



## The Three Mother Letters of Qabbalah and Masonic Initiation

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To give only a few examples, the use of three pillars designated as Wisdom, Strength, and Beauty, and the manifestation of 32 aspects of Deity with a hidden 33rd, are just a couple of elements from medieval Jewish qabbalistic texts like the Sephir Yetzirah and the Zohar.

In fact, the Sephir Yetzirah starts out in Chapter 1, section 1 with:

*“Yah, the Lord of Hosts, the living God, King of the Universe, Omnipotent, All-Kind and Merciful, Supreme and Extolled, who is Eternal, Sublime and Most Holy, formed and created the Universe in thirty two mysterious paths of wisdom...”*

And in Chapter 2, verse 6 we read:

*“He created a reality out of nothing, called nonentity into existence and hewed, as it were, colossal pillars from intangible air...”*

Even though many qabbalists are of the opinion that these texts go back to the actual time of Genesis and were written possibly by Moses as secret texts reserved for a few, most scholars put their creation sometime between 700 and 1200 CE.

In the Hebrew Qabbalistic tradition, it is specified that Deity created reality by the use of the twenty two letters of the Hebrew aleph-beth (alphabet), and also formed 10 sephiroth or spheres of Universal intelligence and principles, with sometimes another hidden sephiroth called DAAT. These combinations then comprise reality on all levels- physical, mental, psychic and spiritual.

The twenty-two Hebrew letters therefore are assigned with qualities which allowed Deity to speak reality into existence via the power of the Word, which became the Lost Word to humanity.

The twenty-two Hebrew letters are therefore broken down into three sets that are called the Three Mother Letters, the Seven Double Letters, (called double for their hard and soft sound), and the Twelve Simple or Single letters.

Each of these letters had associations dealing with characteristics, numbers, planetary, zodiacal and elemental associations, and associations with parts of the human body.

The Ten Sephiroth represented qualities of Deity in His creation, and some have even associated them as representing a Triune aspect of God followed by seven other aspects

that can also be found in the seven days of creation. Qabbalists regularly depicted the upper three sephiroth that represented this triune aspect as an eye within a triangle.

**See Plate 1: Qabbalistic Rose with 22 Hebrew letters and their associations.**

The purpose of this short article is not to explore all the associations with all the Hebrew letters, but rather to focus on what are called the three “mother letters”.

Likewise, this article will not focus on the qabbalistic diagram that shows all 33 emanations, also called the “Tree of Life”, “Jacob’s Ladder”, or the “Parziv” (meaning Face).

However, it’s worth noting that the qabbalistic tree is featured in one form in the 4th degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite for the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States, where the new Mason is warned that you cannot understand Freemasonry without having an understanding of qabbalah.

Qabbalah and the Qabbalistic Tree diagrams are likewise explored to some degree in Albert Pike’s works of his *Morals and Dogma* and his *Esoterika*.

We are going to focus on the three mother letters for this article, because they relate directly to the first three symbolic Craft degrees of Freemasonry. We will also just touch on the Qabbalistic Tree insofar as it relates to the three mother letters.

The three mother letters of Hebrew are the letters:

Mem ( ם ),  
Aleph ( א ),  
and Shin ( ש ),

which correspond to M, A and Sh in English.

These letters are said to correspond to the elements that exist in lighter density than the earth.

Therefore, Mem is said to correspond with water (and in fact the Hebrew word for water is “Mayim”), Aleph corresponds with air, and Shin corresponds with fire.

There are other associations in the Qabbalistic texts associated with these letters, but for our purposes, this elemental aspect is the most important to grasp in relation to the Craft degrees of Freemasonry.

That being said, every Hebrew letter is said to correspond with a path on the qabbalistic tree, and in this diagram, there are three horizontal paths that most qabbalists have associated with the three mother letters. Since this diagram is also called “Jacob’s Ladder”, it is interesting that our Masonic ritual likewise makes reference to “three principle rungs on Jacob’s Ladder”, which in this context would be the three paths associated with the three mother letters.

Incidentally, there are also seven vertical paths which were said to be associated with the seven “double letters” and twelve diagonal paths which were said to be associated with the twelve simple or single letters). It is also important to note, that many qabbalistic scholars viewed the descriptions of Solomon’s Temple in the Bible as a metaphor for this qabbalistic diagram itself.

**See Plate 2: Qabbalistic Tree or “Jacob’s Ladder” with three horizontal paths.**

The Sepher Yetzirah has a lot to say regarding these three mother letters, but most sections referring to them suggest that the Hebrew letters Mem and Shin are extremes and that Aleph reconciles them, or acts as the middle step between them. Since all creation came out of God parting “the waters of the deep” from Genesis, then water was usually deemed the first element that the other two came out of, along with everything else.

In fact, in Chapter 1, section 9 of the Sephir Yetzirah we read:

*“...From the spirit of the living God emanated air from air, water from water, fire from fire, the height and the depth, the East and the West, the North and the South.”*

This seems to be very much in line with the symbolic dimensions of a Masonic Lodge as found within some of our lectures.

The next thing we need to focus on is the elemental association with the three mother letters, as it will clearly be shown that these also correspond to the three degrees of Symbolic Craft Masonry. In the qabbalistic tradition, the body is said to be divided into sections that are ruled by the elements. Fire was associated with the head, air was associated with the chest, and water was associated with the abdomen. In fact, the abdomen is where all liquid functions are generated, the chest is where air comes into the lungs, and the head is the place that the electrical signals to the nervous system form.

Therefore, the three mother letters were also associated with these three parts of the human body. It should be noted that where there is water dominating, then fire cannot exist. Where there is fire dominating, then water cannot exist. Though where water and fire are in perfect balance, then they create air or steam. Think on this fact while considering the penalties of the Masonic obligations for the first three degrees.

Each degree in Freemasonry emphasizes a different element in the penalties of the obligations, with water being emphasized in the Entered Apprentice degree, air being emphasized in the Fellowcraft degree, and fire being emphasized in the Master Mason degree.

See Plate 3: Body divided into three sections according to the elements by Robert Fludd, circa 1619.

It is interesting to note that the medieval European alchemists, the mystical Islamic Sufi, and the Chinese Taoists also divided the body into these three sections and associated them with the same elements and with meditation techniques designed to awaken energies in these locations.

In fact, just as the Hebrew qabbalistic texts associated the head with the Hebrew fire letter Shin, the Chinese Taoist tradition likewise refers to the fiery force that emanates from the head as the “Sheen”, (with the chest being associated with “chi” or vitalized breath, and the abdomen being associated with a humid force called “ching”).

Likewise, in the traditional Gnostic baptismal rites, there were three degrees of consciousness awakening, which were also associated with the elemental progression of baptisms by water, followed by air, followed by fire.

The Sufi divided the body to these associations of water, air and fire, and the alchemists likewise associated these with their operations of digestion (water), distillation (air), and calcinations (fire), which they also associated with the abdomen, the chest and the head. Obviously, we find such ideas reinforced within the degrees of Freemasonry. In fact, to take it to another level, water was always associated with the emotions and specifically the learning to subdue passions; air was associated with developing the mind and intellect; and fire was associated with the divine will and the recognition of the spiritual source.



A careful examination of the lessons in the lectures of the three degrees in Freemasonry will show that they follow this exact same order. Therefore, as we progress up Jacob's ladder in three stages, these three stages also represent the three elements associated with the three mother letters of the qabalah. Further, should we doubt it; we need only look at the Master Mason degree which emphasizes fire over and over again - not just in the penalty of the obligation, but also in the password of the degree for example.

Should we wish to look for further qabbalistic association in the Master Mason degree, we need only look to the Strong Grip of a Master Mason. It is safe to say that the grip cannot be given unless the hand is in a particular shape. This shape just happens to be the same shape as the Hebrew letter Shin, associated with fire and in fact both Jewish and Eastern Orthodox Priests will make blessings with their hand in this shape because it represents Shin and the divine fire.

**See Plate 4: Hebrew letter Shin. Above right: Hand placed in the letter Shin.**

It has also been observed by esoteric researchers of the past, that the very cathedrals themselves were erected with the human body in mind, and in fact, they were called Notre Dame in France, meaning "our lady", as they may have in fact represented the form of the Virgin Mary, who in turn gives birth to new Christians.

So, how does this relate to the Hebrew letters we have been discussing you may ask? When viewing most cathedrals, they were constructed so that when you enter them, the baptismal font would be at the area of the belly button, the choir is at the area where the lungs would

be, the Priest spoke from the area where the heart would be, and the sacrament was stored at the area of the pineal gland of the head. The divisions of the water, air, and fire are clearly marked inside the cathedral in this context, and when people left the arch of the cathedral, they were leaving the birth canal itself.

This suggests that this idea of the division of the human body and the elements was even being utilized by the cathedral builders, who some look to as a forerunner of Freemasonry.

Others look to the Templars, who were believed to have funded the cathedrals if not helped to also provide the craftsmen to build them. It should be noted in this context, that some qabbalistic traditions even believe that the sacred qabbalistic text of the Zohar was found by the Templars in the Holy Land and given to Jewish Communities in Spain. Likewise, it should be noted that some traditional Jewish qabbalistic traditions refer to the qabbalah as the “Holy Grail”.

In this light, it is significant that the medieval Grail legends like Parzival state that the Templars guard the Grail, and the Grail champion Parzival may in fact be alluding to the “Parziv-Al”, the “Parziv” being the qabbalistic tree (also called the “face” in Hebrew), and the “Al” being one of the Hebrew names for God, also called “El” and spelled Aleph-Lamed. Clearly this suggests and persuasively shows that many elements of our symbolic craft degrees can be taken directly from Hebrew qabbalistic traditions and texts that were first public centuries before Freemasonry went public.

I will leave it for others to debate on the antiquity of these things in the Masonic system, but we cannot ignore that a general study of qabalah can only help to reveal the symbolic code that Freemasonry is propagating. This article is just meant to touch upon a few aspects of the relationship between qabalah and Freemasonry, of which there is so much more. I leave it to my brothers to think about the significance of these initial mother letter associations however, which form the basic framework for the symbolism in the first three degrees of Freemasonry.

Qabalah has been spelled many ways in English by many different authors. It is sometimes spelled with a C or a K for various stated reasons by different authors. It is also sometimes spelled with one “B” or sometimes two, and likewise some people put an “h” on the end and others do not. In Hebrew, the word begins with the Hebrew letter “Qof” however, which is equivalent to “Q” in English, and the word “Qabalah” in Hebrew is generally believed to come from “QBL” in Hebrew, meaning “to receive”.

For more information on Qabbalistic associations with Freemasonry, see Bro. Tim Hogan’s book the 32 Secret Paths of Solomon: A New Examination of the Qabalah in Freemasonry.

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Plate 1: Qabbalistic Rose with 22 Hebrew letters and their associations.

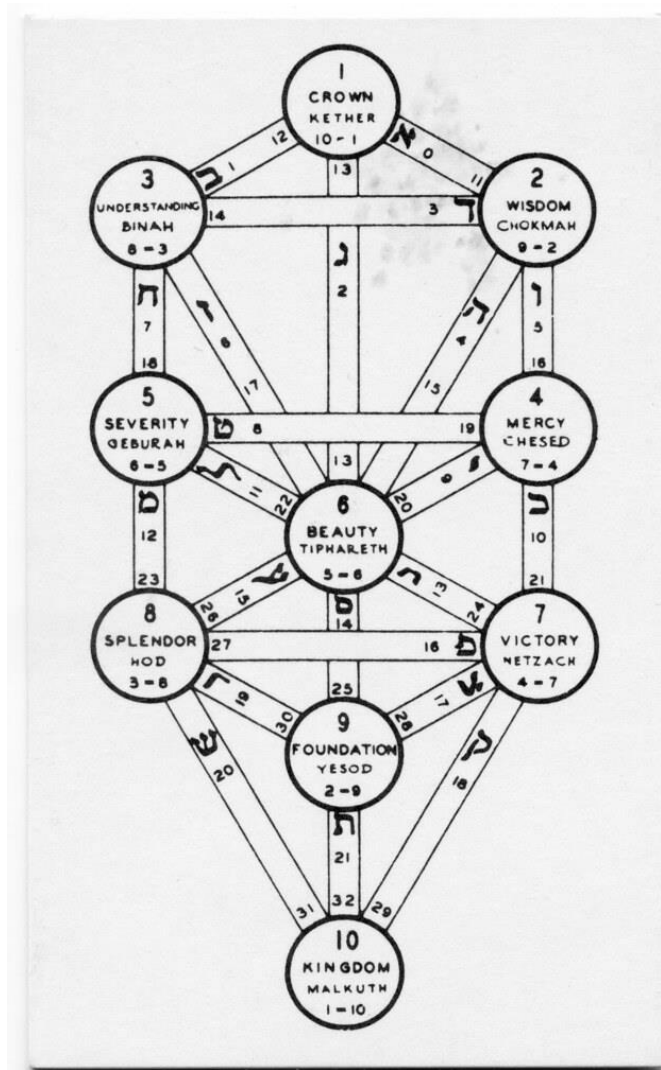


Plate 2: Qabbalistic Tree or “Jacob’s Ladder” with three horizontal paths.

Bro. Peter Taylor, PM, Lodge Albert Lochee 448; PM, Lodge Discovery 1789  
at East of Scotland College, on the 6th September 2013

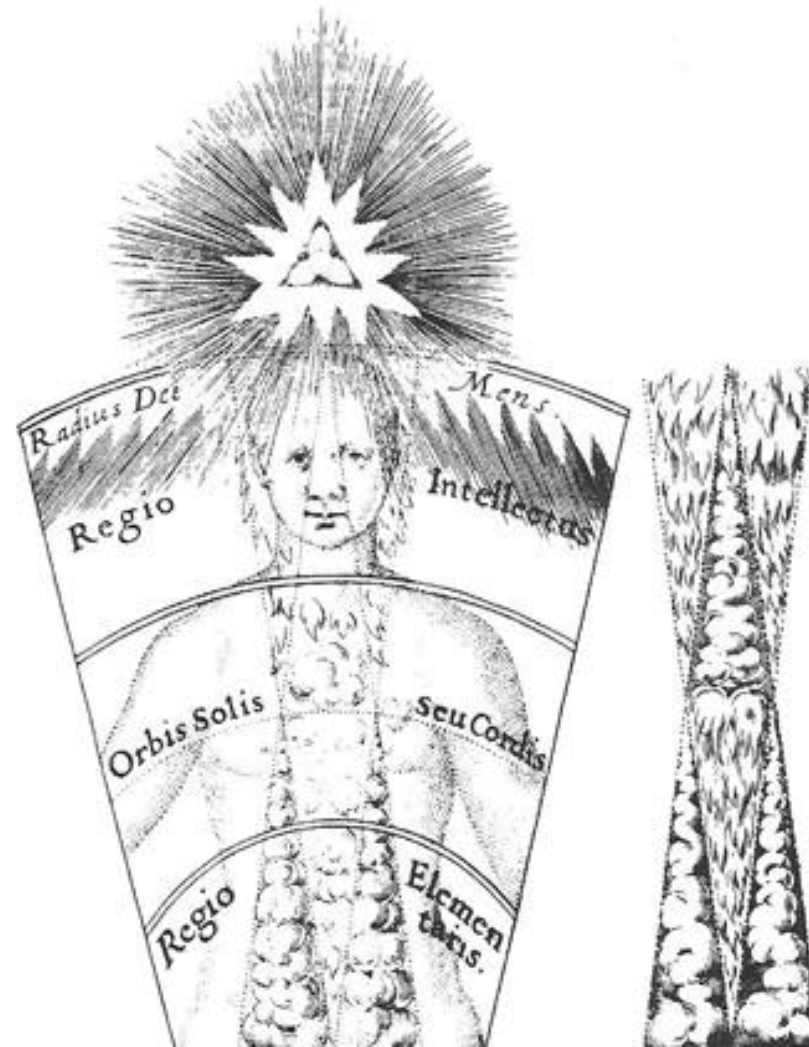


Plate 3: Body divided into three sections according to the elements by Robert Fludd, circa 1619.

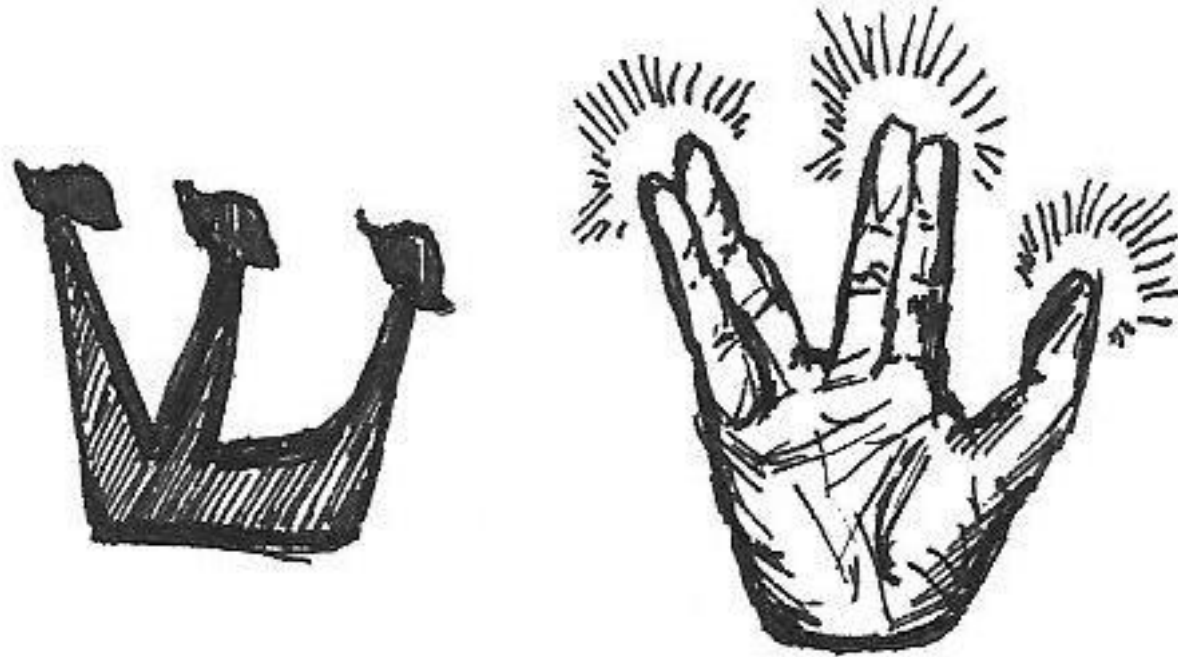


Plate 4: Hebrew letter Shin. Above right: Hand placed in the letter Shin.