

The Tetractys and the Hebdomad: Blavatsky's Sacred Geometry

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Abstract

This article traces essential sources behind the Western reception of Sanskrit terminology on the concept of subtle anatomy, focusing on the late nineteenth-century when the Theosophical Society and its forefront, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, first presented it to a Western audience. A doctrinal change took place around 1880–81 in an interaction between American, European, and Indian Theosophists, distinguishing Blavatsky's major works *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). The subject of how and why the first doctrine of *three* human principles (body, soul, and spirit) developed into her later version including *seven* human principles is carefully examined. A new hypothesis on why the number seven became the backbone of Blavatsky's entire cosmology is also presented. According to this, the seven-fold subtle anatomy was there since the grounding of the Theosophical Society (1875) and was rooted in specific numerological, mathematical, and geometric speculations which Blavatsky shared with several other contemporary authors. The article explores Blavatsky's interpretation of some related arithmological themes in nineteenth-century American literature such as the Pythagorean *tetraktys*, “the tetrad,” “the pyramid,” “the cube,” and “the hexagram.”

Keywords: Theosophical Society; Helena Blavatsky; Arithmology; Sacred Geometry; Chakras, Subtle Body

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Theosophical renderings of Sanskrit terms were crucial in forming the Western reception of the concept of subtle anatomy.¹ Many Westerners today have encountered Sanskrit terms like *prana*, *kundalini*, *nadis*, and *chakras*.² In India, Tibet, and East Asia, the number of chakras (“energy centers”) in the subtle anatomy varies. The modern “Western

1. Wujastyk, “Interpreting the Image,” 20.

2. Survey on Swedish conceptions of subtle anatomy made by Fitger. See forthcoming dissertation.

schema,” however, has a relatively standardized seven-fold structure. The chakras are generally also correlated to the seven colors of the rainbow.

We will examine how the Theosophical Society’s most prominent leader, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) formed the ideas behind the seven-fold schema of subtle anatomy and we will search for reasons behind her choice of number seven as the structuring cosmological principle. The article is based on a historical analysis of source material published before Blavatsky’s move to India (1878–79) compared with similar conceptions among her contacts and literary influences. It also examines secondary scholarship on the subject.

We will begin with a brief résumé of the academic discussions about “theosophical orientalism,” after which we will take a look at Blavatsky’s idea about a “universal mystery language” and her emphasis on *numbers* as a point of departure when looking for correspondences. “God geometrizes” was one of Blavatsky’s favorite expressions, but what did she mean by that? We will explore how her conception of the “universal mystery language” was linked to a literary genre called arithmology and the esoteric speculations about “Pythagoras tetraktys.” We will also examine her views on Kabbalah in connection with these speculations. Lastly, I will show the presented discourse was central in nineteenth-century freemasonry and among mythographic authors of that era.

At first glance, it may look as if Blavatsky’s doctrinal change from *three* to *seven* human principles (related to the seven chakras) occurred due to her confrontation with Hinduism and Buddhism. There was, however, a previous process leading up to this shift – a process which, I will argue, largely depended on the mentioned arithmological themes prevalent in the nineteenth-century masonic and mythographic discourse. This kind of literature influenced Blavatsky immensely – both before and after her Indian period. My comparison of sources is temporally synchronic; that is, it compares conceptions of subtle anatomy among (mostly Anglo-American) nineteenth-century authors. It is also typological, focusing on the conception of subtle anatomy and the vital

energy that it is supposed to consist of. Another concept related to “the Western model of subtle anatomy” is the aura. Second-generation Theosophical leaders further elaborated on this concept.³ The Society also cultivated a growing interest in Orientalist translations and interpretations of Tantric philosophy.⁴ John Woodroffe’s (1865–1936) illustrated English translation of the Tantric text *Satchakra-nirūpana*, (*The Serpent Power*, 1918) and Charles W. Leadbeater’s (1854–1934) *The Chakras* (1927) became seminal in the consolidation of the Western seven-fold model of subtle anatomy.

Theosophical Orientalism⁵

In his book *Yoga Body*, Mark Singleton examines the Western reception and appropriation of the concept of yoga. In the late 19th century when the Theosophical Society broke new ground in India, *hatha yoga* with focus on bodily exercises was regarded as a symbol of an outdated, superstitious form of Hinduism. Singleton convincingly shows how occultists of this period viewed yoga as a kind of magic.⁶ Blavatsky saw hatha yoga as a low and selfish sort of magic, contrasting it against the intellectual and spiritually high-standing *raja yoga*.⁷ At the very beginning of the yoga-renaissance, bodily postures were usually condemned by academic Orientalists and other Westerners as well as by high-caste Hindus. From about the 1920s and onwards, there was a shift in the Western appropriation of yoga towards identifying it more with gymnastics and health-promotion than as before, with fakirs and “Eastern magic.”⁸

The Theosophical Society’s use of Eastern concepts is a highly complex issue. Based on Edward Said’s classical reasoning one could argue that the

3. The shapes and colors of subtle anatomy surrounding the body.

4. Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism,” 336.

5. The term is coined by C. Partridge in “Lost Horizon,” 309–34.

6. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, “Introduction.”

7. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 7:145–71

8. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, ch. 2–4; De Michelis, *History*, ch. 5–6.

Society — from a perspective of power relations — was guilty of plagiarism as well as corruption and colonialism.⁹ However, as Richard King (as well as other critics of Said) has observed, Said’s version of Orientalism does not account for how *both* Eastern and Western cultures could use the encounter of their cultures in their own identity formation.¹⁰

Julian Strube has stressed the fact that “modern Tantra should not simply be seen as a one-way street of Western imaginations but rather as the outcome of complex global exchanges.”¹¹ Indian authors contributed greatly to writings on Tantra in *The Theosophist* during the first part of the 1880s.¹² Authors like Barada Kanta Majumdar and Sabhapati Swami thereby promoted a growing interest in Tantric concepts like *chakras* and *kundalini* among Theosophists, altering the previously negative image of Tantra. Strube points to the fact that the esoteric appropriation of Tantra, in the early 20th century, largely depended on John Woodroffe’s English translations and interpretations of the Tantric philosophy. Woodroffe wrote under the pseudonym “Arthur Avalon,” however, behind the pseudonym were also his Indian collaborators, who helped him in his translation and interpretations.¹³

The Western reception of the chakra-system has also been discussed by Julie Hall [Chajes] in “The Saptaparna” (2007) and more recently by Karl Baier in “Theosophical Orientalism” (2016). According to Chajes there was no direct parallel teaching on subtle anatomy to that of Blavatsky’s, in either Eastern or Western traditions. Her working hypothesis is that Blavatsky — although inspired mainly by Western esotericism — invented the seven-fold division due

9. Said, *Orientalism*, 63–67.

10. King, *Orientalism*, 86.

11. Strube, “Tantra,” *Dictionary of Contemporary Esotericism*, forthcoming.

12. Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism,” 326–27.

13. “His writings are decisively influenced by the very same Bengali tantric movement that had initiated the Theosophist debate in the 1880s. [Ati Behari] Ghose belonged to this milieu, and Majumdar, one of the active Theosophist authors on the topic, was also one of Woodroffe’s closest collaborators” (Strube, forthcoming).

to her need of an all-encompassing system.¹⁴ Baier shows that early members of the Theosophical Society had ideas about “the significance of certain body centers for spiritual development,” before they learned about the South Asian *chakras*.¹⁵ According to him, the Indian vocabulary helped the Society in developing a more elaborate system than they had before. Baier also highlights the potential benefits that the teaching of “the ascent through the chakras” could offer the society in terms of occult practice,¹⁶ since they had previously only focused on astral projection as the means to come in contact with “the higher spheres.”

The Theosophical study and appropriation of cakra systems promised twofold enrichment: a better understanding of the subtle body, its anatomy, and physiology, and a more precise conceptualization of the theory and practice of astral projection.¹⁷

Both Baier and Singleton have highlighted the significant contribution of mesmeric Theosophical interpretations of the *chakras*.¹⁸ Baier points to the fact that Blavatsky already in 1877, in *Isis Unveiled* (referred to as *Isis* in the following), described how yogic meditation stimulates the senses of the astral body so that “the most ethereal portions of the soul-essence can act independently of its grosser particles and of the brain.”¹⁹ According to Blavatsky the clairvoyant abilities which could be seen in mesmerized persons and the *samadhi* of the yogis only differed in the degree of “seeing” that was reached. Five years later, in his introduction to the *Yoga Sutras* (1882), Henry Olcott (president of the Theosophical Society) interpreted kundalini yoga as “self-mesmerization” and stated that the difference between a mesmerized subject and a yogi was that the yogi has not only self-consciousness but also self-control. Olcott continues discussing how “the current of nerve aura” is directed through vital points of

14. Hall, “The Saptaparna,” 11, 25.

15. Baier, “Modern Yoga,” 341.

16. Baier, “Mesmeric Yoga,” 337–38.

17. Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism,” 341–42.

18. Baier, “Modern Yoga,” 8; Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 44–51.

19. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:590.

the yogi's body (*The Yoga Philosophy*, iii).²⁰ These observations are also confirmed by John Patrick Deveney's findings, which suggest that Theosophists identified the higher states of yogic meditation with astral projection.²¹

Initially, Blavatsky had a profoundly negative view of Tantra. In the first years in India, she and Olcott collaborated with the reform movement Arya Samaj which also disputed Tantric literature harshly. They imagined Dyanand Saraswati as a genuine yogi but eventually became frustrated by his "lack of occult training."²² Quite soon, Blavatsky changed her opinion about him and criticized him heavily. Nevertheless, after one member in Bengal wrote about his negative experiences of *pranayama* (yogic breathing exercises), critique of the body-oriented yoga exercises (referred to as hatha yoga) started to grow within the Theosophical Society. This resulted in yet another shift towards a more Western concept of meditation, introduced by Gondolphin Mitford and Damodar Mavalankar.

During the last years of her life Blavatsky taught a very personal variant of kundalini yoga to the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, connecting the chakras with "the higher triad" and "the lower quaternary" of her seven principles²³ – although she still condemned hatha yoga exercises.²⁴ Her system was, however, (according to remarks made by members of the group) very hard to grasp, something which led William Quan Judge (the forefront for the society in America) to reintroduce yogic technics again, but now from Patanjali's eight-fold path (although with some references to kundalini yoga).²⁵

A central question if we are to understand the background and influences of Blavatsky's teachings on subtle anatomy is how well versed she was in Eastern religion during the first years of her authorship. Several researchers

20. Baier, "Mesmeric Yoga," 156.

21. Deveney, "Astral Projection," 33; J. Ennemoser's *History of Magic* seems to have inspired Blavatsky's first conception of "subtle energy-centers"; Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:26.

22. Baier, "Mesmeric Yoga and the Development of Meditation," 154.

23. Blavatsky, "Esoteric Instructions," 697–99.

24. Blavatsky, "Esoteric Instructions," 5.

25. Baier, "Mesmeric Yoga," 157–58.

have concluded that her knowledge of Hinduism and Buddhism was primarily influenced by: 1) Orientalist translations and interpretations of Hindu and Buddhist texts, and 2) representatives of the Indian reform movements who were influenced by enlightenment ideas, Orientalism, and Protestant theology.²⁶

However, Blavatsky and Olcott had a few Eastern acquaintances before they moved to India. One of them was Peary Chand Mitra, who became a member in 1877. Mitra was a Spiritualist medium, well-versed in Western literature, and a member of both the British National Association of Spiritualists and the Brahmo Samaj. He later became the head of the Theosophical section in Bengal.²⁷ In 1877 he wrote an article titled “The Psychology of the Aryas” in the journal *Human Nature* where he addresses some of the terms that Blavatsky used in her later version of the subtle anatomy — *atma*, *manas*, and *lingua sarira*. Mitra depicted *atma* as “the soul” and *manas* as “the mind.”²⁸ In 1880 he also describes (from a Spiritualist perspective) how certain spirits “act on the nervous system” and cause the subtle body to develop. It is similar to the effect of yoga, but it can go faster with the help of spirits, he explains.²⁹ In the same year the Indian Theosophist S. Row linked “Pythagorean” arithmology with Indian concepts.³⁰

Older studies have argued that Blavatsky adopted the Indian concepts of subtle anatomy but interpreted them according to Western sources³¹ — a view that Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Julie Chajes also have confirmed.³² Nowadays

26. Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism,” 324–26; Partridge, “Lost Horizon,” 314; Urban, *Tantra, Secrecy*, 61; Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory,” 378–80.

27. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 327; Rudbøg, “H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy,” 336–37.

28. In 1880, Mitra also published an article titled “Stray Thoughts on Spiritualism” where he speculated on “the development of the subtle body, the body of the soul.” One year later he also published a small compendium called *On the Soul*. This text is quite ambiguous regarding the numbering of the human principles.

29. Mitra, *Stray Thoughts*, 5–6.

30. Row, “The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac.”

31. Von Glasenapp, *Das Indienbild*; Wichmann, “Das Theosophische Menschenbild”; Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*.

32. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 455; Hall [Chajes], “The Saptaparna,” 24.

researchers have slightly refined their view of Theosophical Orientalism, highlighting the reciprocity in the influence between Indian, European, and American Theosophists and how the exchange of ideas and concepts sometimes makes it complicated to talk about “East” and “West” as separate cultural spheres. Baier has described the process as a “reverse reflection” between, on the one hand, high-caste English-speaking Indians (often themselves Theosophists), and on the other hand, European and American Theosophists who were interested in and highly valued Hinduism and Buddhism. Both parties had an interest in cooperation. The Indian Theosophists needed to define their identity both with respect to British colonial power and to Indian reform movements such as Arya Samaj. The European and American Theosophists, in their turn, had a desire to define themselves as “the others” in their own culture. The Indian teachings and terminology gave the Theosophical Society their sought for identity of “the Other,” as well as the exotic status of being familiar with Eastern spiritual teachings (which were supposed to be more genuine and closer to the Eternal Wisdom). It also gave them a chance to develop and systematize their doctrine of subtle anatomy so that it became easier to explain such phenomena as astral projection (which was already practiced in the society).

The Universal Mystery Language

According to Hanegraaff, Blavatsky used cannabis (which could be bought at regular pharmacies and was considered “healthy” at the time).³³ It is likely that *Isis*, at least partly, was written in an intoxicated state (an insight that perhaps can be small comfort to readers exhausted from trying to analyze it). The two volumes of *Isis* are crammed with quotes and references to religious texts and philosophical teachings, works on history of religion, literature, and science, medical treatises and articles on archaeology, geology, anthropology, as well as to history of art. Blavatsky herself also admitted to the fact that *Isis* is very difficult to read:

33. Hanegraaff, “The Theosophical Imagination,” 13.

Finally, that the work [*Isis*], for reasons that will be now explained, has no system in it; and that it looks in truth, as remarked by a friend, as if a mass of independent paragraphs having no connection with each other, had been well shaken up in a waste-basket, and then taken out at random and—published. Such is also now my sincere opinion.³⁴

One of Blavatsky's acquaintances, Robert Bowen, stated that Blavatsky had compared her searching of "the secret doctrine" with the practice of Jana Yoga, describing how she used to see "mental images floating before her inner eye."³⁵ This confirms Hanegraaff's account of her method when writing *Isis*³⁶ and could also be related to what Tim Rudbøg has shown to be Blavatsky's use of the word Theosophy. According to Rudbøg, she used the term on three ontological levels: one historical level tied to the original Wisdom Religion; one practical level tied to Divine Ethics; and one abstract level linked to the meaning of intuition or higher truth.³⁷ In this article we primarily address the abstract meaning of the word Theosophy.

In the beginning the Wisdom Religion had belonged to all people, Blavatsky explained. At this archaic age, humans had shared a "universal mystery language," whose elements were still to be found in symbolism and mythologies throughout the world.³⁸ This idea must be seen in the light of nineteenth-century intellectual discourse where the "search for an origin" was highly fashionable.³⁹ The comparing of symbology was an indispensable part of Blavatsky's rhetoric.⁴⁰ An early influence within this field was Georg Friedrich Creuzer (*Symbolik und Mythologie*, 1810–12).

34. Blavatsky, "My Books," 242.

35. Algeo, *Blavatsky, Freemasonry*, 33.

36. Hanegraaff, however, emphasizes that the Theosophical view on clairvoyance markedly differed from that of mesmerism and Spiritualism and that Blavatsky's imaginative ability was deemphasized by herself and her successors (Hanegraaff, "The Theosophical Imagination," 12).

37. Rudbøg, "H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy," 101.

38. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 1:xliv. During the fourth root-race, however, the wisdom was abused for black magic. As a consequence, the doctrine was hidden in secret symbols whose esoteric significance was preserved only by a chain of initiated masters (Rudbøg, "H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy," 117–18).

39. Rudbøg, "H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy," 179–80.

40. Rudbøg also notes that she was familiar with great "system thinkers" like Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, More, Cudworth, Newton, Boehme, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Rudbøg, "H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy," 366–71.

Blavatsky refers to him in a letter to the Spiritualist H. P. Corson Cornell, stating that she – like all the enlightened occultists before her times – was “searching for a system that should disclose to them the ‘deepest depths’ of the Divine nature and show . . . the real tie which binds all things together.” She continues, “I found at last—and many years ago—the cravings of my mind satisfied by this theosophy taught by the Angels and communicated by them” (February 16, 1875).⁴¹

To describe this underlying universal core, Blavatsky had to make comparisons between contemporary and historical teachings and concepts in a very eclectic way (a method which Egil Asprem has named “programmatically syncretism”).⁴² Lévi was one of her precursors in this way of writing, and many esoteric groups presented their teachings in similar ways.⁴³

Since she was a perennialist, Blavatsky did not believe in “pure religious traditions,” but in an underlying “Esoteric core” which could be found in all traditions. Asprem also emphasizes the important role of *numbers* in Blavatsky’s system and that they can work as a form of mnemonic system as well as a point of departure when looking for correspondences.⁴⁴ It is quite clear that Blavatsky needed more systemization during this period and the literature that Blavatsky quoted (or plagiarized) often had arithmological speculations in common.

It is recognized by modern science that all the higher laws of nature assume the form of quantitative statement. This is perhaps a fuller elaboration or more explicit affirmation of the Pythagorean doctrine. Numbers were regarded as the best representations of the laws of harmony which pervade the cosmos. We know too that in chemistry the doctrine of atoms and the laws of combination are actually and, as it were, arbitrarily defined by

41. Blavatsky, *The Letters of Blavatsky*, 1:96–97. As Rudbøg has shown, a passage in her letter to Corson was copied directly from Ginsburg’s *The Kabbalah* (Rudbøg, “H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy in Context.”

42. Asprem, “Kabbala Recreata,” 132–53. “The Theosophical Society treated the newly available cultural data with a deliberately syncretistic attitude, relating cultural data regardless of time and space, but with a programmatic basis, always with the aim of improving the sum outcome” (Asprem, “Kabbala Recreata,” 136).

43. Asprem shows how the occult Kabbala in *The Golden Dawn* worked like a mnemonic system. It offered (just as the tetraktys of Pythagoras did for Blavatsky) a numerological map through which concepts from different traditions could be linked.

44. Asprem, “Kabbala Recreata,” 132–53.

numbers. As Mr. W. Archer Butler has expressed it: ‘The world is, then, through all its departments, a living arithmetic in its development, a realized geometry in its repose.’⁴⁵

The literary genre of arithmology has influenced Western esotericism profoundly.⁴⁶ According to Mark Blacklock, Blavatsky was part of a very popular “uncritical and extra-academic tradition of mystical geometry.” “Pythagorean ideas” as well as Plato’s *Timaeus* were at the center of interest in the circles that she moved.⁴⁷ In this genre Pythagoras is portrayed as the first Western initiate into the “mysticism of numbers” which he, the legends say, learned from the Egyptians and Indians.

According to Leonid Zhmud, systematic arithmology was developed by the Greek Academy, mainly inspired by Plato’s oral teachings on “the ten ideal numbers” – the *decade*. While traditional number symbolism had focused on the importance of individual numbers (for example, 3, 7 or 9), the arithmological speculations were linked to the *decade* and thus organized in a system that – in addition to its philosophical and theological meaning – accounted for the purely mathematical properties of numbers.⁴⁸

According to esotericism scholar Jean-Pierre Brach, arithmology can be described as “a ‘qualitative’ approach to numbers and mathematical objects in general . . . by what is known as ‘correlative thinking’ . . . linking the quantitative values of mathematical entities to a vast array of correspondences.”⁴⁹ This line of thinking has often been linked to religious and esoteric ideas about “The Great Chain of Being,” and conceptions of “a ladder with seven steps” – from the divine sphere down to the earthly realm. The ladder favorably includes conceptions of “subtle levels” between the physical and the spiritual world. All the above-mentioned ideas can also be found in masonic teachings among

45. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:xvi.

46. According to Godwin, Pythagorean Arithmology – often combined with Christian Kabbala – has influenced Western esotericism right up to our days (Godwin, “Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism,” 22).

47. Blacklock, *The Emergence*, 137.

48. Zhmud, “Greek Arithmology,” 322–24.

49. Brach, “Mathematical Esotericism,” 405.

Blavatsky's near acquaintances and there is good reason to assume that she got many of her speculations directly from her early masonic contacts as well as her familiarity with masonic literature. One of the common themes in this literature was the strong emphasis on the number seven as an ordering principle in nature and in creation.

To summarize our discussion so far, it is reasonable to assume that Blavatsky was searching for some sort of unifying system or, as she expresses it, “*the real tie which binds all things together.*”⁵⁰ eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Neoplatonism were major influences before her move to India,⁵¹ and there were some arithmological themes repeatedly discussed by Blavatsky as well as by other mythographers of her time. We will look at some of the most significant works which came to benefit Blavatsky when she tried to systematize her great cosmological vision.

“God geometrizes”

[Numerals] are a key to the ancient views on cosmogony, in its broad sense, including man and beings, and the evolution of humanity, spiritually as well as physically. The number *seven* is the most sacred of all, and is, undoubtedly, of Hindu origin. . . . It is not possible to solve fully the deep problems underlying the Brahmanical and Buddhistic sacred books without having a perfect comprehension of the Esoteric meaning of the Pythagorean numerals.⁵²

“God geometrizes” is one of Blavatsky's favorite expressions,⁵³ and she associated “Theosophy” – in the abstract sense of the word – with “inspiration” and “higher intuition.”⁵⁴ The subtitle of *Isis* – “*A MASTER-KEY to the Mysteries*” – could therefore refer to the notion of a geometric and numerological key behind the mysteries of creation. Also related to this are speculations about the “squaring of the circle” – a concept we will soon return to.

50. Blavatsky, *The Letters*, 86.

51. Chajes, “Reincarnation in H. P. Blavatsky's,” 70–72 (with reference to Hanegraaff).

52. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:407, 409.

53. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 3:196, 313; 7:292; 14:62; *Isis*, 1:508. The expression is often attributed to Plato but is a phrase cited by Plutarch as “typically Platonic” (Kahn, “Pythagoras,” 57).

54. Rudbøg, “H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy,” 120.

Blavatsky actually writes that *Senzar* (an ancient sacred language upon which her teachings in *The Secret Doctrine* are said to be based) is not a language in the usual sense.⁵⁵ It is rather depicted as *a system of archetypal symbols*, often systemized through *geometric figures and numbers*. The numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 10 as well as the circle, the triad, the tetrad, and the cube, are the most prominent ones. “The six-pointed star” (Solomon’s seal) is also central, as is the Pythagorean *tetractys* (see explanation below) and the concept of *Tetragrammaton* יהוה (God’s name in Judaism).

The Kabbalistic “Tree of life” with its *sephiroth* provides the map to Blavatsky’s system.⁵⁶ According to Blavatsky, the foundation of existence was an impersonal *Parabrahm* with no active role in the creation of our world. Instead she wrote of the active agents – or “builders of the architecture of the cosmos” – as *Dhyan Chobans*. They were the *demiurges* which constructed the cosmos following a drawing found in the Divine thought (*Logos*):

The imaginary atoms . . . are like automatic workmen moved inwardly by the influx of that Universal Will directed upon them, and which, manifesting itself as force, sets them into activity. The plan of the structure to be erected is in the brain of the Architect, and reflects his will; abstract yet, from the instant of the conception it becomes concrete through these atoms which follow faithfully every line, point and figure traced in the imagination of the Divine Geometer.⁵⁷

Already in 1875, Blavatsky had a numerical “basic structure” that she tried to apply – and she had not invented it entirely on her own. Plutarch was essential to her already in 1875⁵⁸ – most likely as interpreted by nineteenth-century mythographers such as George Oliver and John Yarker.⁵⁹ Like them she emphasized the cosmological significance of certain numbers holding a special position because of their role in the creation. In *Isis*, she repeatedly states that

55. She describes *Senzar* / “*Zend-zar*” as a “Hieratic Code” and notes that the word “*Zend*” cannot be linked to any language. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 4:517–18 & 14:100–101. This is also Algeo’s opinion (See *Blavatsky, Freemasonry*, 29 and *Senzar: The Mystery*).

56. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 328.

57. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:62.

58. Rudbøg refers to *The Letters of Blavatsky*, 1:213–14.

59. Rudbøg, “H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy,” 349; Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 2:601.

“everything in this world is a trinity completed by the quaternary” explaining the Pythagorean doctrine in the preface of the first volume:

The One is God, the Two, matter; the Three, combining Monad and Dyad, and partaking of the nature of both, is the phenomenal world; the Tetrad, or form of perfection, expresses the emptiness of all; and the Decade, or sum of all, involves the entire cosmos.⁶⁰

One of the red threads in *Isis* is the “Pythagorean triangle” or the *tetraktys* (from *tetros* meaning “four”).

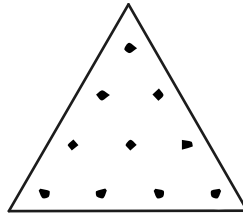


Figure 1. Illustration by Fitger.

Pythagoras is mentioned 146 times in *Isis*. The concept of the *tetraktys* (*tetractys*/*tetraktis*/*tetractis*), also called “tetrad,” “tetragram” or *Tetragrammaton* and depicted as a “quarter” or “quaternary,” is mentioned sixty-nine times altogether. But how are these terms related? Blavatsky talks about “the triad” (a group of three) plus “the tetrad” (a group of four) and the sum of these, making “the heptad” (a group of seven). She also connects $3 + 4 = 7$ to the human constitution:

The Pythagoreans called the number seven the vehicle of life, as it contained body and soul. They explained it by saying, that the human body consisted of four principal elements, and that the soul is triple, comprising reason, passion, and desire. The ineffable WORD was considered the Seventh and highest of all, for there are six minor substitutes, each belonging to a degree of initiation.⁶¹

Blavatsky traces the *tetraktys* in Hindu, Egyptian, Chaldean, and Persian mythology, in Gnostic sects (such as the Ophites), in the Bible and in Kabbalah.

60. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:xvi.

61. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:418.

Towards the end of her life, in her instructions for the Esoteric Section, Blavatsky explains the concept in the following way:

In occult and Pythagorean geometry the Tetrad is said to combine within itself all the materials from which Cosmos is produced. The Point or One, extends to a Line—the Two; a Line to a Superficies, three; and the Superficies, Triad or Triangle, is converted into a Solid, the Tetrad or Four, by the point being placed over it.⁶²

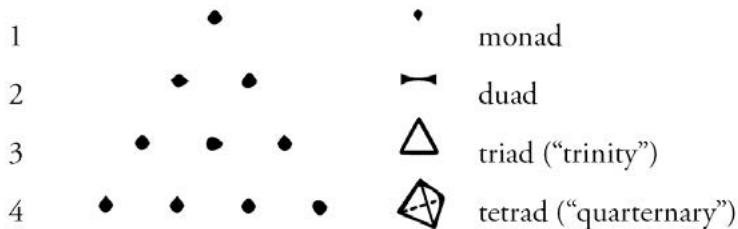


Figure 2. Illustration by Fitger.

The *tetrad* contains the numbers three and four and at the same time, the whole *tetractys* (the *decade*), symbolizing the manifested cosmos — our world of three dimensions.⁶³ Blavatsky begins chapter 9 in *Isis* (vol 2) with a quote from the mathematician Theos of Smyrna⁶⁴ stating that the tetractys contains “the nature of all things.”⁶⁵ Her speculations about the *tetractys* (and its connection to the number seven) are also similar to Proclus’s⁶⁶ commentary on the *Timaeus* as translated by her favorite nineteenth-century Platonist — Thomas Taylor (1820):

62. Blavatsky, “The Transactions”; Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 10:355. The same way of reasoning is found in Oliver’s *Signs and Symbols*, 207.

63. A few times later on Blavatsky also mentions speculation about a “fourth dimension” and its connection to the seventh (Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 5:151–52).

64. Blavatsky refers to “Theon of SMYRNA.”

65. “The Tetractys was not only principally honored because all symphonies are found to exist within it, but also because it appears to contain the nature of all things.” Quoted by Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:417. She also refers to Proclus (*Isis*, 1:212).

66. In Taylor’s translation, Proclus also refers to “seven local movements”: the circle; up; down; left; right; forward and behind (Proclus, *On the Timaeus*, 461). This maybe gives another hint to how Blavatsky viewed the geometrical creation of the physical world symbolically depicted as a cube in a circle (see Fitger, “The Circle Squaring Itself.”).

All the genera, therefore, are seven, and the monad is exempt from the hexad. And the monad, indeed, is analogous to the one intellect which connects all the fabrication of generated natures; but the hexad is analogous to the more partial orders under this intellect (Taylor, 1816: 129).⁶⁷

The link between the tetraktys and the seven-fold constitution of man existed as a continuous discourse in *Isis*, albeit not in its later completed and systemized form.⁶⁸ In an article written in *La Revue Spirite* (January 1879), Blavatsky defends her depiction of the human constitution as “a quaternity” and “a tetraktys.”⁶⁹ Even though I have not systematically examined the bibliography in *Isis*, I have come across the *tetraktys* and/or the conception of the micro- and macrocosmic “3 + 4 = 7” in all of Blavatsky’s references listed below.⁷⁰

Proclus, *On the Timaeus* (translated by Taylor)

Theon of Smyrna, *Mathematica* (Taylor)

Paracelsus’ alchemical works⁷¹

Johannes Reuchlin, *De Verbo Mirifico* (1480)

Jacob Böhme, *De signatura rerum* (1621)⁷²

Athanasius Kircher, *Magnes; sive de arte magnetica opus tripartitum* (1641)

Robert Fludd, *Mosaicall Philosophy: Grounded upon the Essentiall Truth or Eternal Sapience* (1659)

Ralph Cudworth, *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678)

Thomas Taylor, *Theoretic Arithmetic* (1816)

Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis* (1836)

Dionysius Lardner, *Popular Lectures on Science and Art* (1850)

Eliphas Lévi, *Dogme et Rituel de la haute Magie*, (1854, 1856)

Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Kabbalah Its Doctrine, Development and Literature* (1865)

67. See also Proclus, *Proclus, On the Timaeus*, 390.

68. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 2:598 f.

69. “May we be allowed a comparison . . . between what our critic calls ‘the triple hypostasis’ and we ‘the tetraktys’? Let us compare this philosophic quaternary, composed of the body, the périsprit, the soul and the spirit – to the ether – so well foreseen by science, but never defined – and its subsequent correlations. The ether will represent the spirit for us; the dead vapor that is formed therein – the soul.” Blavatsky, “Erroneous Ideas,” 14–15.

70. See Rudbøg’s compilation of the bibliography of *Isis*.

71. Blavatsky cites several works by Paracelsus, but she may also have retrieved the quotes from Lévi’s writings.

72. According to Böhme, God also revealed the world through a series of seven “Quellgeister.”

Hargrave Jennings, *The Rosicrucians, Their Rites and Mysteries* (1870)

John Yarker, *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity* (1872)⁷³

George Oliver, *The Golden Remains of the Early Masonic Writers* (vol. I, 1847) and probably also *The Pythagorean Triangle* (1875)

Charles W. King, *The Gnostics and their Remains* (1864)

Ralston Skinner, *Key to the Hebrew-Egyptian Mystery in the Source of Measures* (1875)

In *The Secret Doctrine* (and other later texts), Blavatsky refers to the Belgian Freemason Jean Baptist Marie Ragon (1781–1862) as one who had come close to understanding the universal mystery language,⁷⁴ and Ragon’s interpretations of Pythagoras have many striking similarities with hers.⁷⁵

Kabbalah and “the *tetractys* of Adam”

Reject the Talmud and its old predecessor the Kabala, and it will be simply impossible ever to render correctly one word of that Bible.⁷⁶

Pantheistic, Neoplatonic, and Gnostic emanation doctrines were popular among 19th century writers, but there was also a profound interest in Kabbalah⁷⁷ – often seen as the key to the esoteric truth in the Bible. Blavatsky, for instance, proclaimed that the doctrine of the divine light, called *Ain Soph*, was found in the biblical Books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Enoch, as well as in “John’s Revelation,” which according to her were wholly Kabbalistic and Hellenistic in their nature. She narrated how the Jewish Kabbalah had evolved from the “original Oriental Kabbalah” in which Moses was initiated in Egypt. Moses, however, to some extent distorted the original Kabbalistic doctrine.⁷⁸

73. It is quite probable that she also knew of Yarker’s *The Quadrature of the Circle* (1851).

74. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 1:311.

75. Ragon, *Le cours philosophique*, 230–35.

76. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:450.

77. Chajes, *Recycled Lives*, 109.

78. It is possible that Blavatsky was given this idea of separating “Oriental Cabala” from “Jewish Kabbalah” by her friend Emma Hardinge Britten’s writings *Ghost Land* or *Art Magic* (1876) (Chajes “Metempsychosis,” 215).

In Europe, Blavatsky believed that the Rosicrucians were the ones who had preserved the most genuine Kabbalah.⁷⁹

Blavatsky also depended heavily on Eliphas Lévi in *Isis*. For Lévi, arithmology and Kabbalah were keys to the mysteries. “The *heptad*,” the *tetraktys*, “the pyramid,” and “the *tetrad*,” were also reoccurring concepts in both of their writings.⁸⁰ According to Hanegraaff, Lévi valued Kabbalah so highly because he perceived it as “universal,” making it possible to use it as a key for unlocking the secrets of all religions and philosophies.⁸¹ Lévi’s “astral light” and the notion that “the astral body” dissolves after death were essential ideas for Blavatsky. Likewise, she was probably influenced by Lévi’s idea that spiritualistic phenomena were caused by elemental spirits.⁸²

According to Chajes, Blavatsky was familiar with many Kabbalistic texts and commentators, including *Zohar* and Isaac Luria’s writings, although she interpreted them in the light of contemporary academic authors such as Adolphe Franck, as well as non-academics such as Lévi and Hargrave Jennings.⁸³ She frequently refers to *Kabbala Denudata* (1677–1684)—a collection of Latin translations of various parts of *Zohar* as well as other Kabbalistic writings — compiled by the German Christian Knorr von Rosenroth.⁸⁴ Chajes, however, convincingly shows that Knorr von Rosenroth was not Blavatsky’s primary source and that her quotes were picked from an appendix titled “Kabbalah” in Samuel Fales Dunlap’s book

79. Blavatsky’s Kabbalah differed in part between her various writings. Marco Pasi has made an important analysis of Blavatsky’s view on Kabbalah in relation to the ideas of her contemporaries (see Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah”).

80. Lévi, *Dogme et Rituel*, 723, 1256, 2489. “... Logos, according to Lévi, manifests itself on the highest level of creation as a symbolism of numbers; and their meanings and dynamics can serve as a universal hermeneutical key at all ontologically lower levels of reality” (Hanegraaff, “The Beginnings of Occult Kabbalah,” 121).

81. Hanegraaff, “The Beginnings of Occult Kabbalah,” 120–21.

82. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 288. Blavatsky also refers to the same series of “enlightened masters” as Lévi.

83. Chajes, “Construction Through,” 34–35.

84. Hanegraaff notes that Kilcher has displayed how Lévi laid the foundations for the great influence of the work *Kabbala Denudata* in the Theosophical Society, as well as in esoteric Freemasonry, and the Golden Dawn. See Hanegraaff’s “The Beginnings of Occult Kabbalah,” 124–25.

Sod: The Son of the Man (1861).⁸⁵ Blavatsky also refers to “the most ancient Hebrew document on occult learning” – the *Siphra Dʿẓeniouta*,⁸⁶ and according to Chajes she probably first heard of it through Lévi.⁸⁷

Blavatsky’s early interpretation of Kabbalah was also closely related to her doctrine of metempsychosis. Highlighting the importance of the number seven, she distinguished the three higher from the seven lower levels of emanation of the Divine Light (*Ain Soph*).⁸⁸ Christian Ginsburg’s *The Kabbalah, its Doctrine, Development and Literature* (1865) may have influenced her on this point. King described how the three first *sephiroth* in the “Tree of life” form a triad which then spreads out into the seven lower *sephiroth*, which form “the Primordial or Archetypical Man” (but several other authors also make the same division into three higher and seven lower *sephiroth*).⁸⁹

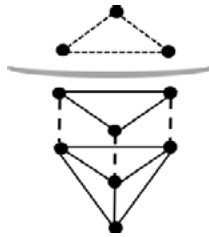


Figure 3. Illustration by Fitger.

One of the general themes in the second volume of *Isis* is that of “the fall” as depicted in *Genesis*. The fall should not, according to Blavatsky, be interpreted as an original sin, but rather as an allegory for the creation of the cosmos. The emanations of divine light depicted in *Isis* illustrate the same principle she later (in *The Secret Doctrine*) calls “involution.” After physical death, the human spirit returns through the same seven “planes of light” – but now in the opposite,

85. Chajes, “Construction Through,” 47, 55–56.

86. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:1.

87. See Lévi, *Fables et symboles avec leur explication*, ii.

88. Chajes, “Construction Through,” 42.

89. E.g., Ginsburg, Yarker and Jennings.

ascending direction. On the macrocosmic scale, the latter process is what she calls spiritual “evolution.” In Blavatsky’s depiction of the fall, “the first Adam” is a pure and entirely spiritual being but the Adam of Genesis’s second chapter is unsatisfied with the position given to him by the Demiurge (which is the same as “the first Adam” or “Adam Kadmon”). This “second Adam” or “Man of dust” strives in his pride to become a creator himself. As a result, the light from the highest divine triad is projected down into a fourth *sephira*, associated with the mythological figure “Sophia.”⁹⁰ According to Blavatsky, “Adam Kadmon is the type of humanity as a collective totality within the unity of the creative God and the universal spirit.”⁹¹ So, the first triad develops into a quaternary – again reflecting her interpretation of the *tetraktys*.⁹²

The Gnostic-Kabbalistic speculations in *Isis* also heavily depended on King’s work *The Gnostics and their Remains* (1864). According to Coleman, Blavatsky plagiarized King as many as forty-two times in *Isis*,⁹³ and they both linked “the seven planetary spheres” to the allegory of “the fall.” Further, King speculated on mystic and geometric interpretations of Gnostic findings.⁹⁴ Another parallel is his depiction of “the ineffable name of the Creator”⁹⁵ as well as Buddhism being the “ancient roots” of Kabbalah.⁹⁶ However, Blavatsky’s “Gnostic-Kabbalistic cosmogony” was also inspired by Proclus and by Plato’s *Timaeus* (which she repeatedly refers to in *Isis*). Proclus’s commentary on *Timaeus* describes how the soul is constructed according to mathematical proportions through which it can shape the body as an image of the arithmetic and geometric ideas immanent in the world of ideas.

90. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:303; 2:ch. 4–6.

91. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:207.

92. “Strictly speaking, there is a TETRAKTIS or quaternary, consisting of the Unintelligible First monad, and its triple emanation, which properly constitutes our Trinity.” (Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:36).

93. Coleman’s appendix in Solovyoff, *A Modern Priestess*, 357; King, *The Gnostics and their Remains*, 31.

94. King, *The Gnostics*, 103–4.

95. King, *The Gnostics*, 103–4.

96. Chajes & Huss, “Introduction,” 12.

Masonic symbolism in Blavatsky's works

Well acquainted as may be a scholar with the hieratic writing and hieroglyphical system of the Egyptians, he must first learn to shift their records. He has to assure himself, compasses and rule in hand, that the picture-writing he is examining fits, to a line, certain fixed geometrical figures which are the hidden keys to such records, before he ventures on an interpretation.⁹⁷

The initiative to found the Theosophical Society was taken after a lecture in Blavatsky's New York apartment (September 7, 1875), demonstrating the existence of a "secret geometrical key." The lecture was given by a George Henry Felt – engineer and elected member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science with patents on several technical inventions.⁹⁸ Felt, who was referred to as "a Freemason" in the press, was headlining "The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians."⁹⁹ Unfortunately, Felt's paper was lost in a fire, and we are left to interpret the audience's and journalists' comments about it.¹⁰⁰ According to them, however, Felt claimed to have found a mathematical and geometrical figure which served as a key to the underlying geometry of nature. He had presented his discovery on numerous occasions during the previous years, and it seems to have attracted relatively broad and partly positive interest among the audience. The "key" was also said to explain "the ancient science used to build the pyramids" – a secret knowledge that, according to Felt, had been passed from Egypt to Greece. Likewise, Solomon's temple was said to be built in accordance with it.¹⁰¹ Felt called it the "Star of Perfection" and for his lecture he had brought a variety of photos and illustrations that were supposed to support his finding. How can we know what Felt's "Star of Perfection" looked like? We have at least two different sources that probably give us a relatively accurate picture. Figure 5, below, derives from a poster advertising Felt's lecture,¹⁰²

97. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:155–56.

98. Demarest, "The Felt Working Group," 5–7, 19.

99. Santucci, "George Henry Felt," 254.

100. Santucci, "George Henry Felt"; Demarest, "The Felt Working Group."

101. Demarest, "The Felt Working Group," 56.

102. Santucci, "George Henry Felt," 251.

and figure 6 is a copy from one of the plates of his work, made by Claude Bragdon and/or Viola de Grunchy before it perished.¹⁰³

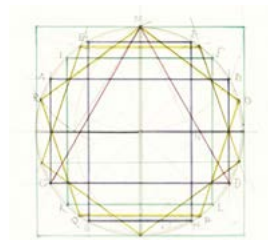


Figure 4. *Left*, the “Star of Perfection” from a poster advertising Felt’s lecture.

Figure 5. *Right*, the “Star of Perfection” made by Claude Bragdon and/or Viola de Grunchy.

The same year as Felt presented the “Star of Perfection” at Blavatsky’s apartment, the *Liberal Christian* (1875) wrote a review of one of Felt’s lectures, asking if this was “anything more than a CAREFUL STUDY OF THE UNIVERSE’S LAWS and their marvelous harmony, whereby her mysteries can be unlocked, and the veil of Isis lifted?”¹⁰⁴ These words might as well have been Blavatsky’s own. In 1875, she already spoke of Kabbalah as a far more advanced science than the sciences of her time. The hidden truth in the Kabbalah was concealed in “the secret teachings of the Orient.” According to Felt, however, the Star of Perfection was not only the key to the ancient mysteries and the fundamental geometry of nature — with its help he also claimed to have succeeded in summoning elemental spirits. He confidently offered to demonstrate this and as a response Olcott suggested founding a society with the aim of practically exploring Felt’s discoveries.¹⁰⁵ Felt collected money to prepare his research but disappeared before he had succeeded in showing any elementals.¹⁰⁶

103. Demarest, “Back from Jerusalem,” 8.

104. *The Liberal Christian*, 1875, described it as follows: “It consists of a circle with a square within and without, containing a common triangle, two Egyptian triangles, and a pentagon” (cited by Demarest, “The Felt Working Group,” 12).

105. Olcott seems to have been most eager to investigate the elementary spirits. It may be that Blavatsky and other early members were more interested in the geometrical key, though.

106. Santucci, “George Henry Felt,” 246.

Although Felt clearly blew the trumpet-horn, proclaiming that *he* was the one to have found “the Talmudic key,” he was far from alone in these speculations. As we will see, ideas about similar keys were popular at the time – for example in the writings of John Yarker (another Freemason and acquaintance of Blavatsky).¹⁰⁷ We can compare the illustrations of Felt’s “Star of Perfection” with some of Blavatsky’s hints to a numerical and geometric key in *Isis* (above). Besides the symbolic figure shown below, she wrote: “‘Attach thyself,’ says the alchemist, ‘to the four letters of the tetragram disposed in the following manner,’” and to the left of the text is a curious figure made of the following three symbols.



Figure 6. Blavatsky, *Isis*, vol. 1, 506.

The text continues: “The letters of the ineffable name are there, although you may not discern them at first. The incommunicable axiom is cabalistically contained therein, and this is what is called the *magic arcanum* by the masters.” “The ineffable name” is a masonic concept repeatedly referred to in *Isis*. It is a concept based on the Kabbalistic idea that the ultimate reality, or God, is symbolized by a lost name.¹⁰⁸ Blavatsky also makes a cryptic comparison with the element hydrogen, depicting its molecular structure,¹⁰⁹ and implies

107. Yarker, *Notes on the Scientific*; Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:317, 374–77, 394.

108. Algeo, *Blavatsky, Freemasonry*, 34.

109. This is a typical example of what Rudbøg has identified as one of the most prominent of Blavatsky’s discourses – that “the ancient masters” possessed a far more profound knowledge than her contemporary scientists (Rudbøg, “H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy,” 136–204).

that her contemporary chemists did not understand the deep numerical and geometric principles inherent in nature.¹¹⁰ The circle part with with a central point (depicted by, for example, Yarker) is common in esoteric contexts, often symbolizing the sun. But what about the other two symbols? Did they come floating to Blavatsky in “etheric mental pictures” or did she copy them from someone else? I believe that both answers could be true. Possibly, she creatively combined things that she had heard, seen, or read and visualized all of it in symbols animated by her imagination. If we search the figure from Felt’s poster (figure 4) for Blavatsky’s symbols in *Isis*, we can find at least two of them (figure 7) – as shown in figure 8 below.¹¹¹

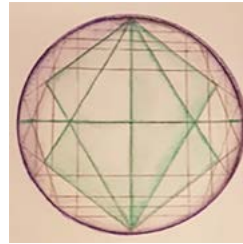
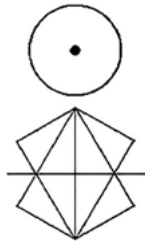


Figure 7. *Left*, two symbols from Blavatsky’s *Isis*.

Figure 8. *Right*, illustration by Fitger of Felt’s star with Blavatsky’s symbols inside.

Felt’s “Star of Perfection” is based on very basic geometric symbols that reoccur here and there in the literature that Blavatsky read and in the esoteric circles in which she moved. This makes it difficult to know if Felt was the one who inspired Blavatsky’s “key” as given in *Isis*. It is, however, quite evident that numerical

110. “What is this mysterious athanor? Can the physicist tell us – he who sees and examines it daily? Aye, he sees; but does he comprehend the secret-ciphered characters traced by the divine finger on every sea-shell in the ocean’s deep; on every leaf that trembles in the breeze; in the bright star, whose stellar lines are in his sight but so many more or less luminous lines of hydrogen?” (Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:506).

111. Figure 7 depicts two of the three symbols presented as a “secret key” in *Isis*. Figure 8 is an illustration (by Fitger) of Felt’s star with Blavatsky’s symbols inside.

and geometric speculation had a very central impact on how Blavatsky chose to structure her teaching.¹¹²

Blavatsky mentions the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite¹¹³ and the concept of “Kadosh”¹¹⁴ a couple of times in *Isis* (also giving “the Cipher of the Knights Kadosh”).¹¹⁵ This Rite was also known as “Rite of Perfection” and in its 30–33rd degrees templar elements related to the concept of “Kadosh” are presented and developed.¹¹⁶ A search for “tetractis” in masonic journals from the 1860s and the 1870s shows that this was a relatively frequently discussed concept.¹¹⁷

The illustration below (“Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret”¹¹⁸) is depicted in Albert Pike’s *Morals and Dogma* (1871). Pike was a leading figure of nineteenth-century American Freemasonry.¹¹⁹ It is also known as “the cosmic egg of Rebis,” found in 17th-century alchemical writings (for instance in one of Blavatsky’s favorites – Basil of Valentin’s work).¹²⁰ The reader should pay attention to the similarity between Felt’s “Star of Perfection” and the globe with a square and a triangle in the illustration. The concept of Pythagoras’ *tetraktys* is very central in the Scottish Rite, it seems.¹²¹ Pike wrote of the human principles as

112. “Any Kabalist well acquainted with the Pythagorean system of numerals and geometry can demonstrate that the metaphysical views of Plato were based upon the strictest mathematical principles. ‘True mathematics,’ says the Magicon, ‘is something with which all higher sciences are connected; common mathematics is but a deceitful phantasmagoria, whose much-praised infallibility only arises from this—that materials, conditions, and references are made its foundation.’” (Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:6.). For an interpretation of Blavatsky’s geometrical conceptions in *Isis*, see Fitger, “The Circle Squaring Itself.”

113. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:ii, 381, 390.

114. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:384, 388.

115. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:395.

116. Mollier, “Freemasonry,” 90.

117. The Library and Museum of Freemasonry, “Masonic periodicals.”

118. Of the grade 32.

119. Pike, *Morals*, 839.

120. Gilbert, “Freemasonry,” 531–32.

121. “The number 4 occupies an arithmetical middle-ground between the unit and 7. . . . Thus, it is that Unity, complete in the fecundity of the Ternary, forms, with it, the Quaternary, which is the key of all numbers, movements, and forms. . . . Seven is the sacred number in all theogonies and all symbols, because it is composed of 3 and 4,” Pike, *Morals*, 635, 771–72.



Figure 9. “Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret.”

seven and that Pythagoras had taught that that each soul was a vehicle.¹²² He depicts Adam as “the human Tetragram” reflecting “the Divine Tetragram” in the exact same manner as Blavatsky.¹²³ Interestingly, Blavatsky also uses many expressions present in Pike’s work, such as describing man as “a microcosmos, or little world”¹²⁴ or discussing “the matrix of the world.”¹²⁵ Due to her grandfather’s involvement, Blavatsky seems to have romanticized Rosicrucian Freemasonry since childhood,¹²⁶ but her relationship with Freemasonry was also split. On the one hand, she had several close masonic friends including her companion Olcott,¹²⁷ who probably was closer to her than anyone else.¹²⁸ Her early friend Albert Rawson was a Rosicrucian and highly initiated Freemason with a specific interest in “secret Oriental brotherhoods,”¹²⁹ as was Charles Sotheran, who helped Blavatsky with *Isis*. Like Blavatsky, Sotheran and Rawson were also both engaged in socialist circles.¹³⁰

122. Pike, *Morals*, 667-70

123. Pike, *Morals*, 771; Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:276.

124. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:323, 502; 2:276; Pike, *Morals*, 667, 841.

125. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:147, 157, 212, 285; Pike, *Morals*, 668, 770.

126. Johnson, *The Masters Revealed*, 21-22.

127. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 281; Algeo, *Blavatsky, Freemasonry*, 16.

128. Algeo, *Blavatsky, Freemasonry*, 42.

129. Goodrick-Clarke, “Western Esoteric Traditions,” 279.

130. Godwin “Blavatsky and the First Generation,” 19.

Sotheran who may have been the one who gave Blavatsky the idea of calling her teaching “Theosophy,”¹³¹ was initiated by Yarker in the Ancient and Primitive Rite of Memphis, the Scottish Rite, and the Rite of Mizraim. He was also the one who brought Blavatsky into contact with both Yarker and Kenneth Mackenzie.¹³² Sotheran gave Blavatsky Yarker’s *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity* (1872) when she was still working on *Isis*¹³³ and it seems to have become very influential to her writing. He was impressed by Blavatsky’s draft, and he suggested to Yarker that the Freemasons should recognize Blavatsky for “her great work and her Esoteric knowledge.” Yarker soon sent a certificate to Blavatsky for membership in the female branch of an Indian system called “Sat Bhai.”¹³⁴ Not long afterward, Yarker also acknowledged Blavatsky by giving her the highest degree of “Adopted Masonry” in the Rites of Memphis and the Rites of Mizraim – the “Crowned Princess.”¹³⁵

Yarker, who was an active figure in “alternative masonry” during the 1870s and 1880s, had imported the Rite of Memphis from the United States to England in 1872.¹³⁶ He also tried to launch Sat Bhai in England, translating its name as “seven brothers, or seven birds of a species, which always fly by sevens.” In *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity*, he repeatedly refers to “a ladder” with seven steps, which was said to symbolize emanation (descending) and initiation (ascending).¹³⁷ He wrote about “the two intertwined triangles” (the hexagram) linked to the Order of the Temple, referring to this symbol being used by the Indian Brahmins (a similar interpretation as Blavatsky’s).¹³⁸ Knowledge of the Hindus’ written language should have been something that

131. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 283–284; Rudbøg, “H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy,” 422.

132. Goodrick-Clarke, “Western Esoteric Traditions,” 280.

133. Blavatsky mentions Yarker’s book on several occasions in *Isis*, 2:316–17, 374, 376–77, 394.

134. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 1:311.

135. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:377.

136. Goodrick-Clarke, “Western Esoteric Traditions,” 279.

137. Yarker, *Notes on*, 126–27.

138. Yarker, *Notes on*, 50.

interested Blavatsky at this time (before encountering Subba Row and other learned Indians). The idea of secret masters was also a part of Sat Bhai's mythology, since the founder, Archer, kept his alleged Indian guru's identity secret.¹³⁹ It seems reasonable to assume that Blavatsky's many personal contacts with masons, and the fact that her closest spiritual companion Olcott was highly initiated, added something to her knowledge of masonic symbolism acquired through literature.¹⁴⁰ She was keen to emphasize the authority, degrees, and knowledge of her Freemason friends and they emphasized her insights as well. Olcott and Blavatsky even had far-reaching plans to turn their Society into a masonic lodge with rituals and degrees.¹⁴¹

On the other hand, Blavatsky was a woman and thus she could never get an active role in Freemasonry that corresponded to the influence her male friends had. How involved she was is difficult to know, but it is hard to believe that she was given a role that matched her expectations and the knowledge she thought she possessed. Her and Yarker's respective recognition of each other was probably primarily an exchange that both had something to gain from. It is clear in *Isis* that Blavatsky wanted to show that she had special knowledge about Freemasonry. At the same time, she stated that Masonic Orders in Europe or the United States (apart from "a few consecrated brethren") had nothing worth keeping secret. She eloquently summarizes her view: "Like Christianity, Freemasonry is a corpse from which the spirit long ago flowed."¹⁴²

Blavatsky notes that masonic symbolism is concerned with building Solomon's temple¹⁴³ and in the East this knowledge is called "seven-storied" or "nine-storied"; that Jesus was a Pythagorean and had both an "Exoteric" and an "Esoteric" doctrine (of which the latter had been transmitted to the Gnostics);

139. Goodrick-Clarke, "Western Esoteric Traditions," 279–80.

140. Algeo, *Blavatsky, Freemasonry*, 23.

141. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, 1:46; Goodrick-Clarke, "Western Esoteric Traditions," 280.

142. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:371–72, 388; Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 1:311ff.

143. Goodrick-Clarke, "Western Esoteric Traditions," 282.

and that Freemasons have carried on a knowledge that originally came from the Indian tradition. “The ineffable name” had existed in Egypt and was known by the Brahmins. She also mentions that the societies which she was involved with were Eastern, and thus she was under no oath to keep any secrets.¹⁴⁴

It is clear that many of Blavatsky’s ideas about “Rosicrucian Kabbalah” came from the writings of masons like Hargrave Jennings and John Yarker who wanted to establish a connection between modern Freemasonry and the Gnostic mysteries.¹⁴⁵ Regarding Blavatsky’s beloved Pythagoras, Yarker wrote “so closely does his system resemble modern Freemasonry, that various documents and rites have assumed the absolute identity of the two.”¹⁴⁶

Hexagrams and the squaring of the circle

As is evident from the similarities in both their symbolism and way of reasoning, Blavatsky picked up much from Lévi. Referring to Agrippa, Lévi had drawn correspondences between the human body and the pentagram (five-pointed star) linking the seven planets to different parts of the body. The six-pointed star (Seal of Solomon or “the Grand Pentacle”) was depicted by Lévi as “the most simple and complete abridgment of the science of all things.” While the pentagram was said to symbolize the microcosm or the human body, the six-pointed star stood for the macrocosm.¹⁴⁷

Blavatsky also speculated on the Seal of Solomon, concluding that it originally came from India (see figure 9).¹⁴⁸ Blavatsky’s monogram (figure 10)¹⁴⁹ and the Theosophical Society’s seal (figure 11) are here compared with two versions of

144. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:145–47, 355, 384, 402.

145. Chajes and Huss, “Introduction,” 11.

146. Yarker, *Notes on*, 23.

147. Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 1213, 3951–53, 4485.

148. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:136.

149. Hesselink, “Early History.”

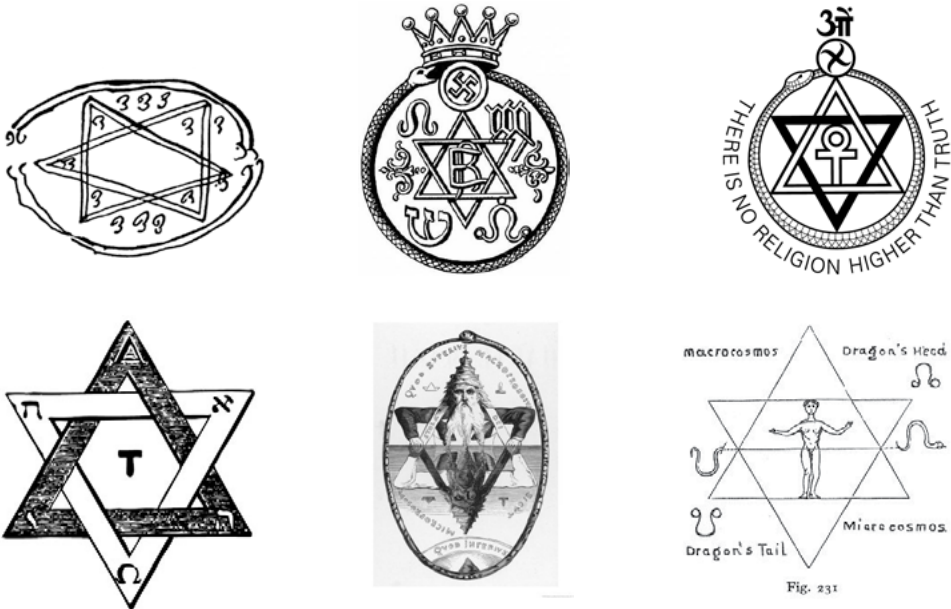


Figure 9. *Top left*, the Seal of Solomon.

Figure 10. *Top middle*, Blavatsky's monogram.

Figure 11. *Top right*, the seal of the Theosophical Society.

Figure 12. *Bottom left*, The Triangle of Solomon.

Figure 13. *Bottom middle*, The Great Symbol of Solomon.

Figure 14. *Bottom right*, Man, the Microcosm of the Universe.

Solomon's Seal as depicted by Lévi (figure 12, 13).¹⁵⁰ The similarity is evident. Several other authors in Blavatsky's bibliography shared similar representations (for example Jennings' *The Rosicrucians* – a work that she both referred to and plagiarized repeatedly).¹⁵¹ The symbolism of the hexagram has a connection to the development of Blavatsky's seven-fold doctrine of subtle anatomy. Her article "The Six-Pointed and Five-Pointed Stars" explained it as consisting of *seven fields* (the six points plus one in the center) and thereby illustrating "the sev-

150. Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 466, 1140.

151. Jennings, *The Rosicrucians*, figure on the cover sheet, and between pages 344-45.

en principles in man.”¹⁵² In another of her articles (“The Number Seven,” June 1880) published about a year after her move to India, but before the seven-fold constitution had been established, she writes, “The ancients divided the human frame into seven parts; the head, chest, stomach, two hands and two feet; and man’s life was divided into seven periods.”¹⁵³

Speculations (like Proclus’) about the soul being constructed according to mathematical proportions have been relatively common in Western esotericism.¹⁵⁴ In connection with these ideas the nineteenth-century Neoplatonists, alchemists and occultists sought to solve the classic problem of squaring the circle. This is one of the classic design problems in geometry known since antiquity. Lévi,¹⁵⁵ Yarker, the mathematician John Parker, and Ralston Skinner are some of the authors which Blavatsky read early on who also discuss the square of the circle.

The mathematical problem involves constructing a square with the same area as a given circle. The problem was proven insoluble in 1882 when Ferdinand von Lindemann showed that π (pi) is a transcendent number and thus not constructible – which means that it is impossible to find the square of the circle. There are, however, a variety of methods that almost square the circle. Parker’s *The Quadrature of a Circle* (1851) is an example of such an attempt – but the method was not accepted by academic mathematics. Skinner’s *Key to the Hebrew-Egyptian Mystery in the Source of Measure* (1875) is a commentary on Parker’s discovery. Blavatsky exchanged letters with Skinner¹⁵⁶ and refers to *Source of Measure* as well as other texts by Skinner. Later, in *The Secret Doctrine*, she mentions Skinner more than any other author except for Plato.¹⁵⁷

152. Blavatsky, “Our Answer,” 321.

153. Blavatsky, “The Number Seven,” 237.

154. Brach, “Mathematical Esotericism”

155. Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 104–7.

156. Santucci, “Theosophical History.”

157. Rudbøg, “H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy,” 224.

The philosophical importance that Theosophists have attached to the problem of squaring the circle is most likely about the symbolic significance of uniting the unlimited Divinity symbolized by the circle with the limited and ordered cosmos symbolized by the square. Blavatsky writes about the square of the circle a couple of times in *Isis*, stating that although it is not found on the physical plane this does not mean that it does not exist on a metaphysical plane.¹⁵⁸ The writings of the prolific Mason George Oliver played a pivotal role for Blavatsky.¹⁵⁹ His book *The Pythagorean Triangle: Or, The Science of Numbers* (1875), which she also plagiarized, specifically dealt with the *tetraktys* as well as “the remarkable properties of the heptad.”¹⁶⁰

Oliver’s division in <i>The Pythagorean Triangle</i> ¹⁶¹	Blavatsky’s division in <i>The Secret Doctrine</i> ¹⁶²
1. The divine golden man	7. atna
2. The inward holy body from fire and light, like pure silver	6. buddhi
3. The elemental man	5. manas
4. The mercurial growing paradisaical man	4. kama-rupa
5. The martial soul-like man	3. linga-sarira
6. The venerine, according to the outward desire	2. prana/jiva
7. The solar man, an inspector of the wonders of God	1. stula-sarira

It may seem strange to point to Oliver as a source for Blavatsky’s seven-fold division, since in 1888 Blavatsky had some knowledge of different Indian teachings on the subject. However, it is quite possible that she knew of Oliver’s division long before 1888. She used Oliver’s *The Golden Remains* (1847) when

158. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 1:407.

159. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:389; Oliver, *The Freemasons Treasury*, 276; Oliver, *The Origin of the Royal Arch*, 143; Oliver, *The Pythagorean Triangle*, 170.

160. Blavatsky repeats Oliver’s sentence in *Pythagorean Triangle* (p. 104) verbatim both in *The Secret Doctrine*, 2:599 and in “The Transactions,” 355–56.

161. Oliver, *The Pythagorean Triangle*, 179–80.

162. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, xxv. Blavatsky seems to have changed stances on Oliver’s third and fourth principles.

writing *Isis* and there is also a reference to “Rev. Dr. Oliver” in *Isis*.¹⁶³ According to Rudbøg the primary source of Blavatsky’s information on masonic symbolism at that time was Mackenzie’s *Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia* (1877).¹⁶⁴ Under the entry “Tetractys” in this encyclopedia only one work is referred to, namely, Oliver’s “The Pythagorean Triangle.” Oliver’s work should therefore have been read and known in contemporary masonic circles. Considering all this — together with Blavatsky’s highlighting of the *tetraktys* in *Isis* — it is hard to imagine that she did not know about Oliver’s division already in 1877. Her speculations about the *tetrad*, the *tetraktys* and number *seven* (found in *Isis*) are also very similar to Oliver’s. Dewald Bester’s dissertation, “H. P. Blavatsky, Theosophy, and Nineteenth-Century Comparative Religion” (2017), is the only work that I have come across yet which analyzes Oliver’s influence on Blavatsky. He argues that Oliver probably inspired Blavatsky’s seven-fold division of man, but according to him the similarities between the two end there.¹⁶⁵ Bester’s conclusion that she already had a kind of “draft structure” and was searching for the appropriate terms to fit into her model of man seems perfectly reasonable. It is even probable that she visualized the principles in symbolic-pictorial form (for example as geometric figures) before a terminology was connected to these representations.

Conclusions

Blavatsky believed that the Wisdom-Religion originated in the East. The fact that she called it a “Pythagorean teaching” did not contradict this statement, since Pythagoras’ knowledge was supposed to have derived from the Vedic teaching. What this article has tried to show, however, is that although Blavatsky’s encounter with India influenced her in many ways, there is reason to assume that her choice of the number seven as the numerological basis of micro- and

163. Blavatsky, *Isis*, 2:358.

164. Mackenzie, *Royal Masonic*, 729.

165. Bester, “H. P. Blavatsky, Theosophy,” 169.

macrocosm was made earlier on. In fact, it was an entirely natural choice for her given both her Orthodox Christian upbringing, her many Freemason friends, and the late 19th century mythographical discourse in general.

Both masons and mythographers shared the belief in a *philosophia perennis* where geometry and number mysticism were interwoven to describe a cosmogony. In Blavatsky's response to Row's criticism of her seven-fold division, she argues that it is seen "everywhere in nature" (as in the color spectrum of light or in the musical tone scale). She refers to the *tetraktys*, the pyramid, the *tetrad*, and the *sephiroth* (divided as 3 + 7) and manages to connect this to the quadrature of the circle, as well as to Skinner's and Yarker's theories. She also claims that her seven-fold doctrine is hinted at in a number of Indian sources.¹⁶⁶ When Blavatsky, in 1888, mapped Sanskrit concepts onto a Western esoteric-arithmological structure, she was not unaware of how these terms were being used in the yoga literature. The point is that she chose to map them in accordance with an extant genre convention of the "sacred seven."

The dispute between Blavatsky and Row all came down to the fact that while Row was defending a true depiction of Brahmanism, Blavatsky was a perennialist at heart and had no interest in seeing differences between traditions. The differences in divisions really did not matter that much to her since she meant that esoteric truth could be expressed in many ways, at many different levels of knowledge. There is no real contradiction, either between hers and Row's views or between her three-fold and her seven-fold doctrine, she argues (the latter was just a more thorough description). Western conceptions of subtle anatomy were further influenced by Besant and Leadbeater, followed by Woodroffe's works.¹⁶⁷

166. Such as Atharvaveda, the Law of Manu, Nyaya Sutras, the Upanishads, Sankhya-Karika, and Atma Bodha by Sankaracharya (Blavatsky, "Classifications of Principles," 91, 282-83.)

167. It is very likely that the seven-fold standardization of the chakra-system that has become so prevalent in Modern Yoga dates back to Pūrānanda Yatis's text *Satbhakera-nirūpana* (a chapter derived from a Tantric text from 1577) which became known to the West through Woodroffe's translation in 1918. B. Majumdar mentioned this text in *The Theosophist* in 1880. He also translated texts for Woodroffe later on. Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe*, 134; Baier, "Theosophical Orientalism," 313.

During the 20th century, and especially its latter half, there has been a great influence by Indian gurus and teachings in the West. As surprising as it may seem, the Theosophical doctrine of *seven chakras* corresponding to the *seven colors* of the rainbow, is still the dominating schema of subtle anatomy in the West.¹⁶⁸

Much more could be said concerning Blavatsky's early influences. The focus here has mainly been nineteenth-century mythographers and masonic symbolism, but there were many other sources that probably also contributed to her choice of a seven-fold cosmology, one being the Spiritualist influence, where an important figure was Andrew Jackson Davis,¹⁶⁹ another being late nineteenth-century science.¹⁷⁰ She also compared the alchemical uniting of the *tri prima* (mercury representing "the mind"; salt representing "primeval matter" or "the body"; sulfur representing "the spirit") and the four elements to her theories regarding the *tetraktys*.

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168. Fitger, dissertation, forthcoming.

169. See for example Jeffrey D. Lavoie's *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement*, 2012.

170. See Asprem's "The Problems of a Gnostic Science" and "Theosophical attitudes."

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