

FRATER 939

The Symbolism of the Taro and the Qabala

Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.

Topical outline:

1. What is Qabala

Qabala was once only an oral tradition passed from master to pupil. In fact the word itself means tradition. The rabbin of medieval Spain took care of that by writing it down. Thank you very much. In the late 12th early 13th century in France lived Isaac the Blind who is attributed with first using the term Qabala in written form. The Sepher ha Zohar is attributed to Moses de Leon in the 13th century in Spain. Probably he basically popularized it, made it more widely available. Never the less the main texts of the "tradition" emanate largely from this time period. Cultures mixed and philosophy flourished during this time in that part of the world.

I note here that Qabala today has a couple of very distinct and mutually exclusive manifestations. There is still the Hebrew "Mystery School" approach which I would call the literal Qabala. This is best studied in some of the translations from the late 19th Such as MacGregor Mathers The Qabalah Unveiled. This will give a sense of the mysticism of the Jewish religion represented by the literal Qabala. When I speak of the Qabala through out the rest of this presentation I will be referring to something quite different. That is the Speculative or Practical Qabala.

The Speculative or Practical Qabala are unique in that they pretty much discard most of the Jewish dogma in favor of the simple Diagram known as the Tree of Life and its 22 interconnecting paths. These 32 locations provide a way to isolate and store various bits of data (or traditional attributions, ideas, archetypes or what have you). This method can best be described as a relational database founded on the basic principles of the ten sepheroth and the 22 interconnecting paths.

Note on the origins of the Taro:

The Taro on the other hand possibly came to us as through European contact with the Middle East during the crusades. The cards would have been used for a game called Nayb. The first deck that we still have an example of (74 of the 78 cards anyway) was produced in Milan in around 1450 for the count Filippo Maria Visconti. Note we have partial examples of earlier playing cards but this one is the earliest complete set we have.

Various scenarios present themselves as the Taro refined itself and appeared fully developed in the 18th century. Antoine Court de Gebelin, a French freemason became attracted to the game cards of the Tarot game and theorized that these symbols were in fact the "Book of Thoth" or the book of the Egyptian God of Learning and Wisdom. Much of the mystification of the cards can be traced to this approximate time period. (It is perhaps interesting to note that Benjamin Franklin was a contemporary and member of the same Lodge as Gebelin.) In fact several occultists of this period became interested in the card and their symbolic properties. Eliphas Levi was among them. It is he who seems to first have associated the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet to the 22 Trump cards.

The exact path that was taken from card game to divination device and repository of symbols is somewhat murky. It should be easy to speculate that the cards, especially the trumps, became a great way to pass allegorical information from one place to another in spite of the "church", language variations and political machinations. So an earlier interpretation of the cards as a set of secret symbols is fairly plausible.

It is interesting to note that the Tarot is still played as a contemporary trick taking card game played throughout France and in French speaking Canada.

2. Taro and its relation to Qabala

Interestingly enough the Taro and the Qabala were quite independent throughout most of their coexistence in Europe of the Middle Ages through the Age of Enlightenment. However as Qabala became more and more a classification system during the late 18th and into the 19th century the two traditions melded. The Taro had largely developed as a pictorial representation of various western (Neo Platonic) ideas and concepts. The Qabala adapted itself nicely to a classification system and the two became almost inseparable as occultists such as Eliphas Levi, MacGregor Mathers and Aleister Crowley bent the two traditions to their purposes.

a. The Trump Cards

The Taro Trump cards sometimes called The ATU numbered 0 – 21 were, in the old card game, the cards which beat any other card. I.e. Trumped them, a term still used in card games which has also been exported to the vernacular. These Trump cards became the central repository of the symbols which the Taro has accrued over the centuries. The Fool or Trump 0 became associated with Air, the Hebrew letter Aleph, the concept of Qabalistic Zero, the Green Man of Spring and a host of other attributions. Each Trump has accrued such correspondences. Thus the twenty two cards of the Major Arcana (Trumps, ATU) have become a store house for the lore of western esoteric traditions.

b. The Small Cards

The small cards are organized in suites such as Wands, Cups, Swords and Disks (Pantacles). Each suit represents one of the ancient "elements". Wands = Fire, Cups = Water, Swords = Air and Disks = Earth. Each suit has four ruling cards (royalty) which indicate element and sub elemental attributions. The Knight of Wands represents the Fiery part of Fire, Queen of wands represents the watery part of fire, the Prince of Wands represents the Airy part of Fire and the Princess of Wands represents the Earthy part of Fire. Under these categories are the minor arcane the cards 1 or Ace through 10. The Ace of Wands represents the root of Fire. The 2 of Wands is called Dominion and is represented by Mars and Aries, the 3 of Wands is called virtue and represents Sun Aries, the 4 is called completion and represents Venus in Aries, the 5 is called strife and represents Saturn Leo, the 6 is called victory and represents Jupiter Leo, the 7 valor and represents Mars Leo, the 8 swiftness and represents Mercury Sagittarius, the 9 strength and represents Moon Sagittarius and lastly the 10 of wands is called Oppression which represents Saturn Sagittarius.

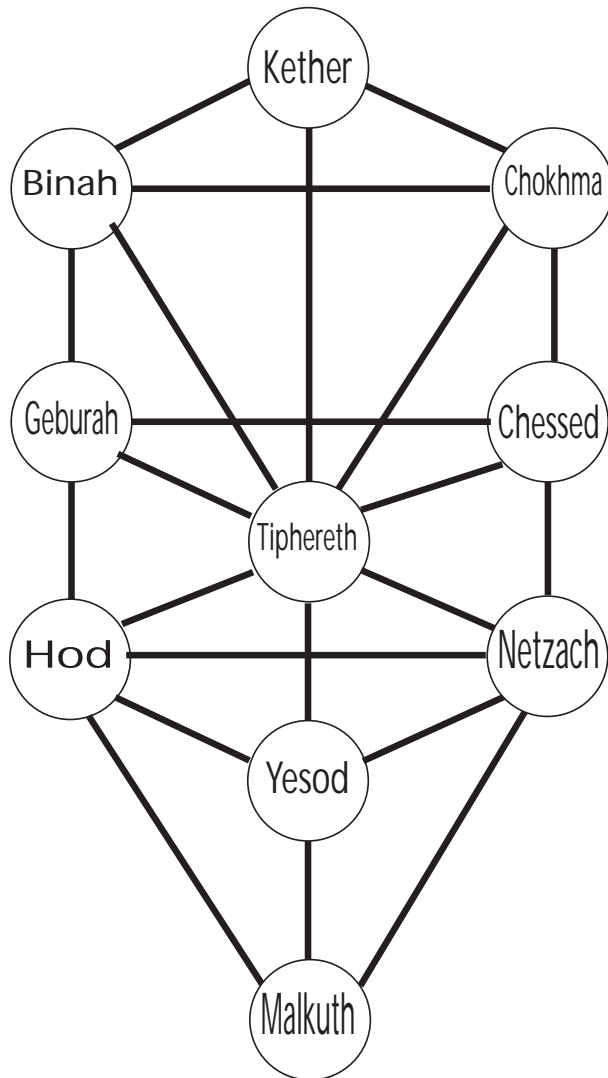
Each Element or suit is arranged in similar fashion each with their own titles and attributes. These attributes are, in the best decks, represented in pictorial form on the card so as to provide a mnemonic device that is a device for easily remembering all of the various meanings of the card.

3. Symbol sets to assist us relate phenomenon

The Diagram of the Tree is probably familiar to most of you. The Ten spheres or sepheroth are assigned to various ideas or archetypes. E.g. Sphere 1 or Kether is called the Crown and is the first manifestation from what is called the three veils of Negative existence. (Ain - Nothing, Ain Soph – The Limitless and Ain Soph Aur – The Limitless Light) From these negative veils coalesce

Kether – the Crown. Next comes sphere 2 or Chokmah or Wisdom (note that this is wisdom in the pure sense of all knowing but undifferentiating). Sphere 3 is next. Binah as it is called and Understanding is its title. This completes what is called the Supernal Triad. The point, the line and the Matrix (Triad) thus existence is manifest in the most rarefied sense possible. These are really more like mathematical conceptions than anything else.

The spheres 4 – 10 are called in order – Chessed – Mercy, Geburah – Strength, Tiphereth – Beauty, Netzach – Victory, Hod – Splendor, Yesod – Foundation and finally Malkuth – Kingdom.



4. The Magicians Data base

It was mentioned earlier that the 10 spheres and the 22 interconnecting paths provide a structure for a symbol database. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Liber 777 by Aleister Crowley I suggest that you obtain a copy and see for yourself how powerful such a database can be. For learning the symbols and relationships between various seemingly unrelated areas it is a very powerful tool.

So how does that work exactly. OK fair question: A data base is arranged as a table; columns and rows. Think of 777 as a table consisting of 32 rows and an expandable number of columns. As new sets of knowledge are presented for inclusion in this database they can be arranged into a column with 32 divisions and thereby inter-related to all of the other columns via the corresponding rows. The example included with this presentation is a few columns from 777 as well as an illustration of the inclusion of a set of data not included in the original. The system is open and can and should be expanded. The flexibility to categorize and relate various facts is a very powerful concept.

The Taro has evolved into a visual database of symbols nearly exclusively related to the western magical tradition. One can think of the symbols on the Taro cards as a mnemonic store house of visual data relating to the particular aspect of a particular card. The following analysis should give the student the gist of this idea.



Let us take for instance this card:

Here is the Chariot ATU VII. This card is attributed to the 18th Path of the Tree of Life. The path which connects Binah (Understanding) with Geburah (Power) The path contains as some of its attributes the astrological sign of Cancer, the Hebrew letter Cheth, Mars and Water, Kephra, Apollo as the charioteer, Roman God Mercury to name a few.

This charioteer has visor lowered for no man may look upon his face and live. He holds the Holy Grail into which the blood of the saints has been poured. Upon his helm is the crab crest of Cancer and his car is pulled by the four elemental cherubs. The car has as its roof the starry sky of Binah and the red wheels represent the martial aspect of Geburah into which this primal watery energy flows. The central aspect of the Grail is the repository of the energy of human kind and this card represents the most primal and holy transmission of energy in all of the symbolism of the Tarot.

As you see from the example the columns and rows of Liber 777 give general data. The data given in the tarot trump just examined is specific to one the manifestation of that particular row in western tradition.

Through this brief lesson in comparison hopefully the student can come to a more complete understanding of the kinds of data organization and mnemonic devices the western tradition has to offer. The way that data is handled is quite unique from the older models. It is streamlined where others are ponderous and hard to manage. Our method is flexible and expandable and perfectly suited for use in a more modern age.

Materials: Bring something uncomfortable to sit on.

Time: approximately an hour

Love is the law, love under will.