

# **Éliphas Lévi and the Kabbalah**

The Masonic and French Connection of the  
American Mystery Tradition

by

Robert L. Uzzel

## Éliphas Lévi and the Kabbalah

A Cornerstone Book  
Published by Cornerstone Book Publishers  
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Cornerstone Book Publishers  
Lafayette, Louisiana

Authors Photo: A Samuel E. Naive Photo

First Cornerstone Edition - 2006

[www.cornerstonepublishers.com](http://www.cornerstonepublishers.com)

ISBN: 1-887560-76-9  
978-1-887560-76-4

MADE IN THE USA

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## Éliphas Lévi and the Kabbalah

## CHAPTER 1

### Éliphas Lévi's Life and Approach to Kabbalah

Alphonse Louis Constant was a noted French writer in the field of medieval Hebrew Kabbalah and other esoteric subjects. He will be referred to throughout this book by his pen name of "Éliphas Lévi." This decision was made, notwithstanding the fact that he did not choose to refer to himself by this title until 1853. He has been called "the last of the magi" and has been given much credit for the revival of interest in magic and mysticism where it featured in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> One writer has observed that Lévi's life spanned the "heart years" of the nineteenth century and that he was in and out of most of the major movements and currents of his day.<sup>2</sup> His influence has continued in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially in the area of occultism. It is probable that a great deal of modern occult terminology and practice is indebted to him.<sup>3</sup> In a very real sense, he can be described as the French connection of the American mystery tradition.

Many nineteenth and twentieth-century students of medieval Kabbalah have relied primarily on the writings of Éliphas Lévi. On this account, certain leading Kabbalistic scholars have been critical, contending that Lévi was guilty of hermeneutical distortions. According to Lévi, all esoteric systems are rooted in Kabbalah.<sup>4</sup> Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942), the British mystic who translated a number of Lévi's works, contended that: "So far Éliphas Lévi, whose undeniable influence upon all modern occultism has done more than anything to exaggerate the true philosophical position of Jewish secret literature, and to place some of its expositors in a false light."<sup>5</sup> Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), who was probably the leading Hebraic authority on Kabbalah in the twentieth century, charged Lévi with "supreme charlatanism" in promoting "totally unrelated inventions such as the alleged kabbalistic origin of the Tarot cards."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the fact remains that he has had extensive influence on the thinking of many religious circles.

To date, there has been no exhaustive study of Lévi's influence on American thought. The only three biographical works now extant relate to his influence in France. Paul Chacornac's *Éliphas Lévi, renovateur de l'occultisme en France, 1810-1875*<sup>7</sup> has never been translated into English. Neither Christopher McIntosh's *Éliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*<sup>8</sup> nor Thomas A. Williams' *Éliphas Lévi: Master of Occultism*<sup>9</sup> provides a treatment of his influence in America. Numerous books on American occultism make passing reference to Lévi, but none of them have provided an exhaustive treatment of him.



*Alphonse Louis Constant / Éliphas Lévi Zahed*

### **Éliphas Lévi's Early Involvement in the Christian Church**

Éliphas Lévi was born on 8 February 1810. He was the son of a poor shoemaker named Jean-Joseph Constant and his wife Jeanne Agnes Constant. He was baptized as a Roman Catholic on 11 February 1810.<sup>10</sup> His family lived at 5 Rue de Fosses-Saint-Germain-des-Pres.<sup>11</sup> In an autobiographical essay, he wrote about the experience of his first Communion:

"Through the mysteries of Catholicism I had glimpsed the infinite; my heart became filled with passion for a God who sacrifices himself for his creatures and transforms himself into bread to nourish them. The gentle image of the immolated lamb brought tears to my eyes, and my heart throbbed at the tender name of Mary."<sup>12</sup> As a child, he was given more to meditation than to action. Early in life, he developed a marked talent for drawing and painting.<sup>13</sup> He was described as "the clever lad," and exhibited an aptitude for picking up stray bits of knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

At the age of fifteen, Lévi enrolled at the *petit séminaire* of Saint-Nicholas de Chardonnet. There he was influenced by Abbé Frère-Colonna, whom he described as "the most intelligent and sincerely pious priest I have ever known." This priest predicted a final golden era of mankind "in the shade of the apple trees of a New Eden." The abbé's teachings about a secular, historical realization of the Christian ideal of pure and selfless love in the

structure of society influenced Lévi's inclination toward utopian thought. However, when the abbé was censured by the conservative church hierarchy, Lévi became disillusioned with the idea of Roman Catholicism as a great revolutionary force.<sup>15</sup> According to one of his biographers: "His Catholicism was too deeply ingrained for him ever to abandon it but he never lost his dislike for the authoritarian side of the Church."<sup>16</sup>

Eventually, Lévi left Saint-Nicholas to continue his studies at Saint Sulpice Seminary, in preparation for the priesthood.<sup>17</sup> There, he demonstrated much scholastic ability, including great proficiency in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.<sup>18</sup> However, he had some problems with the theological instruction. He later recalled that the chief occupation of students and teachers seemed to be the "slow and painful learning of ignorance" and the main qualities required for success were "sufficient memory to retain the old arguments of the scholastics, a little old-fashioned subtlety in making them over again into the Gallican mold, and a tongue capable of repeating and twisting reason to conform to them."<sup>19</sup> Despite many negative experiences, he remained at Saint Sulpice. While there, he developed feelings of "great compassion for the church that had fallen into the hands of such of its children as these." He declared: "My soul by virtue of its love alone, sought to raise itself to the divine unity, to the great religion of the future, which will unite all beings in a single being, all sciences in a single idea, all hearts in a single love; in short, to the pantheism that men of bad faith would have us avoid as a monstrous error and that is, in reality, the last word of the sublime doctrine of Christ and his apostles."<sup>20</sup> For a long time, he wrestled with the problem of evil and finally concluded: "The dogma of Hell could no longer stand against my ardent love of God and humanity."<sup>21</sup> About this time, he was assigned to read *Golden Verses of Pythagoras*, a work he found to be very inspirational.<sup>22</sup>

On 19 December 1835, Lévi was ordained a deacon, taking a vow of celibacy.<sup>23</sup> He served for a brief period as professor at Petite Seminaire de Paris. About the same time, he was sent to a number of rural parishes, where he preached with great eloquence. However, the doctrines he preached were not always in accord with orthodox Catholic dogma.<sup>24</sup>

In May 1836, Lévi was scheduled to be ordained to the priesthood. However, he concluded that "I could not take my vows before the altar of a cold and egotistical cult without remorse."<sup>25</sup> It appears that his break with the church was precipitated by his assignment to prepare a class of young girls for their first Communion. He recalled: "I felt as if I were surrounded by my family, and I was not wrong. They listened to me, loved me and respected me as a father." He supervised this catechism class for a period of two years. One of his catechumens was Adèle Allenbach, the daughter of a poor woman who had been turned away by a number of priests. A close relationship developed. She called him "my little father" and he called her

“my little girl” On the day of her first Communion, he wept as he prayed to God on her behalf. He saw her every day and had no fears of becoming too attached to her until the day he realized he could not do without her.<sup>26</sup> As the relationship developed, he recognized that it could create a barrier to his ordination as a priest. Thus, he recalled:

I told my confessor about the childish but all-powerful affection that filled me and was changing my life so totally; he replied that I could not receive the episcopal benediction before purifying my heart.... As a matter of conscience, therefore, I turned away from the future for which I had prepared and left the seminary at the very moment when it seemed that I would attain the goal I had set for myself on coming there and toward which I had been so laboriously working during the last fifteen years of study and sacrifice.<sup>27</sup>

After leaving the seminary, Lévi experienced many crises. His mother committed suicide. Some believe that depression over her son's lost career contributed to this. For the time being at least, he no longer saw Adèle Allenbach.<sup>28</sup> He lived in the poor sections of Paris, where he found earning a living to be very difficult. For a year, he taught at a boarding school near Paris, but he did not get along well with the masters of this school. Thus, it turned out to be a very unhappy year.<sup>29</sup> By 1839, he had established a friendship with Alphonse Esquiros, author of a book called *The Magician*. Through Esquiros, he met a socialist prophet named Ganneau, who claimed to be a reincarnation of King Louis XVII who had “come back to earth for the fulfilment of a work of regeneration.”<sup>30</sup> Lévi and Esquiros came to scoff and became disciples. Ganneau's combination of socialism and illuminism influenced Lévi's book *La Bible de la liberté*.<sup>31</sup>

Lévi made his first unsuccessful attempt to return to the Catholic Church at the Benedictine Abbey at Solemes. There, he spent much time in the library, studying the Gnostics, the Church Fathers, and the Christian mystics. He came under the influence of the seventeenth-century mystic and quietist Madame Guyon. He found her doctrine of universalism exhilarating and developed a vision of a utopian future for man, with the Virgin Mary as a bridge between the ministry of Jesus and the reign of the Holy Spirit, and a final experience of divine unity through love.<sup>32</sup> During his stay at the abbey, his first book, an anthology of hymns entitled *La Rosier de mai*, was published.<sup>33</sup> He went to work at College de Juilly, first as a tutor of backward students and later as a playground supervisor.<sup>34</sup> The position set the stage for another confrontation with church hierarchy.

### Lévi's Transvaluation in His Perception of Religion

Lévi wrote *La Bible de la liberté* (Paris: A. Le Gallois, 1841) while at Collège de Juilly. In this book, he expressed a mystical, transcendental overview of man's historical struggles and spiritual growths, pointing out the relation between the two. He presented his visions of God's liberty, with charity and love as the breath of life and governments as servants of the people. His superiors at the college were very displeased with his plans for publication and even offered him a bribe to withhold publication. He responded that he was happy that he had finally done something – anything at all – that merited the attention of the church and the offer of financial assistance, which he had long been denied. Nevertheless, his principles demanded that he refuse this offer.<sup>35</sup> The book appeared on 13 February 1841. Within one hour, Paris police had confiscated it and charged both the author and the publisher with impiety and advocacy of insurrection. At his subsequent trial, Lévi sought to define his position before the jury. He declared: "I consider exploitation to be a kind of murder, as wrong as any thievery. My only crime has been a deep love of mankind." The jury was not favorably impressed and found him guilty, fining him \$300.00 and sentencing him to eight months in prison. By this time, he was well known, especially in leftist circles. His trial provoked a great deal of debate. Most socialist writers supported him, although some rejected the Christian context of his ideas.<sup>36</sup> During his incarceration at the Prison of Sainte-Pelagie in Paris, he read widely and did a great deal of writing.<sup>37</sup> Eventually, his ideas came to the attention of the Franco-Peruvian socialist and feminist, Flora Tristan, who arranged for him to have better food and a more comfortable cell. This was the beginning of a close relationship which culminated in Lévi's editing of Tristan's posthumously published book *L'Emancipation de a femme*.<sup>38</sup>

Lévi was released from prison in April 1842. His first employment following this incarceration was the painting of murals at Choisy-le-roi. He also began work on a book entitled *La Mère de Dieu* (Paris: C. Gosselin, 1844).<sup>39</sup> At Choisy-le-roi, he sought voluntary self-exile from the political controversies of the capital. There, he received approval of Monsignor Affre, Archbishop of Paris, who urged him to use his mother's maiden name of Bancourt and agreed to find him a suitable ecclesiastical post outside of the diocese of Paris. Thus, he moved to Evreux, where Monsignor Olivier, Bishop of Evreux, became his most intelligent and sympathetic ecclesiastical protector. But even there, Lévi was not able to escape controversy. An announcement appeared in *L'Univers*, a Parisian newspaper, regarding the death of "the abbé Constant." Another newspaper, *Le Populaire*, published an article in the 10 June 1843 issue entitled "Resurrection de l'abbé Constant," informing its readers that, far from being dead, the abbé was alive and well in

Evreux. An article entitled "Le Nouveau Lazare" ("the New Lazarus") appeared in a provincial paper called *L'Echo de la Normandie*, revealing the true identity of the abbé de Bancourt to its readers in Evreux, along with the story of his trial and imprisonment. On 29 June, in its coup de grace, *L'Echo* published excerpts from *La Bible de la liberté*.<sup>40</sup>

As a result of this scandal, Lévi soon found himself unemployed. However, Monsignor Olivier privately provided for his quarters and subsistence. He even offered him a parish in his diocese on the condition that he take the final vows and become a priest. Lévi was not prepared to make such a commitment.<sup>41</sup>

In February 1844, *La Mere de Dieu* was published by Lévi's friend Auguste Le Gallois. The appearance of this book offended Monsignor Olivier, who regarded it as doctrinally unacceptable.<sup>42</sup> In this book, woman is idealized as the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God and the fullest representation of woman's pure and holy life. He saw the orgy of strife, faction, greed, war, and inhumanity to be resolved through the love of Mary as society exchanged the old Adam for the new Christ. He envisioned a new world order arising from the social catharsis of the destructive years, which leveled old values and opened the way for the Holy Spirit, which he saw as feminine.<sup>43</sup> According to one of Lévi's biographers: "Just as Constant's passion is unquestionably real, so are his insights profound. 'Mary and Eve reveal themselves everywhere in human destiny,' he writes, and in his discussion of these revelations he often gets down to the bed rock of man's struggle with history. If <C. G.> Jung's primal archetypes of human experience do in fact exist, then Constant is struggling mightily with them in his book."<sup>44</sup> In this book, Lévi recalled a prophetic vision he had experienced on Easter Eve 1841, in which he was convinced that "the anarchy, strife, and babble of conflicting voices" that characterized his own time was "a prelude to the transfiguration of human society." In this dreamlike state, he saw the apocalyptic downfall of the old order, the death of Satan, and the dawning of a new day. In this vision, a young girl was his guide.<sup>45</sup> In *La Mere de Dieu*, he wrote: "I found nothing vague or uncertain in the dream of life. God's mind came to the aid of my own and explained to me every image and dissipated every shadow."<sup>46</sup> Lévi envisioned a society in which antisocial behavior would be treated as an illness and every branch of learning would be a part of the science of God, with religious understanding seen as "analysis and synthesis of love in all its forms."<sup>47</sup> He spoke of a "Magnificent Synthesis which joins all souls in a single soul, all bodies in a single body, through communion; and which creates a new world."<sup>48</sup>

During this period, Lévi did much research in medieval and Renaissance literature. He was impressed by Guillaume Postel, Raymond Lully, and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. He was especially influenced by Francois Rebelais, whose verve, taste for life, and good humor marked his own life to

the very end.<sup>49</sup>

In 1843, Lévi published *Le Testament de la liberté*.<sup>50</sup> During the fall of 1844, he joyfully accepted the invitation of his benefactrice, Madame Legrand, to come and live in her house at Guitrancourt, Seine-et-Oise, to serve as tutor for her children, Clarisse and Adoïphe. One month later, he formally renounced his holy orders. He remained at Madame Legrand's home for about a year and then returned to Paris for the publication of his pacifist manifesto entitled *La Fête-Dieu, ou le triomphe de la paix religieuse*. This work was published anonymously in 1845 and followed in the same year by two other works: *Le Livre des larmes ou Le Christ consolateur; essai de conciliation entre l'Eglise catholique et la philosophie moderne* (Paris: Paulia, 1845), an essay pleading for conciliation between Roman Catholicism and modern philosophy, and *Les trois harmonies* (Paris: Fellen et du four, 1845), a collection of original songs.<sup>51</sup>

Lévi spent a great deal of the money he earned from his writings on entertaining friends at lavish champagne parties. In attendance at such social events were his old friends, Le Gallois and Esquiros, and a host of journalists and socialist pamphleteers. Other guests may have included Adèle Allenbach, the girl who had first awakened his heart to love; and Charles Fauverty, a visionary who dreamed of establishing a universal religion. In October 1845, Lévi and Fauverty founded a monthly politico-cultural review, *La Vérité sur toutes choses*, which lasted only four issues.<sup>52</sup>

In 1846, Lévi published two political pamphlets—"Le Chagrin du Poland" and "La Voix de la famine." The latter publication was seized and condemned, Lévi was charged with "disturbing public order by provoking and inciting hatred between the several classes of society" and with "inciting the people to hatred of His Majesty's government." He went on trial on 3 February 1847. He told the court: "You speak of the abbé Constant. The abbe Constant no longer exists. The abbé Constant is dead. You see before you a layman, Alphonse Constant, a designer, painter, man of letters, a poor man and a friend of the poor." The jury fined him a thousand francs and sentenced him to a year in prison. In August 1847, he was released as a result of special appeal by Noémi Cadiot, a young lady whom he had married, notwithstanding his previous vow of celibacy.<sup>53</sup>

According to one report, Lévi had a number of liaisons with female students over the years.<sup>54</sup> In the mid-1840s, he had become romantically involved with Eugénie C., a teacher in a private school for girls at Choisy-le-roi. One of this teacher's favorite students had been a seventeen-year-old Noémi Cadiot. Frequently, both of these ladies would accompany Lévi on Sunday excursions. Noémi had apparently liked Lévi and soon had exchanged letters with her teacher's "friend."<sup>55</sup> The following summer, Noémi packed all her belongings and traveled to Paris. She presented herself at Lévi's apartment. Apparently, he did not ask her to leave. When her father

learned about her living arrangements, he threatened to charge Lévi with contributing to the delinquency of a minor unless the couple became legally married. They agreed to his demands and, on 13 July 1846, the ceremony took place.<sup>56</sup>

Eugénie gave birth to Lévi's son on 29 September 1846. Noémi gave birth to Lévi's daughter, Marie, in 1847.<sup>57</sup> Lévi and Noémi lived a hand to mouth existence in the bohemian and radical circles of Paris during the two years leading to the revolution of 1848.<sup>58</sup> After the fall of the July monarchy, they began to drift further and further apart. Eventually, they became totally estranged. In 1853, she requested a legal separation and this was granted. In 1854, their seven-year-old daughter died. In 1865, the marriage was annulled on the grounds that Lévi's early ecclesiastical position had made the marriage contract void. He was never able to rid himself of Noémi's memory.<sup>59</sup> No doubt, he was reflecting on personal experience several years later when he wrote: "Make yourself beloved of women, that they be made happier; but never love any woman so much that you cannot be happy without her."<sup>60</sup>

### New Directions of Esotericism in Lévi's Religious Interests

In 1846, Lévi's *La dernière incarnation: Légendes évangéliques du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Librairie sociétaire, 1846) appeared.<sup>61</sup> Two years later, an English translation – *The Last Incarnation: Gospel Legends of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: William H. Graham, 1848) – appeared. This work reflected Lévi's religious views, which were, no doubt, greatly influenced by the political conflict of the time. Lévi depicted Jesus as making various appearances during the nineteenth century, with a message to the poor and oppressed of that day. Lévi's desire to be a champion of the poor can be seen in Jesus' words: "It was to holy and austere poverty that was instructed the education of the heirs of God, in order that through privation they might learn the true use of their Father's riches."<sup>62</sup> In this book, the word of Christ is "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity."<sup>63</sup> Lévi's readers are assured that "everywhere the spirit of the Gospel makes conquests, except in the closed minds and frozen hearts of those who call themselves the depositories of the Gospel."<sup>64</sup> The "Widow's son" – an expression used in Freemasonry – is called a "Brother of Christ." In keeping with this theme, Jesus is made to say "The blind man whom I can guide to prevent him from stumbling over the stones of the road shall be my father, the poor widow who weeps, and whom I can console, shall be my mother, and the deserted orphans who have no one to love them shall be my brothers and my sisters."<sup>65</sup>

The above work, as a whole, is marked by strong socio-human, socio-ethical, and socio-religious overtones. Much concern for the poor and oppressed is repeatedly expressed by Jesus, Who says "You are all brothers,

because God is the father of you all: and he loves you all, the poor as well as the rich, but more particularly the poor, because they have more to suffer."<sup>66</sup> Jesus is depicted working with an axe and charging people to be "Intelligent Workmen."<sup>67</sup> Lévi made further references to working people when he depicted Jesus as instructing four rival journeymen that journeymen of all professions need each other. Due to Jesus' influence, the journeymen swear to work unto death for the union of the children of Solomon and Hiram in the great family of the children of Christ.<sup>68</sup> In the legend called "The New Adulterous Woman," Lévi depicted the power of women's tears. Here, Jesus says: "I am the husband of isolated souls; I am the man of the future!" This seems to imply that Lévi believed that the human soul was feminine.<sup>69</sup> Later, Jesus is seen as seeking wisdom in the "House of the Insane" and telling the "Keepers of the Insane": "His madness is only the love of justice carried to extreme, and the more he is tormented, the more dangerous and incurable will his malady become."<sup>70</sup> Those in authority could not have appreciated Lévi's picture of Jesus saying "My Father will require of you an account of all the victims of society. . . . He alone has a right to take away life who can give or restore it. . . . If man wishes to be a judge like unto God, let him therefore be a Saviour like him. . . . He who has made orphans ought to adopt them."<sup>71</sup> The book's utopian spirit is reflected at the end, where Lévi revealed a vision of "fields already green with the first fraternal crops" and sounds of a "mysterious prelude of the chant of union."<sup>72</sup>

*La dernière incarnation* was followed by a political tract entitled *La Deuil de la Prologue*.<sup>73</sup> In 1847, *Les Trois Malfaiteurs, Légende Orientale* was published. This work was based on imagined earlier associations of Jesus and the two thieves who were later crucified with Him.<sup>74</sup> Also appearing that year was *Rebelais à la Basmette* (Paris: Librairie phalansterienne, 1847). Other works written about this time were later reissued as *Le sorcier de Meudon* (Paris: A Bourdilliat et ce, 1861).<sup>75</sup>

Whereas the crisis years at Saint Sulpice turned a young aspirant to the Roman Catholic priesthood into a man of action, mystic, and herald of the new age that would dawn as soon as men freed themselves from the chains of the old, the crisis of the Revolution of 1848 turned a man of action into a solitary magus, sage, and teacher. Perhaps, by this time, he had concluded that the time was not ripe for the regeneration of humanity as a whole. Nevertheless, it appears, he remained determined to show individuals the way of enlightenment.<sup>76</sup> But how significant were the changes he experienced at this time? According to one writer: "The Revolution of 1848 burned out his radical zeal and gave birth to the Magician."<sup>77</sup> Another writer, however, took a different view when he wrote that "Constant's occultism does not represent a complete break with previous experiences and beliefs. It is simply a new codification of them."<sup>78</sup> From all indications, it appears that, after 1848,

Lévi drifted away from socialism without renouncing it.<sup>79</sup> His major interest shifted from politics to magic and mysticism. The remainder of his life was devoted to teaching and writing.<sup>80</sup>

In 1850, Lévi received a commission from an ecclesiastical publisher to write *Dictionnaire de Littérature Chrétienne* (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1851).<sup>81</sup> His life at that time has been, thus, described: "Callers at the Constant home would invariably find their host dressed in the garb of a monk, which he adopted whenever possible—a predilection that was to remain with him throughout his life. Indeed with his full beard and towering bald cranium, he looked more than anything like the benevolent abbot that he might have become."<sup>82</sup>

During this period, Lévi met Hoeni Wronski, a Polish mathematician and theosophist who became his mentor. He described Wronski as "learned to the point of becoming unintelligible for everyone else and sometimes even for himself." Wronski may have introduced Lévi to Kabbalah and the traditions of magic. Lévi saw Wronski's real importance in "this century of absolute and universal doubt" as that of trying to establish "the unshakable foundation of a science both human and divine." The two men shared concerns about Messianism, the dawning of a new age, and the apotheosis of human intelligence.<sup>83</sup> If Wronski introduced Lévi to Kabbalah, he made an inestimable contribution to the future of esoteric thought.<sup>84</sup> The following theory of Lévi's thinking after 1848 may be credible:

To change the world by working revolution in its exoteric political structure might be no longer practicable, but to change the world by transforming one's own consciousness of it was still a viable option and an option that appealed to him more and more strongly. All that was lacking was a conceptual structure that would impose a pattern of meaning on the disparate spiritual, mystical, and rational impulses and insights moving within him. This structure he finally found in the symbolism and doctrines of the Cabala.<sup>85</sup>

In later years, Lévi reflected mixed feelings about Wronski, always recognizing his contributions to his own system of thought but, at times, also noting his shortcomings. He took pride in the fact that, whereas Wronski charged high prices for his teachings of Kabbalah, he offered such to his readers without charge.<sup>86</sup>

By 1853, the transition which began in 1848 was complete. That year, forty-three-year-old Alphonse Louis Constant officially adopted the Hebrew name of Éliphas Lévi Zahed. Three years later, his masterpiece *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* (Paris: G. Baillière, 1856) was published. Four years after this publication, he amplified his views in the publication of *Histoire de la magie, avec une exposition clair and précise de ses procédés de ses rites et de ses*

*mystères* (Paris: G. Baillière, 1860). The following year, his third occult work, *La Clef des Grands mystères suivant Hénoch, Abraham, Hermé Trismégiste et Salomon* (Paris: O. Baillière, 1861), appeared. These three works served as the foundation for all of his later writings.<sup>87</sup>

### **The Role of Initiation in Lévi's Life and Thought**

Lévi joined a number of organizations practicing rites of initiation and promoting the study of magic and mysticism, but the level of his involvement is unclear. It appears, however, that his research and writing on such matters was far more significant than his personal involvement in any initiatory institution.

On 14 March 1861, Lévi was initiated into Freemasonry by a friend named Jean-Marie Lazare Caubet, who was Worshipful Master of *La Loge de la Rose du Parfait Silence*.<sup>88</sup> On 21 August 1861, he received the Master Mason degree. He became a Freemason with the firm conviction that Masonic symbolism was rooted in Kabbalah.<sup>89</sup> As it turned out, however, this association was not a happy one. At that time, the Grand Orient of France – to which this lodge was affiliated – was moving in the direction of secularism and anticlericalism, which Lévi would find quite distasteful.<sup>90</sup> He was quite certain that the real meaning of the complicated and bizarre, but also very rich, Masonic symbolism had been lost to many Masons. One month after his “raising,” he was invited to make an address to the lodge. He told the Masons assembled that he had come among them in order to instruct them, so that they might recover the “lost tradition” of Freemasonry and the “exact knowledge” of all its “signs and symbols.” He stated that, at a later time, he hoped to teach them why the Masonic order came into existence in the first place. His remarks were not well received by the lodge’s established leadership. It seems that the brethren did not desire to receive “more light” from Lévi. As a result, he did not remain active in organized Freemasonry.<sup>91</sup> He wrote: “I ceased being a Freemason, at once, because the Freemasons, excommunicated by the Pope, did not believe in tolerating Catholicism; I thus separated from them to protect my freedom of conscience and to avoid their reprisals, perhaps excusable, if not legitimate, but certainly inconsequential, because the essence of Freemasonry is the tolerance of all beliefs.”<sup>92</sup> Interpretations of Masonic philosophy and symbolism, however, are found throughout his writings.<sup>93</sup>

Lévi also became an authority on Rosicrucian symbolism and may have joined one of the Rosicrucian groups that emerged in France. He saw the rose as a type of beauty, life, love, and pleasure, a mystical expression of “the secret thought of all protests manifested at the Renaissance.”<sup>94</sup> He understood the union of the rose and the cross as a problem of high initiation.<sup>95</sup> In 1867, in England, the Societas Roscruciana in Anglia was established,

with membership limited to Freemasons. Lévi was given honorary membership.<sup>96</sup> American Rosicrucian leader Pascal Beverly Randolph claimed that Lévi installed him in the office of “Supreme Grand Master of the Western World” during a visit to Europe in 1858. Randolph’s role in reviving magic and mysticism in America may be seen as comparable to Lévi’s in Europe.<sup>97</sup>

Lévi was intrigued with the experiences of initiation and adeptship. He believed that such were, by their very nature, closed to all who were enslaved by passions and prejudices.<sup>98</sup> He understood the end of all ancient initiations as forming men who were prepared to die rather than renounce truth and justice. Such men, he believed, are the most truly living, for they are possessed of immortality.<sup>99</sup> He wrote: “The elect of intelligence are always few on earth and are encompassed by the foolish and the wicked, like Daniel in the den of lions .... absolute science, being an omnipotence, must be the exclusive possession of the most worthy.”<sup>100</sup>

Lévi described ancient initiatory societies as “seminaries for priests and kings.” He believed that medieval secret societies perpetuated, with diminished power, the initiatory system of the Egyptian Mysteries. He regarded initiation as the essential law of religious life.<sup>101</sup> He wrote: “The intellectual and social chaos in the midst of which we are perishing has been caused by the neglect of initiation. ... Masonry has had its deserters, as Catholicism its apostates. What has been the consequence? The substitution of a cast-iron level for the intellectual and symbolical level., this work... is an appeal unto all that is yet alive for the reconstitution of life in the very midst of decomposition and death.”<sup>102</sup>

To him, the death of Jesus represented “the highest and most sublime of Arcana, the last word of all initiations.”<sup>103</sup> He declared that “Christ died as a young man on a cross, and all those whom He has initiated have become martyrs.”<sup>104</sup> He interpreted the visit of the Magi from the East to the cradle of Jesus guided by the Star of Solomon symbolic of Jesus’ mission to consecrate anew the fires of Zoroaster, to renovate the symbolic treasures of Hiram, and to bind up the mutilated form of Osiris. In the narrative of Jesus’ nativity he saw the Magi as honoring the infancy of Christian initiation. In the Magi’s return home by another road in order to avoid the wicked schemes of Herod he saw symbolized the road of occultism which is ignored by the world but well known to adepts, whom he regarded as the Magi of his day and beyond.<sup>105</sup> To the latter was Lévi’s message directed. Thus, he stated: “Let it be well understood that we are not writing for the profane masses, but for the instructed of a later age than ours and for the pontiffs of the future.”<sup>106</sup> He sought to instruct his students in what he understood as the true wisdom of the ages. Such mysteries, he believed, were not fully comprehended by the average initiate in a Masonic or Rosicrucian lodge. In later chapters, it will be demonstrated that his influence in both of these

initiatory institutions was far in excess of his personal involvement in either of them.



*Éliphas Lévi*

### **Lévi's Literary Contribution to Nineteenth-Century Religion**

In addition to the works cited above, Lévi wrote *Doctrines religieuses et sociales* (Paris: A. Le Gallois, 1841); *Fables et symboles avec leur explication, ou sont-révélés les grandes secrets de la direction du magnétisme universel et des principes fondamentaux du grand oeuvre* (Paris: G. Baillière, 1862); *La science des esprits; révélation du dogme secret des kabbalistes esprit occulte des evangiles, appreciation des doctrines et des phénomènes spirites* (Paris: G. Baihière, 1865); *Le carechisme de la paix, suivi de quatrain sur le Bible et de la liberté* (Paris: Chamuel, 1896) *Le grand arcane; ou L'occultisme dévoilé* (Paris: Chamuel, 1898).<sup>107</sup> *La science des esprits* has been described as “a defence of the Christian Gospel against the spirits of table-rapping” and reflects Lévi's horror of spiritism.”<sup>108</sup>

### **Lévi's Last Years**

Lévi spent the last twenty years of his life engaged in writing and in giving private instruction to students who visited his apartment in Paris. In 1856, he received a visit from Pascal Beverly Randolph, founder of *Fraternitas Rosae Crucis*. Reuben Swinburne Clymer, one of Randolph's successors as

Supreme Grand Master of this American Rosicrucian body, gave the following account of Randolph's message to Lévi:

This is the first time you see me, at least in this form, but I know you well. I know everything about your past, present, and future life. It is ruled by the inexorable law of numbers. You are the *man* of the *Pentagram*, and the years marked by the number "5," have always been fatal to you. Look back and recollect. Your mortal life started in 1815, your memory failing to recollect beyond that. In 1825 you entered the Seminary. In 1835 you left the Seminary and entered the *freedom of consciousness*. In 1845 you published *The Mother of God*, your first essay on religion, and you broke your connection with the church. In 1855 you were a free man, being deserted by a woman who had absorbed you and forced you to submit to the Law of "Binaire." You then went to England. You were there to dive in the masculine and active principles. It was there you saw *Appolonius (sic)*, sad, tired and suffering like yourself, because the Appolonius you saw *was YOURSELF* – a phantom that came out of yourself, again becoming a part of you and still is with you. You will see him in 1865, but then beautiful, radiant and triumphant. The natural end of your life is marked as 1875 <as is mine> accidents aside.<sup>109</sup>

On 3 January 1857, Lévi witnessed the assassination of the Archbishop of Paris by Louis Verger, a discontented country priest who shouted, 'Down with the Goddesses.' Shortly before this terrible event, Lévi had talked with this priest and warned him against the evils of Black Magic.<sup>110</sup> On another occasion, dairy farmers from the island of Jersey came to him and requested that he remove a curse they believed had been cast on their animals which inhibited the production of milk. Lévi gave them a "sign of the microcosm" and a "magnetized photograph." When the farmers left Paris, they were quite satisfied. Two weeks later, they wrote to Lévi, informing him that Jersey cows were again producing milk and that they were very thankful to their benefactor.<sup>111</sup>

Most of Lévi's last twenty years were spent in Paris. He did, however, visit London in 1854 and again in 1861. He also visited Germany during the summer of 1871. The latter visit occurred at the time of the Franco-Prussian War. That summer, he spent two months in the home of Gustave and Marie Gebhard in Elberfeld. Mrs. Gebhard observed that there seemed to be no book on the subject of mysticism which he had not read and that he had a great memory and a way with words.<sup>112</sup> She declared: "I look upon Éliphas Lévi as one of the truest friends I ever had, for he taught me the highest truth which it is in the power of man or woman to grasp."<sup>113</sup> He changed apartments only three times between 1854 and 1875.<sup>114</sup>

Much of Lévi's meager income came from students who sought him out and desired private lessons from him. It appears that he was a very successful teacher, much more interested in opening the minds of students than in indoctrinating them.<sup>115</sup> One of these students, M. Chauliac, described him as follows: "Vested invariably when at home in a long robe, with his long white beard and bald head, he recalled, somewhat confusedly, the astrologers of the Middle Ages."<sup>116</sup>

The humiliating defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War came as a bitter blow to Lévi, who saw France as the future saviour of civilization. From his book-lined refuge in the Rue de Sèvres, he wrote: "Paris, once the centre of the world, no longer seems part of it. There is silence in the streets and squares, but for the occasional boom of a cannon." He seemed to view the conflict as inevitable and as the result of a more basic conflict between force and right, with Prussia identified with force and France identified with right. He declared: "If everything is but force and matter. . . then Prussia is right. But if force is only the manifestation of the universal intelligence, right exists over and above force, and France is right."<sup>117</sup> Following the siege of Paris, someone thought they saw a shot fired from Lévi's window. An officer from Versailles burst into his apartment and threatened to have him shot. Lévi greeted him calmly, explaining that he was a philosopher and not an assassin and inviting him to search the apartment. The officer found nothing and, impressed by Lévi's sincerity, ordered his troops to withdraw.<sup>118</sup>

During this time, Lévi's health was deteriorating. His periods of illness were becoming increasingly frequent, but in between them he continued to teach and write. In 1873, he completed *L'Évangile de la science*. This was the only book that he ever re-read and corrected. Shortly afterward, he completed *Le Religion de la science*.<sup>119</sup>

Some devoted disciples remained close to Lévi during the last few years of his life. Such included the aforementioned Marie Gebhard and also Jacques Charrot, who would later organize a Rosicrucian society at Lyons. He also received accolades from the literary world. He received a visit from Judith Mendès, wife of novelist Catulle Mendès and daughter of novelist Theophile Gautier, who wrote novels and poetry under her maiden name of Judith Gautier. Lévi accepted the invitation of Catulle Mendès to visit his home. Mendès was enthused by Lévi's writings and introduced him to the noted author Victor Hugo, who was also familiar with his works. In 1874, Lévi completed the writing of his book *Le livre d'Abraham le Juif* which he composed for Comte Georges de Mnischev in gratitude for the material help given to him. Early in 1875, he finished writing *Le Catechisme de la paix* (Paris: Chamuel, 1896).<sup>120</sup>

Toward the end of his life, Lévi reflected a great deal of inner peace and a positive attitude toward life and death. He said:

Everyone is good to me.... Everything breathes an atmosphere of deep peace. The earth would be an Eden for me if my brothers were not suffering in it.... Children smile and approach me when I rest in parks and gardens. I have never knowingly or willingly harmed anyone. I still love the things I once loved: knowledge, poetry, religion, liberty, the sun, the world's greenness, and I feel loved by those things in return. Let the dead leaves fall; spring is immortal in her constant return.<sup>121</sup>

As the year 1875 wore on, Lévi's physical condition steadily became worse. He experienced repeated attacks of dropsy and gangrene. His friends constantly attended him. Dr. Wattelet, his personal physician, did everything possible to relieve his condition. Anna Bomet, an old friend, was his nurse until she contracted influenza and, thus, could no longer perform her duties. She was succeeded by Edouard-Adolphe Pascal, son of a benefactor from his time in prison. Lévi faced his last agonizing days with much courage. His mental faculties were preserved to the end. Near his bed was a beautiful image of Jesus, at which he often looked. Pointing to this image, he said to a visitor: "He told me that He would send the Consoler, the Spirit, and now I wait for the Spirit, the Holy Spirit!" He, thus, reflected the radiance of a profound religious faith.<sup>122</sup>

In May 1875, Lévi made his last will and testament. To Comte Georges de Mnischev he left his manuscripts, books, and scientific instruments. Edouard-Adolphe Pascal was given the right to select among his non-scientific books, curios, and works of art. To his sister, Pauline Bousselet, he gave all of his pictures and devotional objects. He gave his clothes and linen to a community of nuns in the Rue Saint-Jacques. He willed that what remained of his belongings should be sold and the proceeds divided between the friends who had cared for him in his final hours.<sup>123</sup>

On 29 May 1875, Lévi was visited by one of his students, Madame Jobert, who could sense that the end was near. She decided to summon a priest. After refusal at one church, she went to a Jesuit chapel in the Rue de Sèvres and talked with Father Lejume, who agreed to visit Lévi. He came the next day but, for some reason, was unable to gain entry. He returned on 31 May. On that day, he had a long talk with Lévi and probably granted absolution. At 2:00 p.m. that day, Lévi died. Pascal arranged for him to be photographed on his death bed.<sup>124</sup> His funeral was held on 2 June at the church of Saint-Francois Xavier, on the Boulevard des Invalides. He was buried at the cemetery of Ivry. A small group of devotees gathered around his grave. His friend Henri Dyrolle delivered the eulogy, praising Lévi for his courage in renouncing the priesthood, his personal charity, his efforts to unite science and religion, and the great writings he had left. His closing words were: "Farewell, Constant! Honest and loyal soul who never knew charity and yet

practiced it with dignity, rest in peace and may the sincere grief of your friends be the proof of the void which you have left among them."<sup>125</sup>

Arthur Edward Waite, who edited and translated a number of Lévi's works, was one of his major critics, often charging him with distortions of Kabbalah and other matters. However, in editing a collection of Lévi's writings, Waite paid tribute to the French magus in the following manner: "Éliphas Lévi has originated a new departure in Kabbalistic exegesis... his interpretations have fused new life into old symbolism. . . we need have no hesitation in proclaiming him an initiate of the first order and the prince of the French adepts. . . . The noble and generous spirit of Éliphas Lévi has passed behind the veil and has doubtless achieved the immortality he aspired to, and the Absolute which he sought in life."<sup>126</sup>

### **The Primacy of Kabbalah in Lévi's Thought**

In his book, *The Holy Kabbalah*, Waite sought to make an assessment of Lévi's importance to Kabbalistic thought:

It remains to say that Éliphas Lévi represents the invention of a new and gratuitous phase in the study of the Kabbalah ... the standpoint of Lévi is that there is a relationship behind all religions and that it is the veiled mystery of Kabbalism, from which all have issued and into which all return. ... Now it is precisely this standpoint, its derivatives and connections, that created French occultism in the generation which followed Lévi. ... in a very true sense Éliphas Lévi was the magus who opened before his readers the wide field of the imaginary view.<sup>127</sup>

Lévi believed that Kabbalah represented the widest possible synthesis of occult systems and schools. He saw Kabbalah as the origin of the entire esoteric tradition, with every branch leading back to it and included in it.<sup>128</sup> For him, Kabbalah was prior to, superior to, and purer than, every other occult system and, when rightly understood, revealed the unity of all such systems.<sup>129</sup> He saw the major work of Kabbalah—the *Zohar*—as a hidden wisdom unique to his vision. To him, the *Zohar* contained the lost knowledge of the ancient world.<sup>130</sup> He found quite meaningful the teachings of the *Zohar* regarding the spirituality of man, the importance of the human soul, and the manner in which the transcendent God becomes immanent through the emanation of the ten Sephiroth.<sup>131</sup> He saw this secret tradition originating among the children of Seth, the third son of Adam. His theory of transmission was as follows: "Taken from Chaldea by Abraham, communicated by Joseph to the Egyptian priesthood, ingarnered by Moses, concealed by symbols in the Bible, revealed by the Saviour to St. John, and embodied in its fulness in hieratic images, analogous to those of all antiquity, in the Apoca-

lypse of this Apostle."<sup>132</sup>

For Lévi, Kabbalah provided the scientific and religious absolute which was transmitted to the elect of all ancient initiations and handed to the Templars, Rosicrucians, Illuminati, and Freemasons.<sup>133</sup> He insisted that Kabbalah alone consecrates the alliance of universal reason and the divine Word, that it establishes by the counterpoise of two forces an apparent opposition, the eternal balance of being. He declared that Kabbalah alone reconciles reason with faith, power with liberty, and science with mystery. Kabbalah, he said, holds the keys of the past, present, and future.<sup>134</sup> He summarized the Kabbalistic tradition with the following words: "The visible is for us the proportional measure of the invisible." He stated that this symbolical summary of the primitive tradition was attributed by the Hebrews to Enoch, by the Egyptians to Hermes Trismegistus, and by the Greeks to Cadmus, the mysterious builder of the holy city.<sup>135</sup>

Lévi rejected the notion that there was anything pre-scientific about Kabbalah. On the contrary, he regarded it as the world's oldest and truest science; and expressed regret that it was so little known. As a self-proclaimed "Professor of the Highest Science," he felt he had a mission to make Kabbalah and the magical doctrines of the ancient sanctuaries widely known.<sup>136</sup> Thus, he declared: "Let the physicists seek and find out; ever will the Kabbalist explain the discoveries of science."<sup>137</sup> In one interesting passage, he contrasted the observations of Kabbalists and shepherds:

A Kabbalist, familiar with mystic hieroglyphics, will perceive signs in the stars, which will not be discerned by a simple shepherd, but the shepherd, on his part, will observe combinations that will escape the Kabbalist. Country people substitute a rake for the belt and sword of Orion, while a Kabbalist recognizes in the same sign—considered as a whole—all the mysteries of Ezekiel, the Ten SEPHIROTH arranged in a triadic manner, a central triangle formed of four stars, then a line of three stars making the JOD, the two figures taken together expressing the mysteries of BERESHITH, and finally, four stars constituting the wheels of MERCAVAH, and completing the divine chariot.<sup>138</sup>

Lévi saw no contradiction between Christianity and Kabbalah. He called upon Christians to study Kabbalah and recognize that all dogmas were rooted in the secret tradition of Israel.<sup>139</sup> He believed that Kabbalah contained all of the secrets of transcendental theology and that all of the keys to Scripture—from Genesis to the Apocalypse—were Kabbalistic.<sup>140</sup> He called Solomon "the king of Kabbalists and Magi."<sup>141</sup> He referred to the Hebrew prophets as "the kings of the Kabbalah and the great rabbins of science."<sup>142</sup> He stated that the legend of Nebuchadnezzar's transmutation into a beast was recorded in "the Kabbalistic book of Daniel the seer."<sup>143</sup> In one passage,

he declared that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the teachings of Kabbalah: "That which we expose before the intelligent world, mounted on the cubic chariot and drawn by sphinxes, as a Word of Light, the Divine Fulfiller of the Mosaic Kabalah, the human Son of the Gospel, the man-God who has come as Saviour and will manifest soon as Messiah—that is, as definitive and absolute king of temporal institutions. It is this thought which animates our courage and sustains our hope."<sup>144</sup>

Lévi claimed that the Jews at the time of the Pharisees lost the fundamental cornerstone of the Kabbalistic Temple. He declared that, in the light of the *Zohar* and another Kabbalistic work called *Sepher Yetzirah*, Christianity was revealed as the orthodox tradition of Judaism while the scribes and the Pharisees were exposed as sectarians.<sup>145</sup> He taught that the Apostle Paul suspected Kabbalah, which Jesus revealed through the Apostle John in the Apocalypse. John, he said, borrowed much from the Prophet Ezekiel. Jesus, he insisted, came not to destroy but to fulfill the secret tradition of the Jews.<sup>146</sup> He rejected all notions that God's covenant with Israel had been nullified. Thus, he wrote: 'Do not our apostolic traditions declare that after the decline of faith among the Gentiles salvation shall again come forth out of the house of Jacob, and that when the crucified Jew Who is adored by the Christians will give the empire of the world into the hands of God His Father?'<sup>147</sup> He saw in the Kabbalistic Tree of Sephiroth "an admirable exposition of the mystery of the Trinity."<sup>148</sup>

Despite his negative experience at Saint Sulpice and subsequent renunciation of the priesthood, Lévi was nevertheless strongly attracted to Roman Catholicism throughout his life. In his later years, he came to view it as a great hierarchic system and great sequence of holy pageants of living symbolism. He regarded the church as the heir to Kabbalistic knowledge which deserved respect and "qualified obedience" despite the fact that it had lost the Kabbalistic keys.<sup>149</sup> He believed that the loss of these keys had resulted in exegetical obscurity related to the sublime imagery of the Book of Ezekiel and the Apocalypse of Saint John—an obscurity that rendered both books completely unintelligible.<sup>150</sup> He saw this loss of the true meaning of the arcana as inseparably linked with the loss of the church's spiritual mission.<sup>151</sup> He observed that, if Saint Thomas Aquinas had followed his logic to its ultimate conclusion, he would have discovered the Philosopher's Stone and, thus, reformed the church.<sup>152</sup> He regarded sovereign priesthood and perpetual sacrifice as "two indisputable marks of a true religion."<sup>153</sup>

Lévi viewed Christianity as the fully realized and vital expression of Kabbalah and the Apocalypse of Saint John as a Kabbalistic book incomprehensible without the Kabbalistic keys.<sup>154</sup> He saw the Apocalypse as inseparably linked with the Book of Ezekiel and called Ezekiel the "most profound Kabbalist of the ancient prophets."<sup>155</sup> One commentator described the significance of Lévi's studies of these two important biblical books:

Both Ezekiel's "Prophecies" and the "Apocalypse" have played a very important role in the speculations and history of esoteric thinking. Still, it was Éliphas Lévi who pointed out the close relationship between the two books. ... Lévi, by explaining the resemblance in meaning of both books of revelation, tries to prove the identity of the ultimate goal of the Old and New Testament, and so established the reconciliation of the western world: Judaism and Christianity.<sup>156</sup>

Lévi believed that Ezekiel wrote his book "in order to preserve, by means of traditional symbols, the great Hebrew doctrines of occult theology, the universal knowledge of the ancient world."<sup>157</sup> In his commentary on Ezekiel, he pointed out, as he did in other writings, the total opposition of Kabbalists to idolatry. He acknowledged, however, the possibility that Kabbalistic hieroglyphs might be perverted into idols.<sup>158</sup> He gave the following interpretation of the wheels which play such a prominent role in Ezekiel 1:

In the prophecy of Ezekiel life is represented by wheels which turn within one another, the elementary forms are symbolized by four beasts, which ascend and descend with the wheel and pursue one another without ever overtaking, like the signs of the Zodiac. The wheels of perpetual movement never return on themselves; forms never go back to the stations which they have quitted; to return whence one has come, entire circle must have been traversed in a progress always the same and yet always new. The conclusion is that whatsoever manifests to us in this life is a phenomenon which belongs to this life and it is not given here below to our thought, to our imagination, or even to our hallucinations and our dreams, to overstep even for an instant the formidable barriers of death.<sup>159</sup>

He drew parallels between the seven curses of Ezekiel and the many uses of the number seven in the Apocalypse.<sup>160</sup> In his discussion of Ezekiel 40-48, he had much to say about the symbolism of King Solomon's Temple:

All of these figures symbolizing the great mysteries of science had been executed and fixed in their places under the direction of Hiram. Modern Freemasons still mourn the death of that architect, giving us to understand that the sublime theology of Solomon has fallen into oblivion and that the spirit of anarchy among the subordinate workers killed the genius that was Hiram's.

The hieroglyphic sign of the cross, a symbol of the name which con-