From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

Kabbalah

The term *Kabbalah*[1] in Hebrew means nothing else than "tradition" in the most general sense, and although it generally designates the esoteric or initiatic tradition when used with no further precision, it also sometimes happens that it may be applied to the exoteric tradition itself.[2] This term can therefore designate any tradition; but since it belongs to the Hebraic language, it is normal to reserve it to the Hebrew tradition alone, as we have noted on other occasions, or, if one prefers perhaps a more exact way of speaking, to the specifically Hebrew form of the tradition. If we insist on this point, it is because we have noted that some people have a tendency to attach another meaning to this word, to make it the name of a special type of traditional knowledge, wherever this may be found, and this because they believe they have discovered in the word all sorts of more or less extraordinary things that really are not there at all. We do not intend to waste our time bringing up all these fanciful interpretations; it is more useful to clarify the original meaning of the word, which will suffice to reduce them to nothing, and this is all we propose to do here.

The root QBL in Hebrew and Arabic[3] signifies essentially the relationship of two things placed face to face with one another, and from this come all the varied meanings of the words derived from it, as for example those of encounter and even opposition. From this relationship also comes the idea of a passage from the one to the other of the two terms, whence ideas like those of receiving, welcoming, and accepting expressed in the two languages through the verb *qabal;*

[1] Although the initial "K" has been retained in spelling *Kabbalah*, since this represents current practice, when other terms and roots are introduced, the letter "Q" has been used, as in the original French and in common philological practice. ED

[2] This has not failed to cause certain errors: thus, we have seen some claim to link the *Talmud* to the "Kabbalah", understood in the esoteric sense; indeed, the *Talmud* is certainly from the "tradition", but is purely exoteric, religious, and legal.

[3] We call attention to the fact, which perhaps is not sufficiently noticed, that these two languages, which share most of their roots, can very often shed light on one another.

and *Kabbalah* derives directly from this, that is to say "that which is received" or transmitted (in Latin *traditum*) from one to the other. Here there appears, along with the idea of transmission, that of a succession; but it must be noted that the primary meaning of the root indicates a relationship that can be simultaneous as well as successive, spatial as well as temporal. And this explains the double meaning of the preposition *qabal* in Hebrew and *qabl* in Arabic, which signify both "in front of" (that is, "facing" in space) and "before" (in time); and the close relationship of these two words, "in front of" and "before", even in French, clearly shows that there is always a certain analogy between these two different modalities, one in simultaneity and the other in succession. This also allows the resolution of an apparent contradiction: although the usual idea when it comes to a temporal relationship is that of anteriority, which relates therefore to the past, it also happens that derivatives from the same root designate the future (in Arabic *mustaqbal*, that is to say literally that toward which one goes, from *istaqbal*, "to go toward"). But do we not also say in French that the past is "before" [*avant*] us, and the future is "in front of" [*devant*] us, which is quite comparable? In sum, it suffices in every case that one of the two terms considered be "in front of" or "before" the other, whether it be a question of a spatial relationship or a temporal one.

All these remarks can be further confirmed by the examination of another root, equally common to Hebrew and Arabic, and which has meanings very close to these, one could even say identical in great part, for even though their starting-point is clearly different the derived meanings converge. This is the root QDM, which in the first place expresses the idea of "to precede" (*qadam*), whence all that refers not only to a temporal anteriority but to a priority of any order. Thus for words derived from this root one finds, besides the original and ancient meanings (*qedem* in Hebrew, *qidm* or *qidam* in Arabic) that of primacy or precedence and even that of walking, advancing, or progression (in Arabic *taqaddum*);[4] and here again, the preposition *qadam* in Hebrew and *quddam* in Arabic has the double meaning of "in front of" and "before". But the principal meaning designates what

[4] From which comes the word *qadam*, meaning "foot", that is, what serves for walking.

is first, whether hierarchically or chronologically; thus the idea most frequently expressed is that of origin or primordiality, and by extension, that of antiquity when the temporal order is involved. Thus, *qadmon* in Hebrew and *qadim* in Arabic signify "ancient" in current usage, but when they are related to the domain of principles, they must be translated by "primordial".[5]

Concerning these same words, there are other reasons that are not without interest. In Hebrew, derivatives of the root QDM also serve to designate the East,[6] that is, the direction of the "origin" in the sense that it is there that the rising sun appears (*oriens*, from *oriri*, from which comes also *origo* in Latin), the starting-point of the diurnal course of the sun; and at the same time it is also the point used when "orienting" oneself by turning toward the rising sun.[7] Thus *qedem* also means "East", and *qadmon* "eastern"; but one should not see in these designations the affirmation of a primordiality of the East from the point of view of the history of terrestrial humanity, since, as we have often said, the original tradition is Nordic, "polar" even, and neither Eastern nor Western; moreover, the explanation we just indicated seems to us fully sufficient. We will add in this connection that these questions of "orientation" are generally quite important in traditional symbolism and in rites based on that symbolism; they are, besides, more complex than one might think and can give rise to certain errors, for in the different traditional forms there are many different modes of orientation. When one turns toward the rising sun, as we have just said, the South is designated as the "right side" (*yamīn* or *yaman*; cf. the Sanskrit *dakshina*, which has the same meaning) and

[5] *Al-insān al-qadim*, that is, "primordial Man" is, in Arabic, one of the designations of "Universal Man" (synonym of *al-insān al-kāmil*, which is literally "perfect or complete Man"); it is precisely the Hebraic *Adam Qadmon*.

[6] In French, *Orient*, whence oriental, "eastern". As pointed out below, the Latin *oriri* means "to rise". ED

[7] It is curious to note that Christ is sometimes called *Oriens*, a designation that can doubtless be related to the symbolism of the rising sun; but by reason of the double meaning we are indicating here it is possible that we should also, and even above all, relate it to the Hebrew *Elohi Qedem* or the expression designating the Word as the "Ancient of Days", that is, He who is before the days, or the Principle of the cycles of manifestation represented symbolically as "days" by various traditions (the "days of *Brahmā*" in the Hindu tradition, the "days of the creation" in the Hebrew *Genesis*).

the North as the "left side" (*shemōl* in Hebrew, *shimāl* in Arabic); but it also happens that orientation is established by turning toward the sun at the meridian, and the point before one is then no longer the East but the South. Thus in Arabic the South has among other names that of *qiblah*, and the adjective *qibli* means "southern" [*meridional*]. These last terms bring us to the root QBL; the same word *qiblah* is also known in Islam to designate the ritual orientation; in all cases it is the direction one has in front of one; and what is also rather curious is that the spelling of the word *qiblah* is exactly identical to that of the Hebrew *qabbalah*.

Now, one can ask why it is that in Hebrew "tradition" is designated by a word coming from the root QBL, and not from the root QDM. It is tempting to answer that since the Hebrew tradition constitutes only a secondary and derived form, a name evoking the idea of origin or primordiality would not be fitting; but this argument does not seem to us to be essential, for directly or not, every tradition is linked to its origins and proceeds from the primordial tradition, and we have even seen elsewhere that every sacred language, including Hebrew itself and Arabic, is thought to represent the primordial language in some way. The real reason, it seems, is that the idea that must especially be highlighted here is that of a regular and uninterrupted transmission, which is therefore properly expressed by the word "tradition", as we noted at the beginning. This transmission constitutes the "chain" (*shelsheleth* in Hebrew, *silsilah* in Arabic) that unites the present to the past and that must continue from the present into the future; it is the "chain of tradition" (*shelsheleth haqabbalah*) or the "initiatic chain". . . ; and it is also the determination of a "direction" (we find here the meaning of the Arabic *qiblah*) which, through the course of time, orients the cycle toward its end and joins it again with its origin, and which, extending even beyond these two extreme points by the fact that its principial source is timeless and "non-human", links it harmoniously to the other cycles, forming with these a greater "chain", that which certain Eastern traditions call the "chain of worlds" into which by degrees is integrated the entire order of universal manifestation.

The text above is from Chapter 27 of the book
The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity, by René Guénon, and edited by John Herlihy.
© 2009 World Wisdom Inc.
All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only.
www.worldwisdom.com