Gershom Scholem

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March 20, 2022

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1 Gershom Scholem

German-born Israeli philosopher and historian (1897–1982)

Gershom Scholem
שלומגרשום
Scholem, 1935

Born	Gerhard Scholem 5 December 1897 Berlin, German Empire
Died	21 February 1982 (aged 84) Jerusalem, Israel
Nationality	German Israel
Alma mater	Frederick William University
Notable work	Sabbatai Zevi, the Mystical Messiah Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism
Spouse(s)	Fania Freud Scholem
Awards	Israel Prize Bialik Prize
Era	20th-century philosophy
Region	German philosophy Jewish philosophy
School	Continental philosophy Kabbalah Wissenschaft des Judentums
Institutions	Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Main interests	Philosophy of religion Philosophy of history Mysticism Messianism

Gershom Scholem (Hebrew[1]: שלום גרשם) (5 December 1897 – 21 February 1982), was a German-born Israeli[2] philosopher[3] and historian[4]. He is widely regarded as the founder of the modern, academic study of Kabbalah[5]. He was the first professor of Jewish Mysticism[6] at Hebrew University of Jerusalem[7].[1] His close friends included Theodor Adorno[8], Hannah Arendt[9], Walter Benjamin[10] and Leo Strauss[11], and selected letters from his correspondence with those philosophers have been published. He was also friendly with the author Shai Agnon[12] and the Talmudic scholar Saul Lieberman[13].

Scholem is best known for his collection of lectures, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*[14] (1941) and for his biography *Sabbatai Zevi, the Mystical Messiah* (1957). His collected speeches and essays, published as *On Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (1965), helped to spread knowledge of Jewish mysticism among both Jews and non-Jews.

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language
2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel
3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher
4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historian
5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalah
6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Mysticism
7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_University_of_Jerusalem
8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_Adorno
9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_Arendt
10 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Benjamin
11 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Strauss
12 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shai_Agnon
13 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saul_Lieberman
14 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_Trends_in_Jewish_Mysticism

1.1 Biography

Figure 1 Gershom Scholem sitting in Sukka studying the Zohar, 1925

Part of a series[15] on
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15 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Kabbalah
16 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalah

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- Ohr[19]
- Ayin and Yesh[20]
- Sefirot[21]
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17 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein_Sof
18 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzimtzum
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26 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_angelic_hierarchy
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30 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tohu_and_Tikun
31 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kashrut#Philosophical
32 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lurianic_Kabbalah
33 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilgul
34 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_views_on_astrology
35 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gematria
36 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Notarikon
37 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temurah_(Kabbalah)
38 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Names_of_God_in_Judaism

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39 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shemhamphorasch
40 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzadik
41 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzadikim_Nistarim
42 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropomorphism_in_Kabbalah
43 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panentheism

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79 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah_study
80 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_mystical_exegesis
81 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitzvah
82 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minhag
83 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikveh
84 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_meditation
85 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kavanah
86 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teshuvah
87 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devekut
88 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_services
89 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nusach
90 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tikkun_Chatzot
91 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shavuot#All-night_Torah_study
92 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzaddik
93 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohel_(grave)
94 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lag_BaOmer
95 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asceticism_in_Judaism
96 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Practical_Kabbalah

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166 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Kabbalah
167 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template_talk:Kabbalah
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170 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellenistic_Judaism
171 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasmoneans
172 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadducees
173 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pharisees
174 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boethusians
175 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristobulus_of_Alexandria
176 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philo

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177 `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jews_in_the_Middle_Ages`

178 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brethren_of_Purity
179 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Bajjah
180 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ismailism
181 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Kalam
182 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalah
183 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbinic_Judaism
184 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasdai_ibn_Shaprut
185 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon_ibn_Gabirol
186 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_bar_Hiyya
187 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bahya_ibn_Paquda
188 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judah_Halevi
189 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_ibn_Daud
190 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_ibn_Tzaddik
191 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_ibn_Ezra
192 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maimonides
193 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nachmanides
194 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_ibn_Tibbon
195 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_ben_Judah_of_Ceuta
196 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shem-Tov_ibn_Falaquera
197 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gersonides
198 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_ben_Joshua
199 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_ben_Sheshet
200 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasdai_Crescas
201 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Albo
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204 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Abarbanel
205 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judah_Leon_Abravanel
206 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natan%27el_al-Fayyumi
207 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoter_ben_Shlomo
208 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Israeli_ben_Solomon
209 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saadia_Gaon
210 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_ibn_Merwan_al-Mukkamas
211 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibat_Allah_Abu%27l-Barakat_al-Baghdaadi
212 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Kammuna
213 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maimonides#Influence
214 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalists
215 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karaism
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218 `https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_denominations`

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthodox_Jewish_philosophy
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sephardic_Judaism
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chabad_philosophy
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasidic_philosophy
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservative_Judaism
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform_Judaism
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_existentialism
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconstructionist_Judaism
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocaust_theology
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_Renewal
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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah_Ba%27al_Shem_of_Chelm
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eliezer_ben_Elijah_Ashkenazi
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Gerhard (Gershom) Scholem was born in Berlin[276] to Arthur Scholem and Betty Hirsch Scholem. His father was a printer. His older brother was the German Communist leader Werner Scholem[277]. He studied Hebrew[278] and Talmud[279] with an Orthodox[280] rabbi. [*citation needed*[281]]

Scholem met Walter Benjamin[282] in Munich in 1915, when the former was seventeen years old and the latter was twenty-three. They began a lifelong friendship that ended when Benjamin committed suicide in 1940 in the wake of Nazi persecution. Scholem dedicated his book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (*Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*

261 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anger_in_Judaism
262 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jews_as_the_chosen_people
263 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_eschatology
264 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_ethics
265 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_principles_of_faith
266 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_in_Judaism
267 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happiness_in_Judaism
268 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holiness_in_Judaism
269 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holocaust_theology
270 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_in_Judaism
271 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microcosm%E2%80%93macrocosm_analogy_in_Jewish_philosophy
272 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzadik
273 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Jewish_philosophy
274 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template_talk:Jewish_philosophy
275 https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Template:Jewish_philosophy&action=edit
276 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin
277 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werner_Scholem
278 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language
279 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud
280 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthodox_Judaism
282 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Benjamin

), based on lectures 1938–1957, to Benjamin. In 1915 Scholem enrolled at the Frederick William University[283] in Berlin (today, Humboldt University[284]), where he studied mathematics, philosophy, and Hebrew. There he met Martin Buber[285], Shmuel Yosef Agnon[286], Hayim Nahman Bialik[287], Ahad Ha'am[288], and Zalman Shazar[289].[*citation needed*[290]]

In Berlin, Scholem befriended Leo Strauss[291] and corresponded with him throughout his life.[2] He studied mathematical logic[292] at the University of Jena[293] under Gottlob Frege[294]. He was in Bern in 1918 with Benjamin when he met Elsa (Escha) Burchhard, who became his first wife. Scholem returned to Germany in 1919, where he received a degree in Semitic languages[295] at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich[296]. Together with Benjamin he established a fictitious school – the University of Muri[297].[*citation needed*[298]]

Scholem wrote his doctoral thesis on the oldest known kabbalistic text, *Sefer ha-Bahir*[299]. The following year it appeared in book form as "Das Buch Bahir", having been published by his father's publishing house.[*citation needed*[300]]

Drawn to Zionism[301] and influenced by Buber, he immigrated[302] in 1923 to the British Mandate of Palestine[303].[3] He became a librarian, heading the Department of Hebrew and Judaica at the National Library. In 1927 he revamped the Dewey Decimal System[304], making it appropriate for large Judaica collections. Scholem's brother Werner[305] was a member of the ultra-left "Fischer-Maslow Group" and the youngest ever member of the Reichstag[306], or Weimar Diet[307], representing the Communist Party of Germany[308]. He was expelled from the party and later murdered by the Nazis during the Third Reich[309]. Unlike his brother, Gershom was vehemently opposed to both Communism[310] and Marxism[311]. In 1936, he married his second wife, Fania Freud. Fania, who had been his student and

283 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humboldt_University_of_Berlin
284 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humboldt_University_of_Berlin
285 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Buber
286 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shmuel_Yosef_Agnon
287 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hayim_Nahman_Bialik
288 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahad_Ha%27am
289 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zalman_Shazar
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293 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Jena
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306 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reichstag_(Weimar_Republic)
307 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diet_(assembly)
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309 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_Reich
310 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communism
311 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism

could read Polish, was helpful in his later research, particularly in regard to Jacob Frank[312]. [*citation needed*[313]]

In 1946 Scholem was sent by the Hebrew University to search for Jewish books that had been plundered by the Nazis and help return them to their rightful owners. He spent much of the year in Germany and Central Europe as part of this project, known as "Otzrot HaGolah". [*citation needed*[314]]

Scholem died in Jerusalem[315], where he is buried next to his wife in the Sanhedria Cemetery[316]. Jürgen Habermas[317] delivered the eulogy.[*citation needed*[318]]

1.2 Academic career

Scholem became a lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He taught the Kabbalah and mysticism from a scientific point of view and became the first professor of Jewish mysticism at the university in 1933, working in this post until his retirement in 1965, when he became an emeritus professor.

312 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_Frank
315 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem
316 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanhedria_Cemetery
317 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%BCrgen_Habermas

Figure 3 Card catalogue which Gershom Scholem used to write his notes

Figure 4 Gershom Scholem House, 28 Abarbanel Street, Jerusalem

Scholem directly contrasted his historiographical approach on the study of Jewish mysticism[319] with the approach of the 19th-century school of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*[320] ("Science of Judaism"), which sought to submit the study of Judaism to the discipline of subjects such as history[321], philology[322], and philosophy[323]. According to Jeremy Adler,

319 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mysticism
320 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wissenschaft_des_Judentums
321 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History
322 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philology
323 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy

Scholem's thinking was "both recognizably Jewish and deeply German," and "changed the course of twentieth-century European thought."[4]

Jewish mysticism was seen as Judaism's weakest scholarly link. Scholem told the story of his early research when he was directed to a prominent rabbi who was an expert on Kabbalah[324]. Seeing the rabbi's many books on the subject, Scholem asked about them, only to be told: "This trash? Why would I waste my time reading nonsense like this?" (Robinson 2000, p. 396)

The analysis of Judaism carried out by the *Wissenschaft* school was flawed in two ways, according to Scholem: It studied Judaism as a dead object rather than as a living organism; and it did not consider the proper *foundations* of Judaism, the non-rational force that, in Scholem's view, made the religion a living thing.

In Scholem's opinion, the mythical and mystical components were at least as important as the rational ones, and he thought that they, rather than the minutiae of Halakha[325], were the truly living core of Judaism. In particular, he disagreed with what he considered to be Martin Buber[326]'s personalization of Kabbalistic concepts as well as what he argued was an inadequate approach to Jewish history, Hebrew language, and the land of Israel[327].

In the worldview[328] of Scholem, the research of Jewish mysticism could not be separated from its historical context. Starting from something similar to the *Gegengeschichte* of Friedrich Nietzsche[329], he ended up including less normative aspects of Judaism in the public history.

Specifically, Scholem thought that Jewish history could be divided into three periods:

- During the Biblical[330] period, monotheism[331] battles mythology[332] without completely defeating it.
- During the Talmudic[333] period, some of the institutions—for example, the notion of the magical power of the accomplishment of the Sacraments—are removed in favour of the purer concept of the divine transcendence[334].
- During the medieval period, the impossibility of reconciling the abstract concept of God of ancient Greek philosophy[335] with the personal God[336] of the Bible, led Jewish thinkers, such as Maimonides[337], to try to eliminate the remaining myths and to modify the figure of the living God. After this time, mysticism, as an effort to find again the essence of the God of their fathers, became more widespread.

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324 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalah
325 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halakha
326 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Buber
327 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_of_Israel
328 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Worldview
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334 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendence_(religion)
335 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Greek_philosophy
336 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Names_of_God_in_Judaism
337 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maimonides

The notion of the three periods, with its interactions between rational and irrational elements in Judaism, led Scholem to put forward some controversial arguments. He thought that the 17th century messianic movement, known as Sabbateanism[338], was developed from the Lurianic Kabbalah[339]. In order to neutralize Sabbateanism, Hasidism[340] had emerged as a Hegelian synthesis[341]. Many of those who joined the Hasidic movement, because they had seen in it an Orthodox[342] congregation, considered it scandalous that their community should be associated with a heretical movement.

In the same way, Scholem produced the hypothesis that the source of the 13th century Kabbalah was a Jewish gnosticism[343] that preceded Christian gnosticism.

The historiographical approach of Scholem also involved a linguistic theory. In contrast to Buber, Scholem believed in the power of the language to invoke supernatural phenomena. In contrast to Walter Benjamin[344], he put the Hebrew language[345] in a privileged position with respect to other languages, as the only language capable of revealing the divine truth. His special regard for the spiritual potency of the Hebrew language was expressed in his 1926 letter to Franz Rosenzweig[346] regarding his concerns over the "secularization" of Hebrew. Scholem considered the Kabbalists as interpreters of a pre-existent linguistic revelation.

1.3 Debate with Hannah Arendt

In the aftermath of the Adolf Eichmann[347] trial in Jerusalem, Scholem sharply criticised Hannah Arendt[348]'s book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*[349] and decried her lack of solidarity with the Jewish people (Hebrew[350]: אהבת ישראל"love of one's fellow Jews", *ʾaḥəvaṯ ʾiśrāʾēl*). Arendt responded that she never loved any collective group, and that she does not love the Jewish people but was only part of them. The bitter fight, which was exchanged in various articles, made Scholem break off ties with Arendt and refuse to forgive her. Scholem wrote to Hans Paeschke that he "knew Hannah Arendt when she was a socialist or half-communist and... when she was a Zionist. I am astounded by her ability to pronounce upon movements in which she was once so deeply engaged, in terms of a distance measured in light years and from such sovereign heights."[5] Interestingly, whereas Arendt felt that Eichmann should be executed, Scholem was opposed, fearing that his execution would serve to alleviate the Germans' collective sense of guilt.[*citation needed*[351]]

Various other Israeli and Jewish academics also broke off ties with Arendt, claiming that her lack of solidarity with the Jewish people in their time of need was appalling, along with her

338 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabbateans
339 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lurianic_Kabbalah
340 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasidic_Judaism
341 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hegelian_dialectic
342 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthodox_Judaism
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344 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Benjamin
345 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language
346 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Rosenzweig
347 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Eichmann
348 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_Arendt
349 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eichmann_in_Jerusalem
350 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language

victimization of various Nazis. Before the Eichmann trial, Scholem also opposed Arendt's interpretation (in letters and the introduction to *Illuminations*) of Walter Benjamin[352] as a Marxist thinker who predated the New Left. For Scholem, Benjamin had been an essentially religious thinker, whose turn to Marxism had been merely an unfortunate, but inessential and superficial, expedient.[*citation needed*[353]]

1.4 Awards and recognition

- In 1958, Scholem was awarded the Israel Prize[354] in Jewish studies.[6]
- In 1968, he was elected president of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities[355].
- In 1969, he received the Yakir Yerushalayim[356] (Worthy Citizen of Jerusalem) award.[7]
- In 1977, he was awarded the Bialik Prize[357] for Jewish thought[358].[8]

1.5 Literary influence

Figure 5 1947 drawing by Trude Krolik of the young Scholem "Baal HaZohar" (Master of the Zohar), in the Scholem collection, National Library of Israel (Hebrew University), Jerusalem

352 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Benjamin
354 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_Prize
355 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_Academy_of_Sciences_and_Humanities
356 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yakir_Yerushalayim
357 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bialik_Prize
358 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_thought

Various stories and essays of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges[359] were inspired or influenced by Scholem's books.[9] He has also influenced ideas of Umberto Eco[360], Jacques Derrida[361], Harold Bloom[362], Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben[363], and George Steiner[364].[10] American author Michael Chabon[365] cites Scholem's essay, *The Idea of the Golem*, as having assisted him in conceiving the Pulitzer-Prize winning book *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*[366].[11] Chaim Potok[367]'s *The Book of Lights*[368] features a lightly disguised Scholem as "Jacob Keter."[12]

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1.7 See also

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- Joseph Dan[377]
- Rachel Elior[378]
- Arthur Green[379]

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1.10 External links

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- Audio of Gershom Scholem lecturing on Kabbalah in 1975[410]
- Biography at the Jewish Virtual Library[411]
- "Gershom Scholem & the Study of Mysticism[412]", MyJewishLearning.com
- Biographical page[413] created by Sharon Naveh
- Orthodoxy and the Scholem Moment[414], by Zvi Leshem

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