H.P. Blavatsky and James Ralston Skinner

The Christmas Letter of December 25, 1886

Historical Background, Kabbalah, Sacred Geometry, and Theosophical Teachings

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Introduction

On December 25, 1886, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), founder of the modern Theosophical movement, wrote an important letter to James Ralston Skinner (1830–1893), an American attorney, Freemason, and student of Kabbalah.

It provides an unusually revealing glimpse into Blavatsky's intellectual interests, her understanding of occult philosophy, and her admiration for Skinner's mathematical and esoteric investigations.

The correspondence is particularly important because it preceded the publication of Blavatsky's major work, *The Secret Doctrine*, in 1888.

Skinner's book, *The Key to the Hebrew-Egyptian Mystery in the Source of Measures*, published in 1875, was an important influence on Blavatsky's thinking about Hebrew symbolism, sacred mathematics, and ancient cosmology.

1. The historical mystery of the letter

The December 25, 1886 letter has an unusual documentary history.

It was originally preserved among the James Ralston Skinner Papers at the Andover-Harvard Divinity Library. But the original handwritten document subsequently disappeared.

A transcription prepared by Sylvia Cranston (Anita Atkins) and photocopies of the original have circulated among a few researchers.

James A. Santucci, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at California State University, Fullerton, discussed the letter's provenance and significance in his 2019 YouTube presentation, *The Christmas Letter of 1886*.

Letter dated Dec. 25, 1886 (Transcription by Sylvia Cranston, pen name of Anita Atkins.)

See also Photocopy of original handwritten letter. The letter is 16 pages long.

2. James Ralston Skinner and The Source of Measures

Skinner's principal contribution to this correspondence is his book:

The Key to the Hebrew-Egyptian Mystery in the Source of Measures (1875).

Skinner proposed that ancient Hebrew scriptures preserved a mathematical and geometrical system.

His investigations included:

- Hebrew letters and their numerical values.
- Biblical measurements.
- Egyptian units of measurement.
- The proportions of the Great Pyramid.
- The sacred cubit.
- The geometry of circles and squares.
- The relationship between mathematics and religious symbolism.

Skinner believed that ancient religious writings contained more than their apparent narrative meaning.

He proposed that numbers, proportions, and measurements concealed a deeper system of knowledge.

Blavatsky admired this approach because it supported her belief that ancient civilizations possessed a common esoteric wisdom.

3. Kabbalah and Gematria

Kabbalah is the Jewish mystical tradition concerned with divine reality, creation, spiritual knowledge, and the relationship between God and the universe.

An important Kabbalistic interpretive method is Gematria.

Hebrew letters have numerical values, allowing words and phrases to be examined through their numerical equivalents.

Examples:

Letter	Name	Value
א	Aleph	1
ב	Beth	2
ג	Gimel	3
ד	Daleth	4
ה	Heh	5
י	Yod	10

Skinner extended this approach by proposing mathematical relationships between Hebrew words, biblical measurements, geometrical proportions, and ancient systems of measurement.

Blavatsky believed that sacred scripture preserved an esoteric mathematical language.

It is important to distinguish traditional Jewish Gematria from Skinner's particular reconstructions. His system represents an individual interpretation rather than an established consensus within Jewish scholarship.

4. Sacred Geometry: The Circle and Square

One of the most important themes associated with Skinner's research is sacred geometry.

The circle and square have long histories in religious and philosophical symbolism.

In esoteric interpretation:

The circle

- Eternity.
- Infinity.

- Spirit.
- The divine.
- The unmanifest.

The square

- Matter.
- The manifested universe.
- Stability.
- Physical existence.
- The material world.

The expression squaring the circle has both a mathematical and a symbolic meaning.

Mathematically, it is the problem of constructing a square equal in area to a given circle using only compass and straightedge. This construction is impossible.

Symbolically, it represents the reconciliation of spirit and matter.

For Blavatsky, geometry could therefore be understood as a language through which metaphysical principles were expressed.

5. The Great Pyramid and the Sacred Cubit

Skinner investigated the relationship between ancient systems of measurement and mathematical proportions.

His interests included:

- The British inch.
- The Hebrew cubit.
- Egyptian measurements.
- The Great Pyramid.
- The relationship between circumference and diameter.
- Ancient architectural proportions.

The cubit was an ancient measurement based approximately on the length of the forearm.

Skinner believed that ancient measurements preserved a sophisticated mathematical system.

Blavatsky was attracted to the possibility that monumental Egyptian architecture encoded knowledge of cosmic proportions.

The Great Pyramid consequently became an important symbol in her understanding of ancient civilization.

6. The Pythagorean Tetractys

The Tetractys was an important symbol in the Pythagorean philosophical tradition.

It consists of ten points arranged in four rows:

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10

Its four levels were interpreted symbolically:

- One: Unity and origin.
- Two: Duality.
- Three: Harmony and relationship.
- Four: Manifestation and structure.

The number ten represented completeness.

The Tetractys provides a useful comparison with Blavatsky's interest in the relationship between numbers, cosmic principles, and creation.

It should be understood as a related philosophical context rather than assuming that every Pythagorean concept was explicitly discussed in the December letter.

7. Egyptian and Hindu Symbolism

Blavatsky frequently compared the religious symbols of different ancient civilizations.

Two particularly important examples are the Egyptian Ankh and the Hindu Swastika.

The Ankh

The Egyptian Ankh represents life and vitality. It appears frequently in Egyptian religious art and is associated with divine life and the continuation of existence.

The Hindu Swastika

The Hindu swastika is an ancient auspicious symbol associated with well-being, prosperity, and cosmic order.

In Theosophical interpretation, the swastika also represents cosmic motion and cyclic manifestation.

These symbols illustrate Blavatsky's broader conviction that different civilizations preserved aspects of a common ancient wisdom.

The Hindu swastika predates and is distinct from its later appropriation by Nazi Germany.

8. Elementals and Ceremonial Magic

One of the most intriguing subjects associated with the Christmas letter concerns Blavatsky's attitude toward ceremonial magic.

She warns Skinner about certain geometrical figures and combinations of diagrams.

Her concern involves what Theosophical literature calls elementals.

In Theosophy, elementals are subtle beings or forces associated with the elements of nature.

The classical elements are:

- Earth.
- Water.
- Air.
- Fire.

Blavatsky believed that geometrical figures and magical diagrams could have effects beyond their ordinary physical appearance.

She therefore distinguished between intellectual knowledge of occult principles and practical attempts to manipulate occult forces.

Her statement that she believed in, but hated and dreaded, ceremonial magic reveals an important aspect of her philosophy.

She regarded occult knowledge as something requiring responsibility and caution.

9. A. W. Ayton and MacGregor Mathers

The letter's occult context also includes the personalities of the emerging Western esoteric movement.

William Alexander Ayton was a British clergyman and occultist interested in alchemy and esoteric philosophy.

Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers became one of the most influential figures in Western ceremonial magic and a founder of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Blavatsky's attitude toward ceremonial magic is particularly interesting in relation to this developing occult movement.

She was interested in Kabbalistic knowledge and occult philosophy but expressed reservations about ritual magic.

This distinction helps explain her emphasis on philosophical understanding rather than magical experimentation.

10. The Masters and Mahatmas

Another significant Theosophical concept is the Masters or Mahatmas.

Blavatsky described these individuals as highly developed human beings who had attained extraordinary spiritual knowledge.

They were not simply ghosts or disembodied spirits.

Within her teachings, the Masters represented an advanced stage of human spiritual development.

Their wisdom was associated with the ancient esoteric traditions that Blavatsky believed had been preserved through the ages.

This distinction also helps explain her attempt to differentiate Theosophy from contemporary spiritualism.

11. Vedanta and Non-Dualism

Blavatsky's interest in Indian philosophy was another important part of her intellectual outlook.

Vedanta is a philosophical tradition based on the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sutras.

One of its major schools is Advaita Vedanta, associated with Adi Shankaracharya.

Its central teaching is non-duality.

In simplified terms:

- Brahman represents ultimate reality.
- Atman represents the deepest spiritual identity.
- Ultimate reality is not fundamentally separate from the true nature of the individual.

Blavatsky believed that Vedanta expressed principles that could also be found in Kabbalah, Egyptian symbolism, and other ancient traditions.

Her larger project was to identify what she considered the universal wisdom underlying different religious systems.

12. The Connection with The Secret Doctrine

The relationship between Skinner's research and Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* is particularly important.

Published in 1888, this work attempted to present a universal account of cosmology, spiritual evolution, and the origins of human knowledge.

Skinner's work was relevant to several subjects Blavatsky explored:

- Hebrew numerical symbolism.
- Sacred measurements.
- Biblical cosmology.
- Egyptian mathematics.
- Ancient systems of proportion.
- The relationship between numbers and creation.

The importance of Skinner is reflected in the frequency with which he and his work are mentioned in *The Secret Doctrine*.

The scholarly discussion published in *Theosophical History*, Volume XVIII, 2016, also emphasizes Blavatsky's admiration for Skinner's learning and her intention to acknowledge his work in her forthcoming book.

13. The Three Central Principles of the Letter

The correspondence can be understood through three overarching ideas.

First: Mathematics is a language of creation.

Numbers, proportions, measurements, and geometrical forms can be interpreted as expressions of fundamental cosmic principles.

Second: Ancient religions preserve fragments of a universal wisdom.

Hebrew, Egyptian, Greek, and Indian traditions may contain different expressions of the same underlying spiritual knowledge.

Third: Knowledge and power must be distinguished.

Understanding occult principles is not the same as attempting to manipulate subtle forces through ceremonial magic.

These three principles provide a framework for understanding Blavatsky's admiration for Skinner.

Further Research: Five Important Connections

The following subjects deserve deeper investigation.

1. **YHWH and Hebrew numerical symbolism:** Skinner's interpretation of the divine name and its relationship to mathematical proportions.
2. **The sacred cubit and the Great Pyramid:** The relationship between ancient units of measurement and Egyptian architecture.
3. **The Tetractys and the Kabbalistic Tree of Life:** Comparisons between Pythagorean number symbolism and Kabbalistic cosmology.
4. **Skinner and The Secret Doctrine:** Identifying precisely which ideas Blavatsky incorporated into her 1888 publication.
5. **Elementals and ceremonial magic:** Understanding Blavatsky's distinction between theoretical occult knowledge and practical ritual magic.

Bibliography and Primary Sources

Primary sources

1. Blavatsky, H. P. *The Secret Doctrine*. 1888.
2. Skinner, James Ralston. *The Key to the Hebrew-Egyptian Mystery in the Source of Measures*. 1875.
3. Blavatsky, H. P. Letter to James Ralston Skinner, December 25, 1886. Transcription by Sylvia Cranston (Anita Atkins).

Historical and scholarly resources

4. Santucci, James A. *The Christmas Letter of 1886*. European School of Theosophy, 2019.
5. *Theosophical History*, Volume XVIII, Numbers 1–2, January–April 2016.
6. Blavatsky Archives, correspondence and historical documents.
7. Harvard Divinity School Library, James Ralston Skinner Papers and Theosophy Collections.

Online reading resources

- December 25, 1886 letter transcription: https://www.blavatskyarchives.com/skinnertyped.pdf
- Blavatsky Archives: https://www.blavatskyarchives.com/
- James Santucci's historical discussion: https://europeanschooloftheosophy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/EuropeanSchoolTheosophy2019-1.pdf
- *Theosophical History*, Volume XVIII: https://theohistory.org/issue-archive/volume-xviii/
- Harvard Library Theosophy Collections: https://library.harvard.edu/collections/theosophy-collections

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Concluding Perspective

The Christmas letter of December 25, 1886, is valuable because it offers a glimpse into Blavatsky's intellectual world immediately before the publication of *The Secret Doctrine*.

Skinner's investigations into Hebrew numerical symbolism, ancient measurements, and mathematical relationships provided material that Blavatsky considered important to her larger theory of universal wisdom.

The correspondence also reveals a tension in her approach to occultism: she admired the discovery of hidden principles but remained deeply suspicious of attempts to employ occult forces through ceremonial magic.

Ultimately, the letter should be studied not merely as a personal correspondence, but as a document illuminating the development of nineteenth-century Theosophy and the relationship between Kabbalah, sacred geometry, Egyptian symbolism, and Indian philosophy.

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