KABBALISTIC CONCEPTS OF TRADITION
REVELATION AND THE ‘CRISIS OF TRADITION’
IN KABBALAH: 1475–1575

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1. Tradition, Reception and Revelation in Early Kabbalah

During the first three centuries of its historical and literary existence, namely between approximately the years 1175 to 1492, the Jewish literature known as Kabbalah produced several distinct schools whose attitudes to the manner in which this religious knowledge has emerged and is transmitted differ dramatically.1 Firstly I shall describe two major approaches: the traditionalist one, gravitating around Nahmanides’s approach, and the revelatory one, first connected to the ecstatic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia, to the Zoharic literature, and to the literature known as Sefer ha-Meshiv. Then I shall turn my attention to issues related to some of the views articulated in the powerful Safedian Kabbalistic centre during the mid-16th century regarding the emergence and transmission of Kabbalah.

In the mid-thirteenth century the Catalan Kabbalist Nahmanides and his school claimed that oral transmission, when performed in a controlled manner from a reliable master to his student, is the only source of authentic Kabbalah in the present. In the introduction to his Commentary on the Pentateuch—which includes some allusions to Kabbalistic topics—Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman, also known as Nahmanides (1194–1270), wrote:

I bring into a faithful covenant and give proper counsel to all who look into this book not to reason or entertain any thought concerning any of the mystic hints which I write regarding the hidden matters of the Torah, for I do hereby firmly make known to him that my words will not be comprehended nor known at all by any reasoning or contemplation, excepting from the mouth of a wise Kabbalist [speaking] into the ear.