sup>

- 1.1 R. Jacanan, Rabbi Jocanan (Neibaur 221b, Owens 193), and R. Jonathan (Neibaur 222a): Probably R. Johanan ben Zakkai, first-century sage and leader of rabbinic Judaism (*EJ* 10:148–54). Owens does not relate Jonathan with these other two spellings (p. 193).

- 1.2 *Bereshith Rabba* (Neibaur 222a): Owens (193) cites R. Moses ben Isaac ha-Darshan's *Bereshith Rabbati*, a Midrashic text on the book of Genesis written in the eleventh century. The early aggadic midrash on the book of Genesis (from which ha-Darshan wrote his work) is also known as *Bereshith Rabbah* (*EJ* 7:399–402; 12:429).

- 1.3 Rabbi Akiba (Neibaur 222a, Owens 193): R. Akiva, second-century Jewish leader and midrashic scholar who exercised a decisive influence in the development of *halakhah* (*EJ* 2:488).

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<sup>184</sup> Parenthetical references in this appendix are as follows: *EJ* = Cecil Roth, ed., *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972); Owens = Lance S. Owens, "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection," *Dialogue* 27/3 (1994): 117–94; Ross = Jesse Ross, "A Study of Manasseh ben Israel's 'Nishmath Hayyim'" (master's thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1931); Neibaur = Alexander Neibaur, "The Jews," *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 June 1843): 220–22; (15 June 1843): 233–34.

<sup>185</sup> Ross notes that Manasseh quotes from "the fundamental sources of Jewish tradition, such as the Bible, Talmuds, Midrashim, Commentaries, Codes, Zohar, and Bahir" (p. 18).

- 1.4 Rabbi Simeon, son of Jacay (Neibaur 222b, Owens 194): Simeon bar Yohai, second-century pupil of Akiva, principal figure in *Zohar* (*EJ* 14:1551–54).

- 1.5 Talmud Tract Sanhedrim (Neibaur 222a, Owens 193). Talmudic tractate.

- 1.6 Talmud Tract Resokim (Neibaur 222a, Owens 193): Talmudic tractate.

- 1.7 Talmud Tract Ketuboth (Neibaur 222b, Owens 193): Talmudic tractate.

- 1.8 Book Siphri (Neibaur 234a, Owens 194): halakhic midrash to the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy (*EJ* 14:1519).

- 1.9 Rabbi Jehuda (Neibaur 233b): Possibly the R. Judah of the fourth century who wrote the *Sifra*—part of the “motivated halakhot”—a collection based on Leviticus (*EJ* 11:316). Not identified by Owens (p. 194). Ross (19) lists an additional three Judahs cited by Manasseh: Judah ben Samuel, Judah ben Jacob, and Judah ha-Levi.

## 2. Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Writers

- 2.1 Rabbi Manesse ben Israel in *Nishmath Cajim* (Neibaur 221a, Owens 191): transliterated Manasseh ben Israel, wrote *Nishmat Hayyim* (1651). He founded the earliest Hebrew printing press in Amsterdam (1626) (*EJ* 11:855–57; 10:604).

- 2.2 R. Isaac Aberhaph in *Menorat Hamoor* (Neibaur 221a): Cited by Manasseh (Ross 18). Owens (pp. 191–92) believes that Neibaur mistakenly confused Isaac Aberhaph with Israel al-Nakawa (*EJ* 2:672–73). It is more likely that Neibaur is referring to Isaac Aboab (*EJ* 2:90–93), a fourteenth-century rabbi, whose *Menorat ha-Ma'or* was first published in Constantinople in 1514, and was reprinted in over seventy editions (*EJ* 11:344.)

- 2.3 R. Abarbane (Neibaur 222b): Probably a variation on Abarbanel; see 2.4 below. Not identified by Owens.

- 2.4 R. Isaac Abarbanel (Neibaur 221b, Owens 192): Cited by Manasseh (Ross 18). Isaac ben Judah Abravanel (or Abravanel), famous fifteenth-century philosopher and biblical exegete (*EJ* 2:103–9).

- 2.5 R. D. Kimchi (Neibaur 221b, Owens 192): Cited by Manasseh (Ross 19). R. David Kimchi, a thirteenth-century grammarian and exegete (*EJ* 10:1001–4).

- 2.6 R. Joseph Albo (Neibaur 221b, Owens 192–93): Cited by Manasseh (Ross 18). R. Joseph Albo, a fifteenth-century Spanish philosopher who wrote a famous treatise on Jewish articles of faith in 1425 called *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* (*EJ* 2:535–37; 15:179).

- 2.7 R. Levi bar Gerohonon (Neibaur 222a, Owens 193): Cited by Manasseh (Ross 19). Levi ben Gershom, a thirteenth-century biblical commentator and philosopher whose major work was *Sefer Mihamot Adonai*, written in 1329, not widely circulated (*EJ* 11:92, 94).

- 2.8 Pesikta Raba (Neibaur 222b): *Pesikta Rabbati*, a medieval midrash on the festival of the year, printed several times, but the critical edition was in 1880 (*EJ* 13:335). This traditional midrash was undoubtedly available to Manasseh.

### 3. Kabbalistic Sources

- 3.1 R. Baccay/Bacay/Bachay (Neibaur 221a, 233b): Cited by Manasseh (Ross 18). Owens claims Neibaur was quoting R. Samson Bacchi of Casale Monferrato (p. 192). The more likely possibility is Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, a thirteenth-century kabbalist who wrote *Kad ha-Kemah*, a widely circulated book on the foundations of faith (*EJ* 4:104–5). Neibaur explicitly references this work by Bahya as well (Neibaur 234a; Owens 194 fails to make the connection between the two).<sup>186</sup>

- 3.2 Book Rad Hakemah (Neibaur 234a): *Kad ha-Kemah*, by Bahya ben Asher, a thirteenth-century philosopher (see 3.1 above under R. Baccay).

- 3.3 Medrash Neelam (Neibaur 221b, Owens 192): *Midrash ha-Ne'lam* is a principal section of the *Zohar*, the kabbalistic

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<sup>186</sup> Other options include Pseudo-Bahya, author of *On the Essence of the Soul*, an eleventh or twelfth-century book written originally in Arabic and translated into Hebrew in 1896 (*EJ* 4:103) or Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, an eleventh-century philosopher who wrote *Hovot ha-Levavot* (Duties of the Heart), a book on the nature of the soul written in Arabic (1080), translated into Hebrew (1161) and widely circulated (*EJ* 4:105–6).



collection of esoteric teachings in the Torah written in the fourteenth century (*EJ* 16:1196).

- 3.4 Sohar (Neibaur 222a, 222b): The *Zohar*.

3.5 Rabbi Naphtali in Emakhamelek (Neibaur 221b, 222a, Owens 192): *Emek ha-Melekh* is an important and widely circulated kabbalistic work written by Naphtali ben Jacob Elhanan Bacharach and published in 1648 (*EJ* 4:49; 10:549).

3.6 Yalkut Kodosh, Yalkut Kadash, Talkut Kadash (Neibaur 221b, 222a, Owens 192): A seventeenth-century anthology of kabbalistic writings. Yalkut ha-Makhiri and Yalkut Shimoni are both anthologies of aggadic midrashim possibly written in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, respectively (*EJ* 16:706–9).

3.7 Aphkat Rackel, Ophkat Rockel (Neibaur 221b, 233b, Owens 193): A seventeenth-century kabbalistic book, *Abkat Rockel*.

3.8 Avodath Hakodash, Abodah Hakadash (Neibaur 222b): *Avodat ha-Kodesh*, a sixteenth-century kabbalistic work written by Meir ibn Gabbay, published in Venice in 1566 (*EJ* 7:34; 12:308).

#### 4. Uncertain Identification Because of Insufficient Data

4.1 R. Solman Jarkian (Neibaur 222b): Not mentioned by Owens. There are numerous classical and medieval writers named Solomon. Possibly Solomon ben Judah (ibn Gabriel), who is cited by Manasseh (Ross 19).

4.2 Rabbi Joshua ben Menaser (Neibaur 233b): Cited by Owens as not yet identified (p. 194).

4.3 R. Elias (Neibaur 222a): One of the numerous Elijahs of Jewish history. Cited by Owens as not yet identified (p. 193).

Thus, of the twenty-five sources mentioned by Neibaur that can be identified with relative certainty, twenty-one are known to have been used by Manasseh. It is quite possible that other sources were used by Manasseh, but were not identified or mentioned by Ross.