

Notes on Editions of *Sefer Yetzirah* in English

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Reviewers may quote brief passages.

Know that the principle of all kabbalah is included in these two issues mentioned in the *Sefer Yeşirah*, the first of them is knowledge of the ten *sefirot* and the second is knowledge of the twenty-two letters. The one who receives should try to receive the *sefirot* first in order to receive the divine overflow [*shefa*] from them and in themselves according to his attributes [*middot*]. He will cleave to each and every *sefirah* separately and he will cleave to all the *sefirot* together as one so that he will not cut the shoots.
—Abraham Abulafia, *Gan Na'ul*¹

The *Book of Creation* (*Sefer Yesira*) is a unique, isolated work that belongs to no school of thought...

—Daphne Hadas Freedman²

Sefer Yetzirah (BOOK OF FORMATION, hereafter SY) is the oldest known speculative treatise in Hebrew. There are three prime recensions of SY: (1) short, (2) long, and (3) one somewhere in between called the Sa'adian recension in that it was the basis of Sa'adiah Gaon's commentary of the early tenth century.³ Even the longest of these contains something less than 2500 words.

The date of SY's composition remains a matter of some debate, though most scholars agree that it was written or compiled between the second and sixth centuries. However, Steven M. Wasserstrom has offered a strong case for the ninth century within an Islamic milieu.⁴ It

¹ Translation: Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia – Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), page 109 [my brackets]. Compare Wolfson's rendition with the less proficient translation of the same paragraph in *Gan Naoul – Locked Garden*, edited by Fabrizio Del Tin ([n.p.]: eUniversity.pub, 2018), page 11.

Gan Na'ul is one of three commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah* by Abraham Abulafia. See below, page 31.

² This is the opening clause of Freedman's article, "The Book of Creation," in *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, vol. 44, edited by Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2019), pp. 159-168. Freedman compares SY to the *Introduction to Arithmetic* of Nichomachus of Gerasa [c. 60-c. 120 CE] and the *Theology of Arithmetic*, attributed to Iamblichus [c. 245-c. 325 CE].

³ Ithamar Gruenwald, "A Preliminary Critical Edition of *Sefer Yezirah*," in *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971); A. Peter Hayman, "Introduction," *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

Sa'adiah "did not regard the *Sefer Yezira* as a divine, eternal, unchangeable text" (—Joseph Dan, "Three Phases of the History of the *Sefer Yezirah*," in *Jewish Mysticism*, Volume I, LATE ANTIQUITY [Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998], p. 165). "Thus, he felt free to edit the text and even omit lines that were offensive to his concepts." (—*ibid*)

Aryeh Kaplan adds a fourth recension: the GRA/ARI version; see below, Part III. C.

was certainly extant by the tenth century, for it exerted a great influence on speculative and mystical thought from that time on.

Commenting on SY at the AJS Conference of 2001, Elliot R. Wolfson stated, “Properly speaking, the work should not be described as a single composition, but rather as a composite of distinct literary strands that have been woven together through a complicated redactional process whose stages are not clearly discernable.”⁴

Within a substantial (42-page) paper,⁵ Ronit Meroz offers some original hypotheses concerning SY’s composition and meaning. Meroz advances (quoting the ABSTRACT at the head of the article),

- 1) the assertion that a single subject unites all the discussions in *Sefer Yezirah*, from beginning to end: namely, the nature of Wisdom, upon which the world stands...
- 2) a stylistic-linguistic analysis leading to the division of *Sefer Yezirah* into three “accounts,” around which are crystallized the style and contents of the book as a whole. The Account of the “Sealing of the Ends” is the latest of these accounts and was written by the editor of the book who joined his account with the other two to form a single book.
- 3) the assertion that the worldview reflected in *Sefer Yezirah* acknowledges the existence of a secondary power alongside God, that assists Him in the Creation and ongoing existence of the universe (as against doctrines claiming the existence of an additional force in conflict with God).

In a paper presented to the European Association for Jewish Studies (Paris 2014), “Some New Observations Concerning the Context of *Sefer Yetsirah*,” Tzahi Weiss concludes,

[I]t is possible to understand the singularity of *Sefer Yetsirah* in two opposing manners: the first is to understand it as a unique composition that had evolved in a known Jewish environment, whose authors or editors succeeded in dispersing most of its identifying Jewish signs. The second possibility is to understand it as a treatise which does not in any way want to conceal its cultural context but rather that this context is unknown to us its readers and interpreters. Since *Sefer Yetsirah* employs many terms physiological, linguistic, astrological, cosmological and others in order to clarify its various arguments, there is no apparent reason to believe that there is any attempt at concealing involved in this text. It therefore seems that it would be more correct to support the possibility that the singularity of *Sefer Yetsirah* in the

⁴ The comments of both Steven M. Wasserstrom and Elliot R. Wolfson were made as discussants at the Association for Jewish Studies 33rd Annual Conference (Washington, DC: December 16, 2001), Session 2.4: “*Sefer Yesirah*: Mystical and Philosophical Intertexts,” Chair: Sarah Pessin.

See Wasserstrom’s (1) “*Sefer Yesira* and Early Islam: A Reappraisal” in *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Chur/Philadelphia: Harwood Academic, 1993); (2) “Further Thoughts on the Origins of *Sefer yesirah*,” in *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, N^o. 2, edited by Gad Freudenthal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) pages 201-221, (at JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40385480?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents); and (3) *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pages 126-133.

Refer to Wolfson’s summary, *SEFER YETZIRAH: LINGUISTIC MYSTICISM AND COSMOLOGICAL SPECULATION*, which is a section of “Jewish Mysticism: A Philosophical Overview” = CHAPTER 19 of *History of Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London – New York: Routledge, 1997), pages 450-498 (the SY section covers pages 463-466).

⁵ “Between *Sefer Yezirah* and Wisdom Literature: Three Binitarian Approaches in *Sefer Yezirah*,” in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, volume 6, number 18 – ESSAYS IN HONOR OF MOSHE IDEL (Cluj: University of Cluj-Napoca, Winter 2007), pages 101-142—online at <http://www.jsri.ro/>.

eyes of its readers and interpreters evolves from an estrangement in regard to the cultural context in which its essential foundations evolved.⁶

Joseph Dan describes three phases in the reception of SY⁷:

1. an inexplicable dormant phase from its composition in the fourth century to the tenth century; while it was known, it was not the basis of doctrine or commentary.
2. the philosophic or rational/scientific phase beginning in the tenth century when speculation on SY burgeoned, commencing with the commentaries of Shabbatai Donnolo, Sa'adiah Gaon, Donash ben Tanim, *etc.*
3. the mystical/magical phase which began in the twelfth century with the Ashkenazi Hasidim, the Unique Cherub Circle and the *Iyyun* school, then passing to the Provençal and Catalan kabbalists.

Tzahi Weiss has proposed a seventh-century composition date for SY, within Christian Syria. Further, he believes that SY was already considered a magical/mystical text within Dan's first two phases, though he acknowledges the noticeable lack of references to SY in the period Dan calls the "dormant phase."⁸

Almost all versions of SY have six chapters containing brief, even laconic, statements, similar in tone to the *hekhalot* texts.⁹ It was from the first chapter of SY that *kabbalah* derived the term *sefirot* and the notion of these as metaphysical stages of creation. The remaining chapters of SY tell of the powers and correspondences of the twenty-two Hebrew letters.

In 1971, Ithamar Gruenwald noted,

Although *Sefer Yezira* is one of the most frequently published works of Jewish esoteric lore, there is no authoritative text available to those who want to study the book. To make a long story short, there are at least three main recensions of the book, and except for one recension (the so-called Saadian recension) all the printed texts are defective.¹⁰

Gruenwald was commenting on the state of editions in Hebrew, the inadequacies of which would inevitably be reflected—if not compounded—in any translation.

In 2004, armed with a more complete array of textual witnesses, many of which were not available to Gruenwald in 1971, A. Peter Hayman produced *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*,¹¹ which is the most thorough scholarly treatment of the SY text in English to date. The core of Hayman's book is a synoptic edition of SY in Hebrew and English, offering specific MS versions of the three recensions in a manner similar to Schäfer, Schlüter, and Mutius' treatment of *hekhalot* texts in *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*.¹²

⁶ Accessed via Academia.edu (12/17/2014):
https://www.academia.edu/9805922/Some_New_Observations_Concerning_the_Context_of_Sefer_Yetsirah

⁷ Joseph Dan, "Three Phases of the History of the *Sefer Yezirah*," cited above, page 1. note 3.

⁸ "*Sefer Yesirah*" and *Its Contexts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); see below, page 23.

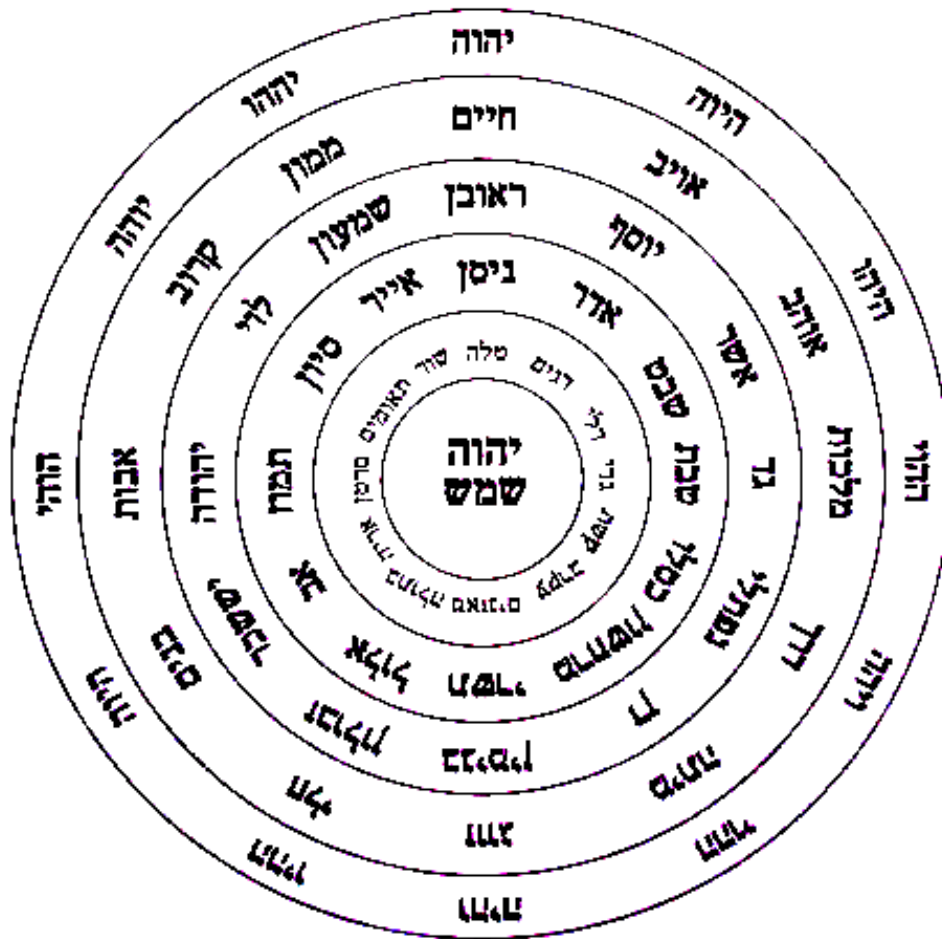
⁹ It is interesting to note that, while the *hekhalot* literature takes up cosmology and cosmogony, reference to SY is entirely—and remarkably—absent therein. Ref. Joseph Dan, "Three Phases of the History of the *Sefer Yezirah*," p. 160.

¹⁰ In the introduction to "Preliminary Critical Edition...."

¹¹ Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004.

¹² Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1981.

Because of its importance and, no doubt, because of its brevity, SY has been put into English many times. All of the English translations of SY which I have seen—and a few that I haven't—are discussed in PART I A-B: TRANSLATIONS. This disparate collection is dealt with in chronological order, starting with the fairly well-circulated translation of Isidor Kalisch (1877) and concluding with the stark translation of Avi Solomon (2021).



PART I A: TRANSLATIONS: 1877 – 1952

Kalisch, Isidor. ספר יצירה - *Sepher Yezirah: A Book on Creation; or the Jewish Metaphysics of Remote Antiquity*, with English Translation, Preface, Explanatory Notes and Glossary (New York: L. H. Frank & Co., 1877; reprinted San Jose: AMORC, 1948, with several reprint editions following; reprinted Berkeley Heights/Gillette: Heptangle Books, 1987 & 1990, in a *deluxe* edition; more recently, [2002 onward], reprinted in paperback and Kindle formats.)

Kalisch gives a straightforward translation, showing the English and Hebrew side by side. His notes clarify the ideas and language of SY, often referring to readings from major commentaries and other rabbinic works. The publisher's forward in the AMORC edition says, "The service Dr. Kalisch rendered in 1877 by his first English translation of the *Sepher Yezirah* has grown ever greater with the passing years. Other translations, it is true, have a certain merit; none the less, none has surpassed and few have equaled the work which he did." This comment was written in 1948, but one could have made a case to fully concur until relatively recently (*i.e.*, until Kaplan's SY published in 1990, then Peter Hayman's in 2004).¹³

Kalisch translated what appears to be the long version.¹⁴ The work is free of any sort of occult agenda—a feature which plagues many of the editions discussed hereafter.

A translation of SY was published in 1883 (2nd edition, 1886) in **Alfred Edersheim's** ambitious *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (London – Bombay: Longmans/Green and Company, 2 volumes; reprinted 1906; reprinted in recent years as a single volume by several publishers: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943 through 1981; MacDonald Publishing and World Bible Publishing Company in 1994; Hendrickson Publishers in 1993 and 1997; reprinted frequently in paperback and Kindle editions.)

The SY translation appears in Appendix V, § 4. After a perfunctory description of *kabbalah*, which concludes, "...the book *Yetsirah* is the oldest Kabbalistic document," the text of SY is summarized.

The translation itself is qualified: "...not only...the meaning of the expressions but even their translations, is in controversy. Hence, not unfrequently, our rendering must be regarded as our interpretation of the mysterious original." The translated text is then given in *italics*, with notes, bracketed or parenthetical words, and explanatory remarks in regular type. What we get is an earnest effort at translation based on a rather terse version of SY (which, for

¹³ See Jonathan D. Sarna, "Isador Kalisch's Pioneering Translation of *Sepher Yetzirah* (1877) and Its Rosicrucian Legacy," in *Kabbalah in America: Ancient Lore in the New World*, edited by Brian Ogren (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2020), pages 138-144.

¹⁴ The short version, thought by some to be representative of the original text, begins (chapter 1, paragraph 1),
 Thirty-two mysterious ways has the Lord, Lord of Hosts, ordained through Scribe, Script, and Scroll.
 (from Phineas Mordell's translation)

By contrast, the long version immerses this simple line in a stream of biblical epithets:

In Thirty-two paths of wisdom did Yah, Lord of hosts, God of Israel, the living God, king of the universe, God almighty, merciful, gracious, exalted, Who dwells in an eternity of holiness, holy is His name, create His universe by three enumerations: number, word, and script. (from a partial translation of my own)

Further, with this first paragraph we run into complications with the last several words, which are rendered differently by each translator. Kalisch has "by three Sepharim, namely: 1) S'for; 2) Sippor; and 3) Sapher," leaving these transliterated in the text to then be explained in his notes. The anonymous Guild Press edition (see below, page 12) ends Mishna *Aleph* (*i.e.*, paragraph 1), "He creates His world in three forms, In letter, in number, in sound."

instance, omits the “predominations” of the letters from chapter 4). The notes and additions are more helpful than intrusive, and where he is unsure, Edersheim nobly places a question mark next to his variant renderings.

Westcott, William Wynn. *Sepher Yetzirah. The Book of Formation and the Thirty-two Paths of Wisdom*, translated from the Hebrew (Bath: Robert H. Fryar, 1887; 2nd revised edition: London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893; 3rd edition: London: J. M. Watkins, 1911; reprinted New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975; reprinted San Diego: Wizards Bookshelf, 1990 [this edition adds notes from Mme. Blavatsky’s works]. “Fourth Revised edition, with Hebrew text”: Volume 3 of Darcy Kuntz’ GOLDEN DAWN STUDIES SERIES [Edmonds: Holmes Publishing Group, 1996]. Westcott’s SY is also included in a reprint of *Collectanæ Hermetica*, a series which Westcott edited 1893-1911 [Weiser, 1998]. Westcott’s *Sepher Yetzirah* was also reproduced in *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East*, VOLUME IV: *Medieval Hebrew: The Midrash, The Kabbalah* [Charles F. Horne, contributing editor], New York – London: Parke, Austin, and Lipscomb, 1917.)

Westcott was an occultist who, with S. L. M. Mathers, was a founding member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Both Westcott and Mathers put several magical and mystical texts into English in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Most pertinent to Kabbalah are Mathers’ *Kabbalah Unveiled* (sections of the *Zohar* after the Latin of Knorr von Rosenroth) and Westcott’s SY, which, in spite of the claim on the title page that the work was “translated from the Hebrew,” appears to have been totally dependent on a Latin version. Arthur E. Waite, in his introduction to the Stenring translation (discussed below), says of Westcott’s SY

It is based on the text of Rittangelius, compared with some other versions. It was prepared for the use of persons described as theosophists, occult and Hermetic students, whose purpose – if any – may have been served by such a production, but is in reality a paraphrase and fulfills few of the conditions required by scholarship.

Although there is a bit of the pot calling the kettle black in Waite’s comments, they do give a fair appraisal of Westcott’s work.

Along with SY, Westcott offers an English translation of *The Thirty-two Paths of Wisdom*; its inclusion is not explained, nor is the text introduced. From other sources (Waite’s introduction to Stenring for one), we learn that *The Thirty-two Paths* is a late addition to SY, appended in some Latin versions. In a series of short paragraphs, it tells of the intelligences, powers and virtues of the thirty-two paths, which are the ten *sefirot* plus the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Westcott’s connections with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn afford his treatment of SY a certain pedigree—at least in the eyes of those who involve themselves with Golden Dawn teachings and literature; thus, it has been reprinted far more often than any other version and appears at a large number of sites on the Internet.

Papus [Gerard Encausse]. *The Qabalah: Secret Tradition of the West* (French original, Paris: 1892. English translation, London and New York: Thorsons and Samuel Weiser, 1977.)

Even though the original, *La Cabbale tradition secrète de l’Occident*, is in French, Papus’ work is included here because it offers an SY translation (of sorts) by an influential occultist which

has been circulating in English for some time. Unfortunately, one finds Papus' treatment of SY (pages 203-48 in the Weiser edition) in the midst of a pseudo-scholarly mess. The entire book is a confusion of elements, Jewish and non-Jewish, many having no connection with *kabbalah* at all. There are many astounding errors, and the reader is flogged with a continual mystery mongering.

As for the SY section, Papus introduces the text with a verbose and meandering forward followed by an utterly superfluous summary of the text. Finally, there is the text, full of bizarre renderings. Papus gives the three *sefarim* (SY 1:1) as “number, numbering, and numbered.” He uses E to represent the Hebrew letter *aleph* in one place, only to use it to represent *heh* in another. He renders *heh-qoph* as OCH, and for the Tetragrammaton, *yod-heh-vav-heh*, he puts YOA H, then IOAH, and later IEVE. To the usual six chapters of SY, Papus saw fit to add a seventh, consisting of a redundant list of correspondences, an account of the derivatives of the letters, and a general résumé. Papus follows SY with not only *The Thirty-two Paths of Wisdom* but also *The Fifty Gates of Understanding*. *The Fifty Gates* is a hierarchic list of features of the universe; Papus' version is derived from Athanasius Kircher's *Œdipus Ægyptiacus* (3 volumes, Rome: 1652-5). Papus' section on SY concludes with an essay, “The Date of the ‘Sepher Yetzirah’” by Dr. Sair A. C. which advances the notion that SY is from the patriarchal age or earlier on the basis that scholars have not proven otherwise—at least not to the satisfaction of subscribers to the occult tradition.¹⁵

Davidson, P[eter]. *The Sepher Jetsirah or Book of Formation*, to which is added THE THIRTY-TWO WAYS OF WISDOM and THE FIFTY GATES OF INTELLIGENCE, translated and annotated by P. Davidson (Louisville, White County [GA]: Peter Davidson / Glasgow [Scotland]: Bernard Goodwin, 1896).

Davidson's work is mentioned on page 30 of Gershom Scholem's *Kabbalah* among the English translations of SY. Given the time and place of this publication—Louisville: 1896—the author is most certainly Peter Davidson (1837-1915), one of the prime movers of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor.¹⁶

I have not seen Davidson's SY except for scans of the cover, preface, and first page of the text and annotations, all kindly provided by Philip Smith (9/17/2016), who, I believe, aptly describes Davidson's production as having an “occult agenda.”

Mordell, Phineas. *The Origins of the Letters and Numerals According to the Sefer Yetzirah* (“The present thesis appeared in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series for April 1912 vol. II, and for April 1913 vol. III. Published by Dropsie College Philadelphia Pa.” SUPPLEMENT: “A

¹⁵ Papus' rendering of *eser sefirot belimah* (a phrase which opens a series of statements in SY, chapter 1) is “The ten Sephiroth, excepting the ineffable.” It must be conceded that the meaning of *belimah* or *beli mah* is open to speculation. Gershom Scholem discussed some of the possible meanings in *Origins of the Kabbalah* (page 28):

According to some views, the obscure word *belimah*, which always accompanies the word *sefirot*, is simply a composite of *beli mah* – without anything, without actuality, ideal. However, judging from the literal meaning, it should be understood as signifying “closed,” that is, closed within itself.

Further, see Peter Hayman's comments in “Some Observations of Sefer Yesira (1) Its Use of Scripture,” (*Journal of Jewish Studies* 35:2 [1984]) concerning *belimah*, where he mentions its likely derivation from JOB 26:7.

In her article, “Between Sefer Yezirah and Wisdom Literature” (in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, v. 6, no. 18 – Winter 2007, page 103), Ronit Meroz develops the idea that “the *sefirot* are themselves the *belimah*.”

¹⁶ Refer to Goodwin, Chanel and Deveney, *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1995), in particular pages 22-32.

Solution of the Pythagorean Number Philosophy.” “Copyright 1922 by Phineas Mordell.” Reprinted, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975.)

Mordell’s thesis regarding SY contains notions which are difficult to credit:

...the Sefer Yetzirah, as the earliest Hebrew grammar, contains...the fundamental rules of Hebrew orthography....

...according to the Sefer Yetzirah, there are ten double letters, and not only seven, as is believed by all commentators since Saadya.

In spite of the numerous works written on Hebrew orthography since the beginning of the tenth century, there is not one which may be considered as really based on the Hebrew [on which the SY is based].

Many more troubling statements could be quoted; however, I shall leap to Mordell’s conclusion:

Already Abraham Abulafia perceived that the Pythagorean number philosophy is identical with the Sefiroth philosophy of the Sefer Yetzirah. The relation they bear to each other is variously explained. A. F. Thimus shares the view that the Pythagorean philosophy is an adaptation from the Sefer Yetzirah. Others hold that the author of Sefer Yetzirah borrowed his philosophy from Pythagoras and Plato. ... Would it be to [sic] bold to conclude that Sefer Yetzirah represents the genuine fragments of Philolaus?

Mordell develops his thesis further in a supplement, “A Solution of the Pythagorean Number Philosophy,” which is included in the Weiser reprint of *The Origin of the Letters and Numerals*.

Mordell put his English translation and the Hebrew of SY side by side, but his version is unlike any which I have ever seen, especially in chapter 1, paragraph 3, where Mordell’s translation reads, “The *ten* double letters are...” (the *italics* are mine). All other readings and translations put the number of double letters of the Hebrew alphabet at seven.¹⁷

Stenring, Knut. *The Book of Formation (Sepher Yetzirah)* by Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph ... including the 32 Paths of Wisdom, their correspondences with the Hebrew alphabet and the Tarot symbols, with an introduction by Arthur Edward Waite (Philadelphia: David McKay Co., 1923; reprinted New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1970; reprinted with a foreword by R. A. Gilbert, Berwick: Nicolas-Hays, 2004).

Stenring refers to his own work as a “word-for-word translation from the Hebrew.” He used a number of SY texts to construct his version. Those parts of the text which Stenring considered “genuine” are printed in ordinary type; those parts which he considered “spurious” are printed in *italics*. Thus, with Stenring we find the first attempt—in English, at any rate—to separate the long version’s supposed additions from the short version’s presumed original text while presenting both. Stenring supplemented the text with a long section of notes concerning the language of SY, citing numerous alternative readings. He also constructed several charts and tables based on the information in SY.

¹⁷ It is puzzling that, out of all the possible translations, David Meltzer chose Mordell’s quirky rendering to represent SY in *The Secret Garden: An Anthology in the Kabbalah* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976). Alas, this is not the only doubtful aspect of Meltzer’s well-circulated compilation.

Stenring's work on SY seems careful and conscientious, but there are some disquieting statements here and there. A paragraph from the notes section serves well as a summary example:

The 231 Gates

Eighteen hundred years ago, when Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph reduced into writing the secret tradition of the Jews in the "Book of Formation," he hesitated to unveil the greatest secret of the Kabala, the Arcanum of the Great Symbol, which had been handed down to him from his forefathers. For this reason he embodied it in a riddle ("S.Y.," II. 4 and 5), which many ancient and modern philosophers have tried in vain to solve. Of all the different tabulations, claiming to be the Great Arcanum of the Kabala, that we have examined, none is correct. The token of the original table ONG and NGO was not to be found in any of them. We have succeeded in solving this riddle. The true Kabbalistic Symbol the Great Master Key to the theoretical and practical Kabala will be found facing p. 24 of the present translation.

[The diagram faces page 21 in the Ktav edition.]

In his introduction to Stenring's book, A. E. Waite diffuses Stenring's claims somewhat:

They [those who consider Stenring's diagram] will come at least across many curious permutations and will be in agreement with myself that the elaborate Diagram is of considerable interest, from whatever point of view it is approached, and however they may interpret Mr Stenring's statement that absolute knowledge of a single number is "impossible for a human mind" (p. 37), unless it has opened every Gate of Understanding, i.e., has acquired "an encyclopedic knowledge of all sciences."

Waite's introduction to Stenring is generally pretty good, though limited by his dependence on Christian sources. He gives a fair account of SY: its background, editions, and content.

Stenring also includes *The Thirty-two Paths of Wisdom*, saying that his

tabulation of Paths and their titles will be given according to Comtesse Calomira de Cimara (from her French translation of 1913), and the translation of the tract according to Waite and Westcott.¹⁸

Comment: Israel Regardie on *The Thirty-two Paths of Wisdom*:

It seems to me, after prolonged meditation, that the common attributions of these Intelligences is [sic] altogether arbitrary and lacking in serious meaning.

(—*A Garden of Pomegranates*, London: Rider and Co., 1932, introduction, p. iv)

Hall, Manly Palmer. *The Secret Teachings of All Ages. An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy* (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker Co., 1928; "Golden Anniversary Edition, Reduced Facsimile," Los Angeles: The Philosophical Research Society, 1978; SY section [pages 114-16] reprinted by Lamp of Trismegistus, 2020)

Hall states that he used Kalisch's translation as the "foundation" of his "interpretation" of SY, but that "material from other authorities has been incorporated and many passages have been rewritten to simplify the general theme." He consulted a number of other versions of SY, two of which have been discussed above: Westcott's and Stenring's. Hall relied heavily

¹⁸ Waite's version of *The Thirty-two Paths* can be found in *The Holy Kabbalah*, pages 213-219.

on Western occult sources, some of which, such as the works of Mme. Blavatsky and Eliphas Levi, are notoriously capricious.

Doreal, Dr. M[aurice]. *Sepher Yetzirah. The Book of Creation. The Kabbalah Unveiled. A Verse by Verse Analysis* (Sedalia: Brotherhood of the White Temple, 1941.)

The second paragraph of Dr. M. Doreal’s foreword reads,

The “Sepher Yetzirah” or “Book of Creation” is usually traced back to the Sixth Century, though it is much older, being, in fact, one of the earliest of the traditional teachings. According to legend, it has existed since the beginning of the world; and it is a record and key to that beginning. Adam was supposed to be its first author; and it was believed to be the record of the lost wisdom of the Pre-Adamic races.

Doreal’s typescript is illustrated by fold-out charts of THE TWENTY-TWO LETTERS and THE EMANATION OF THE TWENTY-TWO LETTERS, along with numerous diagrams through the text. His treatment betrays the influence of Mme. Blavatsky, Wynn Westcott, and S. L. M. Mathers.

Dyer, Roberta Coldren. *The Sepher Yetzirah (The Book of Formation): A Treatise on the Secret Science of Christhood as Presented in the Qabalistic Doctrines of the Hebrews and the Traditions of the Egyptians: charts original* (Evanston: Omen Press, 1949).

My sincere thanks to Paty and the Special Collections staff at the University of California. Santa Barbara Library for providing a photocopy of Dyer’s title page.

Raskin, Saul. *Kabbalah in Word and Image, with the Book of Creation and from the Zohar* (New York, Academy Photo Offset, Inc., 1952).

Russian-born artist Saul Raskin (1878-1966) produced a series of illustrated books on Jewish themes, for example, *Pirke Aboth*, *Passover Haggadah*, the *Book of Psalms*, the *Siddur*, and *Kabbalah*.

Raskin’s section in the over-sized *Kabbalah in Word and Image* on SY—with illustrations—appears on pages 5-11. SY is given in “its original Hebrew” followed by two translations, Yiddish and English—all in Raskin’s calligraphic lettering. A note appended to the English version reads,

The translation into English is made from two Hebrew versions and also two quite different English translations; one by Wynn Westcott, the other by Knut Stenring.

With Raskin we come to the end of a cycle of fairly frequent productions of SY in English. Between *Kabbalah in Word and Image...* and the next SY translation reviewed here, that of *Work of the Chariot*, there is a lapse of nearly twenty years.

PART I B: TRANSLATIONS: 1971 - 2018¹⁹

The more recent procession of SY translations—that of the last six decades—begins with a relatively obscure, homespun production:

Work of the Chariot. *Book of Formation (Sepher Yetzirah): The Letters of Our Father Abraham* [WC #1b], 2nd edition (Hollywood: Work of the Chariot, 1971); now see the WC website: <http://www.workofthechariot.com/TextFiles/Translations-SeferYetzirah.html>.

The 2nd edition includes two appendices: 1. Diagrams; 2. *Shuo Kua/I Ching* with diagrams; plus SY in Hebrew and Gezer/Sinaitic, and a depiction of the Gan Eden alphabet.

The Work of the Chariot Trust (WC) version was made using all six known textual sources. Some of the versions contain considerable addenda whose language points to the Hasmonean period, circa 130 BCE, and later. The additional material was left out of the redaction the WC used as the basis for its translation.

(—from the Work of the Chariot website: “*Sefer Yetzirah*”)

WC’s version has been neither well known nor, until recently, generally available [see the web address shown above]. It is included here in part because it is the version of SY on which David Blumenthal (*Understanding Jewish Mysticism* [1978], pages 13-46) based his translation in no small way.

While Blumenthal made minor revisions and additions here and there, he by and large presented a virtual copy of Work of the Chariot’s translation, while saying, “The translation given here is my own, based upon the Hebrew texts in L. Goldschmidt, *Das Buch der Schöpfung* (Darmstadt: 1969), and *Sefer Yetsira*, anon. ed. (Jerusalem: 1964). I have also used the German translation of Goldschmidt; the English translation of K. Stenring...”²⁰ Blumenthal then refers to what must be Work of the Chariot’s edition as “an anonymous, uncopyrighted pamphlet which was sent to me through the mail,” making no mention of Work of the Chariot. My copy of Work of the Chariot’s SY shows “COPYRIGHT - 1971 / WORK OF THE CHARIOT, etc.” on the title page, though, apparently, not all of their editions of SY show this.²¹

There is bound to be some concurrence among translations of the same text, but Blumenthal’s SY is the same as Work of the Chariot’s, word-for-word, through nearly all of the text. Blumenthal retained Work of the Chariot’s unique readings, e.g., “by border, and letter and number” (chapter I, paragraph 1). Further, Blumenthal used Work of the Chariot’s format in the setting of lines and phrases.

¹⁹ For this time period, books in which the translations of SY are interspersed into—often overwhelmed by—commentary are listed in Part III: COMMENTARIES ON SEFER YEZIRAH: TEXTS & STUDIES, § C. *Sources in Print & Kindle: Commentaries by Recent Authors.*

For example, Aryeh Kaplan’s edition of SY is listed in Part III because the bulk of the book is the Gra-Ari version of SY spread through Kaplan’s ranging 250+-page commentary. Appendix 1 of Kaplan’s book does, however, offer three unadorned versions of SY.

²⁰ *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, page 14.

²¹ My thanks to Miriam Caravella for informing me that her copy of Work of the Chariot’s SY “did not have any copyright or author listed.” (email—02/04/2012)

Work of the Chariot's translation is arresting, all but poetic, though many readings seem interpretive. A few notes follow the text; thereafter is a series of diagrams derived from various chapters of SY. The 1971 edition includes a translation of "Shuo Kua (I Ching): A Discussion of the Trigrams." Two more versions of SY follow, one in the traditional "square" Hebrew, the other in "the original Gezer or Sinatic Hebrew." The diagrams are also rendered in these two scripts.

One of the notes explains the motive for the work:

All of the information given in the Book of Formation is here presented in visual form to facilitate meditation in the manner of the Tree of Perfection (Luria):

- a. each Sephirah may be meditated on individually
- b. the central Sephirot may be taken as a group
- c. all of the Sephirot may be taken as a group
- d. the lettered paths are the gates of release between the Sephirot, the Gates are in the Light of the Endless, and the specific letter is given in the Book of Formation.

Through the notes, the nature of various meditations is indicated by reference to the diagrams; lines from the *Atharva Veda* are offered for comparison with SY.

Work of the Chariot's publication seems to be entirely for an immediate mystical purpose. There is no introduction, no history, no account of editions of SY, etc., and the sparse notes are not of the usual academic sort.

In 1971, **Ithamar Gruenwald** published the "Preliminary Critical Edition of Sefer Yezira" in *Israel Oriental Studies*, volume 1 (Tel Aviv University); of course, the texts are in Hebrew. In a follow-up article, "Some Critical Notes on the First Part of Sefer Yezira" (*Revue des Etudes juives*, CXXXII, no. 4, 1973), Gruenwald gives English translations and analyses of the first sixteen paragraphs of SY. The article is a bit frustrating in spots: some Hebrew words and quotes are not translated. This is, however, an article of great interest from a reliable scholarly source which touches on many crucial issues.

Doria, Charles; and Lenowitz, Harris. *Origins: Creation Texts from the Ancient Mediterranean* (Garden City: Anchor Books and AMS Press, 1976): SY translation: pages 57-78.

On the back cover of the paper edition, Joseph Campbell is quoted: "*Origins* is an interesting and scholarly introduction to the texts of the ancient Mediterranean." Some may find *Origins'* treatment of SY interesting, but it is difficult to see how anyone could find any scholarly value in it. The text is done up as free-form poetry and is neither introduced nor supported by notes. The authors were apparently attempting what has been called a "total translation" in which the authors work

as both poets & scholars, make use of all those "advances in translation technique, notation & sympathy" developed over the last few decades, from the methods of projective verse to those of etymological translation or of that attention to the recovery of the oral dimension of the poem...
(from the "Pre-face to *Origins* by Jerome Rothenberg)

Whatever the aim, the "San Francisco Renaissance" style hardly seems suitable for SY, which is hard dogma in sober, enigmatic language.

Poetic format aside, the individual words chosen in this version are often awkward and affected. For example, *Origins* has “Spiritwind” for *ruah* (spirit), and “lawed” presumably for *khaqq* (“engraved,” though if pointed differently it could mean “decreed” or “legislated”). *Origins’* brand of indulgence infects whole passages, making them stilted and vague.

For SY chapter 1, paragraph 7, *Origins* (p. 59) has

Ten Sefirot made of Nothing
 Their appearance is the look of lightning
 Their disappearance: They have no end

Aryeh Kaplan (in *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*, page 271—see below, Part III. C) offers the same passage (from the long version):

Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Their vision is like the appearance of lightning, and their limit has no end.

Comment: David Biale, recounting Scholem’s view:

Translation of Kabbalistic texts is possible because the Kabbalists themselves considered their language a precise, technical vocabulary and not arbitrary and emotive poetry. The texts are not served well by poetic translations; they cry out for scientific philology. (—*Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah & Counter-History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979: page 89)

(anonymous). *The Sepher Yetzirah* (Bray: Guild Press, 1976.)

With a terse introduction and scant notes (“excluded from the body of the text to avoid any interference between the text and the reader”), this rendition of SY is slim but attractive—more a little work of art and trigger for meditation than a scholarly effort. The frontispiece shows the “Tree of the Sephiroth” from Robert Fludd’s *Utriusque Cosmi* (Oppenheimii : Aere Iohannis Theodori de Bry, Typis Hieronymi Galleri, 1617/1619/1621), page 157.

Friedman, Irving. *The Book of Creation* (New York: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1977.)

Friedman’s reason for translating SY was “to arouse further interest in this most ancient Kabbalistic work by rendering it as simply and accurately as possible.” Friedman was true to his intention. The clear translation is followed by observations of the text which analyze elements of the SY in a broad context of various ancient religions and philosophies. Internal analysis is developed in several short chapters.²²

Blumenthal, David R. *Understanding Jewish Mysticism – A Source Reader: The Merkabah Tradition and the Zoharic Tradition* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1978.)

This translation has already been discussed in a rather unfortunate context: as stated, Blumenthal published a slightly revised and expanded version of Work of the Chariot’s translation. Unlike Work of the Chariot, Blumenthal offers extensive notes—some are helpful, some are bewildering. The notes are marred by Blumenthal’s glib, often condescending, style. He addresses his readers as though he (Blumenthal) were the all-wise

²² A certain type of purist might fault Friedman and others for choosing the word “creation” for *yezirah*. According to convention, “creation” is reserved for *briah*, and “formation” is applied to *yezirah*, even as “emanation” is used for *azilut* and “making” or “action” for *asiah*.

and pithy professor and we (the readers) were restless college kids who needed to be constantly refocused and jollied into sticking with the material.

Heidrick, Bill (adaptation and parenthetical notes by) *Sepher Yetzirah, The Book of Creation* (Berkeley: privately issued by the O.T.O., 1980).

Heidrick's stapled photocopy version is based on Kalisch and Knut Stenring, then "adapted to conform to the Golden Dawn correspondences in 1976."²³

Bokser, Ben Zion. *The Jewish Mystical Tradition* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981.)

Within this valuable anthology, Bokser gives us the first eight paragraphs of SY; the translation is based on Gruenwald's "Preliminary Critical Edition."

Alexander, Philip S. *Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism* (Totawa: Manchester University Press/Barnes and Noble, 1984. Reprinted, University of Chicago Press, 1990.)

In the midst of this well-considered anthology is a translation of SY excerpts, "based upon an eclectic text." The extracts included were "chosen with a view to making clear [SY's] basic structure and leading ideas." An introduction to the text appears on pages 27-29, the translation on pages 117-120. Of the 64 paragraphs established by Gruenwald, Alexander's translation includes 1, 2, 6-8, 10, 12-19, 23, 25, 27-30, 37, 39, 40, 43, 45, 49, 53, 56-58, 61, and 64.

Hayman, Peter. "Sefer Yetsira (The Book of Creation)" in *Shadow: The Newsletter of the Traditional Cosmology Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, pages 20-38 (Edinburgh: Traditional Cosmology Society [University of Edinburgh], 1986.)²⁴

Hayman's article offers a summary and analysis of SY, along with a translation of "the earliest manuscript of the Long Recension" and an appendix on "The Structure of the *Sefer Yetsira*." This fine piece of work resides in the deep obscurity of a mid-'eighties number of the unmilled periodical *Shadow*, which was not well circulated. This article/translation isn't even listed in the bibliography to Hayman's subsequent critical edition and translation of SY (*Sefer Yesira* [2004]—see below, pages 15-16).

Other articles by Peter Hayman (aka A. P. Hayman and A. Peter Hayman) on SY include

- "Some Observations on Sefer Yesira (1): Its Use of Scripture," in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, 1984)
- "Some Observations on Sefer Yesira (2): The Temple at the Centre of the Universe," in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1986)
- "Was God a Magician? Sefer Yesira and Jewish Magic," in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2 (1989).
- "Sefer Yesira and the Hekhalot Literature," in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. VI, nos. 1-2, edited by Joseph Dan (Jerusalem, Hebrew University, 1987).
- "The Doctrine of Creation in *Sefer Yesira*: Some Text-Critical Problems," in *Rashi 1040-1990*, edited by Gabrielle Sed-Rajna (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1993).

²³ Online at <http://www.billheidrick.com/works/sy.htm>.

²⁴ My sincere thanks to Stephan Pickering for calling my attention to Hayman's article/translation (email—09/29/2012).

A most disappointing piece by David Meltzer, “A Reader’s Guide of Kabbalah,” appeared in *Gnosis Magazine* 3: KABBALAH: Exploring the roots of Mysticism (San Francisco: The Lumen Foundation, Fall/Winter 1986/7). Listed there is a rendition of SY which I have not seen. The notice reads

Thompson, Scott (translator and editor). *Sepher Yetzirah: Book of Creation*.

A critical edition consisting of a Hebrew-English interlinear translation with collated translations of six previous editions: Lenowitz, Friedman, Kalisch, Mordell, Stenring, and Westcott. (Available through the translator: c/o Valencia Books, 525 Valencia St., San Francisco, CA 94110. \$15)

Alas, I sent off my fifteen bucks but never received Thompson’s SY.

Leonard R. Glotzer’s *Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism: The Book of Creation and Its Commentaries* (1977) and **Aryeh Kaplan’s** *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation* (1990) are listed below in Part III. C because, even though they present translations of SY, the authors’ commentaries are the real bulk of these books.

On “Sefer Yetzirah & Saadia’s Commentary (excerpts),” which opens with an eight-chapter rendition of the “Saadia recension” of SY, see page 27.

Segments of SY appear in **Daniel C. Matt’s** anthology, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart and Soul of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco [a Division of HarperCollins Publishing, New York], 1995). On pages 75-76, Matt gives his translation of SY chapter 1 paragraphs 1-8; on page 108 there is a compilation of SY chapter 2, paragraphs 2 and 4-6, and chapter 6, paragraph 4. Helpful notes are given in the back of the book explaining the terminology of the passages translated.

Dan Cohn-Sherbok’s *Jewish Mysticism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995: pages 60-66) gives slightly condensed renditions of chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5. These expand a bit on the passages presented in Cohn-Sherbok’s earlier *Jewish and Christian Mysticism: An Introduction*, by Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Lavinia Cohn-Sherbok (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994) in the section called “Creation Mysticism.”

The next entry on our list is, in many regards, the ultimate translation:

Hayman, A. Peter. *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

Hayman’s introduction discusses the text of SY and its treatment by both religious and academic commentators. Consideration of four pre-kabbalistic commentaries²⁵ leads up to Hayman’s section, “The Earliest Recoverable Text of Sefer Yesira and the Three Recensions.” This earliest recoverable text “has been created [by Hayman] as a theoretical exercise in order to try to penetrate into the processes which led to the formation of the multitudinous texts of SY which have come down to us” (page 33). The synoptic critical

²⁵ The commentaries of Shabbetai Donnolo, Sa’adiah Gaon, Dunash Ibn Tamim, and Judah ben Barzillai.

On these and other commentaries, see below, Part III: COMMENTARIES ON SEFER YEZIRAH: TEXTS & STUDIES.

edition and its translation follow specific manuscript versions²⁶: short, long, and Sa'adian, presented side by side, with extensive notes and commentary.

Hayman's *Sefer Yesira...* is the first of a proposed three-volume series: This first book "is concerned solely with the text—with the manuscripts, the recensions, the individual readings within the paragraphs" (page v); the second, a collection of Hayman's papers on SY²⁷; and the third, "a commentary on the content of the book" (page v).

[**Johnson, Reginald**, ed.]. *The Book of Creation - The Sepher Yetzirah: The Jewish Metaphysics of Remote Antiquity*, 5 Translations in One Volume - Large Print Edition (Frankston: TGS Publishing, 2006).

TGS reprints brings you a large 14 point font print edition of five complete translations of the *Sefer Yetzirah* in one volume. The *Book of Creation*, if authored by Abraham himself, would predate the Bible. This book is the beginning material for mystical Judaism, the Kaballah, and some factions of mystical Christianity. The *Sefer Yetzirah* is a must for any serious Biblical student and for open minded truthseekers. Even naysayers will have to admit, the *Book of Creation* is the source of many mystical ideas found in Astrology, Tarot, etc....²⁸

This edition includes the translations of Isidor Kalisch, Saadia ben Joseph, G. Scholem, Bill Heidrick, Wm. Wynn Westcott, and Abraham Father of Nations—three of which we can immediately account for from our list above: Kalisch, Westcott, and Heidrick.

Since I have seen only excerpts posted online, I cannot definitely identify the translations ascribed to G. Scholem, Saadia ben Joseph, or Abraham Father of Nations, though I strongly suspect that these would also be found among the translations on our list if the citations were accurate or more complete. The translation included in the excerpt given at the Hidden Mysteries website is Aryeh Kaplan's, which is, as it is so frequently, reproduced without attribution.

Another reprint "collection" is the anonymous *Sepher Yetzirah: The Book of Creation, Two Versions, Explaining Jewish Mystical Philosophy and the Cabala* (San Diego: The Book Tree, 2006) which reproduces the Kalisch and Stenring translations from 1877 and 1923, respectively.

Hoffman, Edward (ed). *The Kabbalah Reader: A Sourcebook of Visionary Judaism*, foreword by Arthur Kurzweil (Boston - London: Trumpeter/Shambhala Publications, 2010.)

Hoffman's "accessible entrée into the world of Kabbalah" (—back cover) begins with SY.

"This excerpt from the *Sefer Yetzirah* presents chapter 1 in its entirety, highlighting concepts in the five chapters that follow." (—page 4)

²⁶ The primary MSS Hayman translates are Parma 2784.14, DeRossi 1390 fols. 36b-38b (*short*); Vatican Library (Cat. Assemani) 299(8), fols. 66a-71b (*long*); The Genizah Scroll, Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter K21/56 + Glass 32/5 + Glass 12/813 (*Saadian*). These are supplemented by numerous others.

²⁷ See above, page 14, for articles which are sure to be included in such a collection.

²⁸ <http://www.hiddenmysteries.com/xcart/Book-of-Creation-SEPHER-YEZIRAH.html>, reproduced as it appears.

Collé, E. and Collé, H. *Sefer Yetzirah/The Book of Formation: The Seven in One English-Hebrew Edition* ([n.p.]: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.)

This work describes itself as “New Translations with an Introduction into the Cosmology of the Kabbalah.” The introduction and translations have a “second-language” quality about them (for example, the word *reflex* is repeatedly used where *reflect* is obviously meant).

The introduction dresses its description of SY’s cosmology with comments from the *Zohar*.

The book presents Hebrew and English (on facing pages) of the following SY versions:

- 1562 Short Version
- 1562 Long Version
- 1723 Ari Version
- 1806 Short Version
- 1831 Ari Version
- 1862 Ari Version
- 1874 Ari Version

Details on the specific sources are conspicuously—and frustratingly—absent. On the basis of the dates given by Collé and Collé, we might surmise that

- the 1562 versions were published in Mantua by Yaakov ben Naftali Gazolo
- the 1723 was likely published in Constantinople by Yonah be Yaakov and Yeshiah Asheknazi
- the 1806 was published in Grodno, edited by Menahem Mendel of Sklav
- the 1831 was published in Salonica
- the 1862 might be the version from the edition of Benyamin HaLevi’s *Hemed Elohim* published in Livorno, which contains a vocalized text of the Ari-Gra version
- the 1874 was published in Jerusalem, with GRA commentary

Pidgeon, Stephen. *תּאָ Cepher – Sitrei Torah: The Mysteries of the Torah* (Everett [WA]: Ceper Publishing Group/CreateSpace, LLC, 2014).

The first segment of the book (starting page 11) is an illustrated translation of the SY. Other writings featured are the Apocalypse of Moses, the Apocalypse of Avraham, “Cefer Ha Bahir,” the Testimony of the Twelve Patriarchs and “two new writings by the author ... “Cefer Mispariyim (The Book of Numbers) and the Cefer Zamar (The Book of Music).”

Linguist, business executive, speaker (find his lectures on YouTube), musician, Pidgeon is the founder of Ceper Publishing Group, “responsible for the publication of the Eth Ceper, a comprehensive restoration of sacred scripture in the English Language”—ASSEMBLY OF CALLED-OUT BELIEVERS website:

<https://www.calledoutbelievers.org/people/dr-stephen-pidgeon/>

Pidgeon was a Republican candidate for Attorney General for the State of Washington in 2012, receiving 10.1% of the vote behind Republican Reagan Dunn (38.2%) and Democrat Bob Ferguson (51.7%) (ref. [Stephen Pidgeon - Ballotpedia](#)).

“The Torah was always made available to those who claimed it.”

—Dr. Stephen Pidgeon > <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cneys7spELI&t=4s>

Epstein, Meira. *Sefer Yetzirah – סֵפֶר יְצִירָה: Translation, Transliteration and Commentary, with Special Attention to the Underlying Philosophical Origins, Ancient Jewish Mysticism, Cosmology and Astrology* (New York: Bear-Star.com, 2018).

Epstein is a scholar specializing in Abraham ibn Ezra: Epstein has published annotated translations of ibn Ezra's *Beginning of Wisdom* (ARKAT Publications, 1998) and *Book of Nativities and Revolutions* (ARKAT Publications, 2008). She is also an instructor of astrology; find her website, ASTROLOGY WITH MEIRA, at bear-star.com.

Epstein has attempted an “all-in-one” introductory edition of SY, choosing—as Kaplan did—the GRA version for her translation. From the preface:

[M]y goal is to make this text accessible on a simple, primary introductory level, while highlighting fundamental philosophical issues that underly this work. For those who would like to try reading the Hebrew, I have provided English transliteration. ...

My commentaries reflect and combine the fields of interest that are close to my heart—ancient Jewish mysticism, Pre-Socratic Greek philosophy and Classical Astrology.

Given that Epstein pays “special attention to the underlying philosophical origins” as well as “ancient Jewish mysticism, cosmology and astrology,” and her claim of “highlighting fundamental philosophical issues that underly this work [SY],” the first sentence of her introduction (which also appears on the back cover) is disconcerting:

Sefer Yetzirah (SY) is one of the oldest Jewish mystical-magical texts, which inspired Jewish, as well as Christian mystics through the centuries. (—page 5)

True, SY inspired Jewish and Christian mystics through the ages. I confess that my own description of SY as “the oldest known speculative treatise in Hebrew” is not very informative. However, to bluntly designate SY a “mystical-magical text” misses the determination of the best scholarship on the work: We do not—probably cannot—know the original intent of SY. Is it philosophical, mystical, magical, metaphysical, orthographic? We can only know how it was interpreted through its numerous commentaries.

Solomon, Avi. *Sefer Yesira: Book of Creativity* – ספר יצירה ([Kfar Saba]: [n.p.], 2021), available at Academia.edu > [PDF Sefer Yesira: Book Of Creativity | Avi Solomon - Academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu/4181111/Sefer_Yesira_Book_of_Creativity_Avi_Solomon)

Avi Solomon, who has done close work on Abraham Abulafia for some years, writes in his one-page introduction,

Since *Sefer Yesira* is so crucial to Abulafia's spiritual project, I thought it would be a worthwhile detour and exercise to attempt to provide some sort of direct encounter with the text, inasmuch as is possible in a translation, by my lights.

Another reason for preparing a new translation, despite the plethora of existing versions, is the relatively recent publication of Prof. Meir Bar-Ilan's excellent Hebrew monograph on *Sefer Yesira*.²⁹ Prof. Meir Bar-Ilan's proposed edition of the Hebrew text of *Sefer Yesira*, included as an appendix to his work, provides a fresh approach to the work.

To preserve simplicity for now, I have primarily used the text established by Prof. Meir Bar-Ilan, and have made only minor corrections to the Hebrew to account for printing errors in his book.

This edition of SY shows Bar-Ilan's Hebrew and Solomon's translation on the same page. The English is a blunt representation of the Hebrew to the point of having no capital letters or periods. Nor are there any explanations or notes.

²⁹ Meir Bar-Ilan, *Astrology and Other Sciences among the Jews of the Land of Israel in the Hellenistic-Roman and Byzantine Periods* [אסטרוולוגיה ומדעים אחרים בין יהודי ארץ-ישראל בתקופות ההלניסטית-רומית והביזאנטית] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2010).

For the abstract of this book (in English), see [Prof. Meir Bar-Ilan \(biu.ac.il\)](http://biu.ac.il/~meirbar/).

PART II: ACADEMIC STUDIES ON SEFER YEZIRAH IN ROUGHLY CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

1843

Franck, Adolphe. *The Kabbalah. The Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews.*

- French original: *La Kabbale ou la philosophie religieuse des Hebreux*, Paris: 1843.
- German translation by Adolph Jellinek: *Die Kabbala, oder Die Religion-philosophie der Hebraer*. Leipzig: 1844.
- 2nd French edition, Paris: Hachette et Cie., 1892.
- Hebrew translation from the German by M. Rabinsohn: *Ha-Kabbalah o ha-Philosophia ha-Datit shel ha-Yehudim*. Vilna: 1909.
- Revised and enlarged [English] translation by Dr. I. Sossnitz: *The Kabbalah or the Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews*. New York: The Kabbalah Publishing Company, 1926.
- English translation “based on Sossnitz but... so thoroughly overhauled ...that it is, in effect, a new translation,” by John C. Wilson, Bell Publishing Company, 1940. This edition reprinted, New Hyde Park: University Books, 1967; and Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1979.

In *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (Yale University Press, 1988: p. 8), Moshe Idel notes

The first major work devoted to a detailed description of mainly Zoharic Kabbalah and making use of historical, philological, comparative, and conceptual perspectives was Adolphe Franck’s *La Kabbale ...* Franck’s presentation contributed more to the knowledge of Kabbalah in modern Europe than did any other work prior to the studies of Scholem.

The publication data above indicate that Franck’s book has had a wide circulation, and one would rightly infer that it has had a great influence. Chapters 2 and 4 in particular deal with SY. While its appearance preceded much scholarship and many discoveries, Franck’s *Kabbalah* is still considered a worthy survey and analysis of SY and the *Zohar*.

Franck’s treatment of SY is rational: insightful, even if skeptical. His synopsis is straightforward, supported by quotes from the text itself and by passages from Judah Halevi’s commentary on SY. But now, having been made aware by more recent scholars of Franck’s errors, we are inclined to approach this book more to see how far Franck was able to get than to pursue it as a source of reliable information.

Comments:

Gershom Scholem:

These theories in the form in which they have been presented until now—for example, in the widely read book of Adolphe Franck—no longer merit serious scholarly discussion. (*Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 6)

Isaiah Tishby:

Franck’s book, particularly in the way it expounds kabbalistic ideas, contains a great deal of material that is still of value, although there are a considerable number of mistakes in it. (*Wisdom of the Zohar*, p. 48)

Moshe Idel:

The sources of important concepts of Kabbalah, according to Franck, were Chaldean and Persian, that is Zoroastrian. Notwithstanding this basic assumption on Franck’s part—which was rejected by subsequent research—he regarded Kabbalah as a uniquely important Jewish phenomenon.... This diagnosis of the role of Kabbalah is strikingly similar to Scholem’s famous perception of the role of Kabbalah as a vital component of Judaism. (*Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 8)

¹⁸⁶⁴ Ginsburg, Christian D. *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development and Literature – An Essay* (Liverpool: Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society, 1864); reprinted in *The Essenes: Their History and Doctrine / The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development and Literature* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956).

Ginsburg outlines the contents of SY (§ “*The Book of Creation or Jezira*”) over thirteen dense pages (pp. 147-159, Macmillan edition), including an illustration of “the decade” (resembling the tree of the *sefirot*) and two tables: TABLE OF PERMUTATION and TABLE OF COMBINATION. Ginsburg drew from mid-nineteenth century scholarship, primarily the *Wissenschaft de Judentums*, in great detail. Ginsburg also treats the *Commentary on the Ten Sephiroth* of R. Azriel b. Menachem (Azriel of Gerona), “following the lucid analysis of it as given by the erudite [Adolf] Jellinek, according to Spinoza’s form of Ethics,”³⁰ i.e., in the form of definitions, proofs and *scholia* (pp. 177-179).

Waite, Arthur Edward. *The Holy Kabbalah: A Study of the Secret Tradition in Israel as unfolded by Sons of the Doctrine for the Benefit and Consolation of the Elect Dispersed through the Lands and Ages of the Greater Exile* (London: Williams & Norgate Ltd, 1929; reprinted New Hyde Park: University Books, 1960).

¹⁹⁰² *The Holy Kabbalah* incorporates

- *The Doctrine and Literature of the Kabbalah* (London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1902).
- *The Secret Doctrine in Israel. A Study of the Zohar and Its Connections* (London: Wm. Rider and Son, 1913).

Waite discusses SY at some length in the following sections of *The Holy Kabbalah*:

1. Book II, § I: “Date of the Book of Formation”
2. Book III, § II: “The Book of Formation”
3. Book III, § III: “Connections and Dependencies of the Book of Formation.”

In the first section, Waite gives a survey of the issues concerning fixing a date to SY. He defers to his own introduction to Stenring’s translation of SY (see above, pages 8-9) to provide bibliographic details, yet in the second section he lists editions and translations—symptomatic of a composite work.

In the second section Waite summarizes the text well enough but again he defers to his introduction to Stenring to provide a conclusion as to the value of SY.

The third section surveys commentaries on SY, giving the most attention to Saadia’s commentary and, in particular, its connections—or lack of connections—with Zoharic Kabbalah. Waite then moves into a discussion of Azriel of Gerona, then, briefly, Nahmanides and “pseudo-Eliezer” (of Worms). He concludes with a short list of other commentators.

Waite includes a translation of *The Thirty-two Paths of Wisdom* and a summary of *The Fifty Gates of Understanding* (pages 213-219).

³⁰ “[T]aken from Dr. Jellinek’s *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kabbalah. Erstes Heft. Leipzig, 1852.*”

Waite is something of a disappointment to more recent scholars—a disappointment rather than a total write-off—because he exhibited good intuitions but was led astray by the faulty Latin and French translations available to him.

Comment:

Scholem:

[Waite's] work ... is distinguished by a real insight into the world of Kabbalism; it is all the more regrettable that it is marred by an uncritical attitude toward facts of history and philology... (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 212)

¹⁹⁰⁶ The 1906 edition of *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York – London: Funk & Wagnalls Company – vol. XII, pages 602-8)³¹ contains the article “Sefer Yezirah” by Louis Ginzberg.

¹⁹¹³ Joshua Abelson's *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction to the Kabbalah* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1913; reprint New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1969 & 1981; and Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001) has a brief chapter (V) on SY.

We are finally brought to Gershom Scholem, who, in his several studies, presents SY more reliably than any of the writers discussed thus far in PART 2. Scholem was a deep and sympathetic scholar, but one who would not suffer inaccuracy or lubrication. More recent scholars find fault with Scholem's being long on historiography while short on phenomenology—a criticism always accompanied by acknowledgement of the debt owed Scholem's work.

¹⁹⁴¹ Along with the items listed here, the reader may also pursue the numerous references to SY in Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1941; reprinted frequently, New York: Schocken Books).

Kabbalah (—a revised and updated collection of articles from *Encyclopedia Judaica*) (Jerusalem and New York: Keter Publishing House and Times Books; 1974; reprinted New York: Meridian Books, 1978; and again, New York: Dorset Press, 1984).

On pages 23-30, Scholem describes SY and its historical background. He gives a synopsis of its contents with mention of some general interpretations of the book. He then discusses the problems of dating SY, concluding that it is from the 3rd to 6th century. He enumerates the commentaries on SY and concludes with a summary of the printed editions and translations of the text.

Origins of the Kabbalah (The Jewish Publication Society/ Princeton University Press, 1987).

The English edition is an expansion of the Hebrew work, *Reshith ha-Qabbalah* (Jerusalem: 1948), “more than double its size”; it was updated to include additional research (of Scholem's) since 1962 (when a revised version was published in German: *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.) drawn from Scholem's own special interleaved volume, into which he entered notes, queries, corrections, and additions. [French translation: *Les origines de la Kabbale*, Paris: 1966.]

In the longest section on SY in *Origins of the Kabbalah* (pages 24-35), Scholem discusses the dating of SY, then summarizes the fundamental concepts with attention to the language used

³¹ Reprint edition: New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1964.

(including some observations on the term *beli mah*). There follows a brief survey of the commentaries on SY.

Elsewhere, Scholem discusses SY's role in the formation of Kabbalah (pages 46-8), its influence on the German Hasidim (pages 97-8), its development as a manual for creating a *golem* (pages 102-3), and its links with *merkabah* mysticism (pages 117-8). He notes the commentaries of Joseph ben Shalom (p. 224), Isaac the Blind (pages 257-8), and Nahmanides (pages 388-389).

On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism (German original: *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*. Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960; English translation: New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

Chapter 5. The Idea of the Golem

It was by means of the SY that a *golem* (artificial human) was made. On this, see Moshe Idel's *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). On Idel's and Scholem's conclusions regarding the roots of the *golem* tradition, find Peter Schäfer, "The Magic of the Golem: The Early Development of the Golem Legend," in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. XLVI, nos. 1-2 (Cambridge: Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, Spring-Autumn 1995).

Note CHAPTER 2 in *Golem*, "Sefer Yezirah," where Idel begins his discussion of this text with the description, "More than any other text of ancient Jewish mysticism, *Sefer Yezirah* presented an elaborate cosmology which is grounded in the assumption that combinations of letters are both the technique to create the world and the material for its creation." (—p. 9)

For an early source on creating a *golem*, see the reference to Eleazar of Worms' *Sodei Razaya* below, pages 28-29.

Joseph Dan devotes a chapter to SY in his valuable book, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Books, 1993). Dan provides a marvelous summary of SY and the questions it poses to modern scholarship.

Also see "The Language of Creation and Its Grammar" and "Three Phases of the History of the *Sefer Yezira*," which are CHAPTERS 5 and 6 of Dan's collected articles: *Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 1: LATE ANTIQUITY (Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998).

Within Moshe Idel's ambitious *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2002), there are several discussions of SY, as in § SEFER YEZIRAH AND LINGUISTIC CREATIONAL PROCESSES (page 34ff) and the subsequent sections through the conclusion of CHAPTER 1, "The World-Absorbing Text," and elsewhere.

Nitsa Kann's dissertation, *KABBALITERATURE – POST/MODERN HEBREW LITERATURE AND ITS KABBALISTIC PRECURSORS* (Berkeley: University of California, 2006) opens with (chapter 1) "C. N. Bialik and Sefer Yetsira, Mediated by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav – Creator and Creation," pp. 1-73. "C[haim] N[achman] Bialik (1873-1934) is undoubtedly the canonical poet of modern Hebrew literature, and is considered to be Israel's national poet." (p. vii) "Bialik based his ars-poetic perception precisely on *Sefer Yetsira*." (p. 2).

Kann also "explores the interrelationships between" the *Zohar* and the fiction of S. Y. Agnon, and Abraham Abulafia's use of language and the poetry of Yona Wallach.

Marla Segol's book, *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah: The Texts, Commentaries, and Diagrams of the Sefer Yetsirah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) fulfills the promise of its title through surveying the various recensions of SY, their dating and provenance, the commentaries on them, and—peculiar to Segol's study—the diagrams which accompany various texts.³² One of Segol's main points is that, through analyzing the dispositions of the early commentaries, one must conclude that, for the medieval mystics utilizing SY, *magic* and *religion* were not distinct. More—and better—illustrations would have enhanced Segol's book immensely.

In the introduction to “*Sefer Yesirah*” and *Its Contexts: Other Jewish Voices* [DIVINATIONS: REREADING LATE ANCIENT RELIGION] (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) Tzahi Weiss states,

My main goal in this book is to demonstrate that the evolution of Sefer Yeşirah and its reception have something in common: they point us to an alternative picture of the history of Jewish thought in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. I claim that Sefer Yeşirah is a rare surviving Jewish treatise written and edited around the seventh century by Jews who were familiar with Syriac Christianity and were far from the main circles of rabbinic learning.³³

While advancing some of his own conclusions, even here, in the most recent scholarly work given notice, Weiss evocatively expresses the problems of establishing an author, a time, and a place for SY while tracking its shift from being interpreted as a philosophic text to being construed as “a mystical, mythical, and magical treatise.”

Weiss includes Hayman's translation of the “long version” facing the Hebrew text.

A SELECTION OF ARTICLES:

- Block, Tom. “The Question of Sufi Influence on the Early Kabbalah,” in *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Volume 13, Number 2 (Oakton [VA]: The Foundation for Traditional Studies, Winter 2007-2008); pages 68-86.
- Busi, Giulio. “‘Engraved, Hewed, Sealed’: *Sefirot* and Divine Writing in the *Sefer Yetzirah*,” in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought: Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), In Memoriam*, volume 2, edited by Joseph Dan (Jerusalem: Mandel Institute of Jewish Studies, 2007), pages 1-11.

³² The diagrams which adorn kabbalistic texts and commentaries have not, for the most part, been the focus of books or articles in print. Some exceptions are

- Busi, Giulio. *Qabbalah Visiva* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 2005). This work treats well over 100 kabbalistic diagrams from Italian manuscript collections.
- Marty, Jennifer; and MacParthy, Fred. *Essence et Fondements de la Qabale à travers l'Arbre de Vie* (Brestot: Sesheta Publications, 2019).
- Sed, Nicholas. “Deux documents sur la kabbale: Le Commentaire sur le Sepher Yesirāh de Moïse ben Nahman et le Traité des Hêykalōt,” in *Documents oubliés sur l'alchimie, la kabbale et Guillaume Posetel offerts, à l'occasion de son 90^e anniversaire, à François Secret par ses élèves et amis*. Genève: Librairie Droz S.A., 2001.
- _____. “Le texte, les manuscrits et les diagrammes,” in *Revue des études juives* 124 (Paris: Société des Études Juives, 1965).
- _____. “Une cosmologie juive du haut moyen âge: la Berayta di Ma'asah Bereshit,” in *Revue des études juives* 123 (Paris: Société des Études Juives, 1964).

Note that none of these works is in English.

Recent papers by J. H. Chajes are beginning to fill this gap. Refer to <https://haifa.academia.edu/JHChajes>.

³³ “*Sefer Yesirah*” and *Its Contexts*,” page 2. See Weiss' comments quoted above, page 2.

- Finkel, Asher. “The Exegetic Elements of the Cosmological Work, *Sefer Yesirah*,” in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies*, edited by R. A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 45-55.
- Freedman, Daphne Hadas. “The Book of Creation,” in *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, vol. 44, edited by Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2019), pp. 159-168.
- Idel, Moshe. “Midrash *vs.* Other Jewish Hermeneutics,” in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, edited by Michael Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 45-58.
- Kiener, Ronald. “The Status of Astrology in the Early Kabbalah: From the *Sefer Yesirah* to the *Zohar*,” in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. 6, nos. 3-4: PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORY OF JEWISH MYSTICISM: *The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe*, edited by Joseph Dan – ENGLISH SECTION – (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1987), pp. 1*-45*.
- Langermann, Y. Tzvi. Introduction to “A New Redaction of *Sefer Yesira*?” in *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, vol. 2, edited by Daniel Abrams and Abraham Elqayam (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1997), pp. 49-64.
- _____. “On the Beginnings of Hebrew Scientific Literature and on Studying History through ‘Maqbilot’ (Parallels),” in *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science & Judaism*, Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 169-189.
- Meroz, Ronit. “Between *Sefer Yezirah* and Wisdom Literature: Three Binitarian Approaches in *Sefer Yezirah*,” in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, volume 6, number 18 – ESSAYS IN HONOR OF MOSHE IDEL (Cluj: University of Cluj-Napoca, Winter 2007), pages 101-142—online at <http://www.jsri.ro/>
- Pines, Shlomo. “Points of Similarity between the Exposition of the *Sefirot* in *Sefer Yezira* and a Text of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies: The Implications of this Resemblance,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. VII, no. 3 (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1989), pages 63-142.
- Segol, Marla. “Astrology in Hebrew Texts Before and After Islam,” in *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, vol. 12, issue 1 (University of Pennsylvania Press, Spring 2017), pp. 10-38.
Segol’s article considers *Sefer Refu’ot* (BOOK OF REMEDIES), SY, and two commentaries on SY: Donnolo’s *Sefer Hakhmoni* and Saadya Gaon’s *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsirah*.
- _____. “Genre as Argument in the *Sefer Yetsirah*: A New Look at Its Literary Structure,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 79, Issue 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 961-990.
- Shulman, David. “Is There an Indian Connection to the *Sefer yesirah*?” in *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, No. 2, edited by Gad Freudenthal, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pages 191-199, at <http://inscribe.iupress.org/loi/ale> [DEFUNCT LINK—3/17/2022].
- Stroumsa, Guy. “A Zoroastrian Origin to the *Sefirot*?” in *Irano-Judaica III* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, 1994), pp. 17-33.
- Wasserstrom, Steven M. “Further Thoughts on the Origins of *Sefer yesirah*,” in *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, No. 2, edited by Gad Freudenthal, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pages 201-221, at <http://inscribe.iupress.org/loi/ale> [DEFUNCT LINK—3/17/2022]
- _____. “*Sefer Yesira* and Early Islam: A Re-appraisal,” in *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, volume 3, number 1, Special Issue: STUDIES IN JEWISH MYSTICISM, ESOTERICISM, AND HASIDISM, edited by Elliot R. Wolfson and Paul Mendes Flohr (Chur/Philadelphia: Harwood Academic, 1993), pp; 1-30.
- Weiss, Tzahi. “‘The Book of Formation of the World’: *Sefer Yetzirah* and *Hilkot Yetzirah*,” in *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy*, Volume 27 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 168-179.
- Wolfson, Elliot R. “Jewish Mysticism: A Philosophical Overview,” § SEFER YETZIRAH: LINGUISTIC MYSTICISM AND COSMOLOGICAL SPECULATION, in *History of Jewish Philosophy* [ROUTLEDGE HISTORY OF WORLD PHILOSOPHIES, Volume 2], edited by Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London – New York, 1997), pp. 463-466.

Part III: COMMENTARIES ON *SEFER YEZIRAH*: TEXTS & STUDIES

In the matter of English sources for commentaries on SY we come up a bit short, especially if we limit ourselves to published material. With the addition of a handful of dissertations, our list becomes a bit more respectable.

Raphael Jospe's "Early Philosophical Commentaries on the *Sefer Yesirah*: Some Comments," in *Revue des études juives*, 149 (Paris: École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1990), pages 369-415, contains a very useful summary. Consideration is given to the commentaries of Saadia, Dunash ibn Tamim, Judah ben Barzillai al-Bargeloni, and Judah ha-Levi. An addendum contrasts "the case of the *Sefer Yezirah* with that of the *Shi'ur Qomah*."

Updating and expanding upon Jospe's article is Tzahi Weiss' piece, "The Reception of *Sefer Yetsirah* and Jewish Mysticism in the Early Middle Ages," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (Leiden: Brill, Winter 2013), and Tzvi Langermann's "'*Sefer Yesira*,' the Story of a Text in Search of a Commentary," in *Tablet Magazine* (Notebook Inc., 2017) at <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/243868/sefer-yesira-text-commentary>.

Other references to the early SY commentaries:

- Peter Hayman discusses the pre-kabbalistic commentaries of Saadia Gaon, Dunash ibn Tamim, Donnolo, and Judah ben Barzillai in *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*, pages 25-33.
- Piergabriele Mancuso's introduction treats the commentaries of Saadia, Ibn Tamim, and Donnolo, in *Shabbatai Donnolo's SEFER HAKHMONI* (discussed immediately below – *Sources in Print: Pre-Kabbalistic Commentaries: 10th cent.*)
- The SY commentaries of Donnolo and Sa'adiah are discussed in "Magical Letters, Mystical Planets: Magic, Theosophy, and Astrology in the *Sefer Yetsirah* and two of its Tenth-century Commentaries" by Marla Segol, in *Societas Magica Newsletter*, Issue 21 (Spring 2009), online at <http://www.societasmagica.org/>, and again in Segol's "Astrology in Hebrew Texts Before and After Islam," in *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 12/1 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 10-38, which discusses Donnolo's *Sefer Hakhmoni* and Saadya Gaon's *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsirah*.

Refer also to Segol's *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah* (mentioned above, p. 23).

- Chapter 3 of Mark Sendor's dissertation, *EMERGENCE OF PROVENÇAL KABBALAH*, summarizes the commentaries of Saadia, Ibn Tamim, Donnolo, Halevi, and Judah ben Barzillai.

A. Sources in Print: Pre-Kabbalistic Commentaries

^{10th cent.} The first monograph produced in English which deals with a commentary on SY is *The Universe of Shabbetai Donnolo* by Andrew Sharf (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1976), which is a study of Donnolo's *Sefer Hakhmoni*, "one of the oldest commentaries on SY and the first Neoplatonic philosophical text written in Hebrew" (Mancuso, page 8). Donnolo was a tenth-century doctor whose medical tracts on herbal prescriptions came to be overshadowed by his cosmological writings, in particular *Sefer Hakhmoni*. Donnolo brought together Jewish and non-Jewish ideas about astronomy and astrology, but fell short of creating a unified, organized system.

Donnolo's commentary on SY has been published as *Shabbatai Donnolo's SEFER HAKHMONI: Introduction, Critical Text, and Annotated English Translation*, by Piergabriele Mancuso (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2010). Mancuso's introduction offers a useful summary of SY recensions and a comparison of the earliest commentaries, namely those of Sa'adiah Gaon, Dunash ibn Tamim, and Donnolo.

Further on Donnolo's commentary, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo, with Special Emphasis on the Doctrine of *Sefirot* in His *Sefer Hakmoni*," in *Jewish History*, vol. 6, nos. 1-2 (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1992); and Joseph Dan, "Medieval Jewish Influences on Renaissance Concepts of *Harmonia Mundi*," in *Aries (New Series)*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 135-152.

Sa'adiah Gaon's commentary on SY, *Tafsir Kitab al-mubadi*,³⁴ referred to so often, has still not been published in English.³⁵ The promising but somewhat misleading title, *Rabbi Saadiah Gaon's Commentary on the Book of Creation*, annotated and translated by Michael Linetsky (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 2002) offers a translation of Saadia's commentary on GENESIS (*PERUSHE RAV SE'ADYA GA'ON LI-VE-RESHIT: Bereshith to Vayetze*).

Some excerpts of Sa'adiah's commentary on SY were posted on the Internet by Scott Thompson and Dominique Marson at www.wbenjamin.org/saadia.html. Alas, this specific

³⁴ Juan Acevedo kindly provided valuable information on manuscript sources for Sa'adiah's commentary on SY (email of 05/23/2019), stating, "[The MS that Mayer] Lambert used for his 1891 edition," *Commentaire sur le Séfer Yesira; ou livre de la Création par Saadiah* (Paris: Bouillon, 1891; rpt. Paris: Editions Bibliophane, 1986), "is a 13th century Ms. for which Lambert does not give the reference." Prof. Acevedo identifies Lambert's source as "the Oxford Ms., [which] is in Judaeo-Arabic":

Shelfmark: Bodleian Library MS. Pococke 256 / Title: *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsirah (Tafsīr Kitāb al-Mabādi)*
 Creators: Sa'adia ben Joseph / Date: 1262

This MS has been digitized:

<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/inquire/Discover/Search/#/?p=c+o,t+,rsrs+o,rsp+10,fa+,so+ox%3Asort%5Easc,scids+,pid+66d8064e-9a5e-4757-a73d-88df2635c663,vi+fed9d348-9ecf-4de8-83a7-5003fec1d41f>

Acevedo further notes, "There are other Mss. of the Arabic, listed in Steinschneider and Langermann 2013, in Paris, St. Petersburg and Cincinnati, plus a fragment in the Cambridge Geniza (T-S Ar.27.40 Page: 1r), but as far as I know, they have not been edited. There are also unedited Mss. of several Hebrew translations."

³⁵ Itamar Gruenwald writes (email of 01/28/2013):

The two oldest commentaries of *Sefer Yezirah* are those of Yitzhak Ha-Yisra'eli (died ca. 952) and Sa'adiah Ga'on (died 942). Sa'adiah had a unique text of *Sefer Yezirah*, which is different from both, respectively, the Short and the Long Versions of the book. See my 'A Preliminary Critical Edition of SY' in: *Israel Oriental Studies* Vol. I (1971). These are not Kabbalistic commentaries in the strict sense of the term, but relevant to the study of Kabbalah.

link is now defunct.³⁶ Now residing at <https://www.wbenjamin.org/> is an attractive site entirely in French and entirely on Walter Benjamin.

However, “Sefer Yetzirah & Saadia’s Commentary (excerpts)” by Saadia ben Joseph (al-Fayyumi) [931 C.E.]: “From Saadia ben Joseph (al-Fayyumi), *Commentaire sur le Séfer Yesira ou Livre de la Création par Le Gaon Saadya de Fayyoun*, trans. & ed., M. Lambert, Paris, Emile Bouillon, Editeur, (1891); translated into English from the French & Hebrew by Scott Thompson and Dominique Marson, San Francisco, 1985,” can now be accessed online:

<http://themathesontrust.org/papers/judaism/saadia.pdf>

Also online: Ben Newman, “Sa’adiah Gaon’s Yetzirah Commentary / Origins: Observations on Saadia Gaon’s Commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah*,” Published Saturday July 22 2005 by Unknown | E-mail this post ... at <http://kaphtziel.blogspot.com/2005/07/saadia-gaons-yetzirah-commentary.html>. One wishes that the format and design of this webpage had been better considered.

Find Haggai Ben-Shammai’s article “Saadya’s Goal in his *Commentary on Sefer Yezira*,” in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture – Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, edited by Ruth Link-Salinger (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), and Ronald C Kiener’s paper, “Saadia and the *Sefer Yetzirah*: Translation Theory in Classical Jewish Thought,” in *Interpretation in Religion*, edited by Shlomo Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein (Leiden – New York – Köln: E. J. Brill, 1992), pp. 169-179.

Sa’adiah’s commentary on SY is referred to frequently in Israel Efros’ fine outline, “The Philosophy of Saadia Gaon,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974). See also E. J. Revell, “The Nature of *Resh* in Tiberian Hebrew,” in *AJS Review*, Volume 6, edited by Frank Talmage (Cambridge: Association of Jewish Studies, 1981).

Sa’adiah’s most notable work, *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* (Arabic: *Kitâb al-Amânât wal-’Tiqâdât*, or, in the Hebrew translation of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Sefer ha-’Emûnôt ve-ha-Deôt*) has been translated a couple of times:

- Altmann, Alexander (trans). *Saadya Gaon: The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/East and West Library, 1946; reprinted with a new introduction by Daniel H. Frank Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002). This abridged translation also appears in *Three Jewish Philosophers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960).
- Rosenblatt, Alexander (trans). *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* [YALE JUDAICA SERIES, Volume 1] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948 & 1976).

12th cent.

Judah Halevi (c. 1075-1141) included a commentary on SY in his renowned *Kuzari*: CHAPTER 4, § 25. The *Kuzari* has been translated a number of times, but some editions do not include the SY section (for example, Isaak Heinemann’s translation in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, mentioned above).

³⁶ At the same site there was another page, “SEFER YETZIRAH *Bibliography*” compiled by Scott J. Thompson, at http://www.wbenjamin.org/biblio_yetzirah.html (also DEFUNCT), which contains a detailed list of commentaries on SY, commencing with Isaac ben Solomon Israeli in the tenth century and concluding with Aryeh Kaplan in the twentieth. It covers to 1995. It has been reposted at

https://web.archive.org/web/20000831201221/http://www.wbenjamin.org/biblio_yetzirah.html

Translations which include the SY commentary are

- Hartwig Hirschfeld's 1905 rendition, *Judah Hallevis Kitab al Khazari* (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd./New York: E. P. Dutton, 1905; rpt. as *Book of Kuzari* – New York: Pardes Publishing House, 1946; as *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel*, introduction by H. Slonimsky – New York: Schocken Books, 1964).
- N. Daniel Korobkin, *The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith* (Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998; 2nd edition, Jerusalem – Nanuet: Feldheim Publishers, 2009); Korobkin includes informative footnotes.

Further on Halevi, see

- Israel Efros, “Some Aspects of Yehudah Halevi’s Mysticism” and “Some Textual Notes on Yehudah Halevi’s Kuzari,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (1974, mentioned above)
- Yochanan Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet: Judah Halevi, the KUZARI, and the Evolution of His Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995)
- Diane Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi’s KUZARI* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

“The *Sefer Yetzira*,” which is the title of CHAPTER 4 in Joseph Dan’s ‘*Unique Cherub*’ Circle (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), begins

The literature of the Unique Cherub circle is devoted, almost exclusively, to the interpretation of *Sefer Yetzira*. Although we do not understand the main aspects of the circle’s pseudepigraphical framework, its dependence on *Sefer Yetzira*—without doubt the source of its mystical discourse—is clear and obvious.

Dan points out (page 37) that SY served as the main source of mystical speculation for *Sefer ha-Bahir*,³⁷ the Iyyun circle,³⁸ the Provence school as headed by Rabbi Isaac the Blind, and the Ashkenazi Hasidim.³⁹ Dan’s CHAPTER 12 discusses “The Commentaries on the *Sefer Yetzira* by Elhanan ben Yakar.”

^{13th cent.}

A section in the midst of Ashkenazi Hasid **Eleazar of Worms**’ (1176-1238) *Sodei Razaya* (SECRETS OF RAZIEL) comprises a *Perush al Sefer Yetzirah*, that is, an “Interpretation of [or Commentary on] the *Book of Formation*,” which contains passages, purportedly, on how to compose a *golem*.⁴⁰ See pages 120-137 in *Sodei Razaya: Peirush al Sefer Yetzirah / Secrets of Raziel*

³⁷ See Aryeh Kaplan, *The Bahir: An Ancient Kabbalistic Text Attributed to Rabbi Nehuniah ben HaKana* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1979; subsequently reprinted, Northvale: Jason Aronson).

³⁸ See Mark Verman, *The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

³⁹ For references on the Ashkenazi Hasidim, see the source list in my “Notes on the Study of Early Kabbalah in English,” 85, *Hasidei Ashkenaz*.

⁴⁰ “*Golem*, synonymous with fool in Yiddish, is a talmudic expression signifying a lump of lifeless mass. The first man, in rabbinic lore, was allegedly a *Golem* till God breathed life into his nostrils. Raba created a man who was returned to dust by R. Zera (*Sanhedrin* 65b). But *Golem*, in the sense of being created by incantation or magic, does not appear in Hebrew literature before the beginning of the thirteenth century in Eleazar’s of Worms commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*.”

—Eisig Silberschlag, *From Renaissance to Renaissance: Hebrew Literature from 1492-1970*, PART ONE (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1973), p. 338, n. 158.

Daniel Shyovitz comments on the broader context of Eleazar’s *golem* instructions in *A Remembrance of His Wonders: Nature and the Supernatural in Medieval Ashkenaz* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. 96-100.

– *Commentary on the Book of Formation*, translated by Abraham Broide, integral edition in English ([n.p.]: David Smith, LLC, 2016, and [n.p.]: eUniversity.pub, 2018).

The final section of Eleazar’s *Sodei Razaya*, titled *Sefer ha-Shem* (BOOK OF THE NAME), opens with a commentary on SY within a discussion of the Tetragrammaton. See pages 1-6 in *Sefer Ha-Shem – The Book of the Name*, Tome 1 (of 2), translated by Abraham Broide, Alexandru Munteanu, and Sharron Shatil, integral edition in English ([n.p.]: David Smith, LLC, 2016, and [n.p.]: eUniversity.pub, 2018).

In “Cosmology and Color Symbolism in R. Eleazar of Worms,”⁴¹ Natasha Esther Zabolotnaya writes,

For the present context, it is of particular importance to stress that the textual contents of *Sefer Yesirah* to a large degree can be seen as an underlying structural basis for the cosmological views of R. Eleazar. To put it metaphorically, *Sefer Yesirah* weaves for him a canvas, and he embroiders on it a pattern of his 73 *Gates of Wisdom*, his methods of exegesis. As has been noted so many times, R. Eleazar belongs to the commentary tradition that organically absorbed and balanced rationalistic and proto-kabbalistic approaches to this program source of the early Jewish mysticism, namely the philosophical interpretation of Saadya al-Fayumi [= Sa’adiah Gaon], the theosophic commentary of Shabbetai Donollo, and the extensive study of Judah ben Barzilai of Barcelona which aimed to reconcile original perception of the anonymous *Sefer Yesirah* with rabbinic-midrashic sources.

Note Klaus Herrmann’s article, “An Unknown Commentary on the *Book of Creation (Sefer Yezirah)* from the Cairo Genizah and Its Re-Creation among the Haside Ashkenaz,” in *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought* [FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOR OF JOSEPH DAN ON THE OCCASION OF HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY], edited by Rachel Elijor and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pages 103-112.

On another anonymous commentary, a “newly discovered fragment” located in the Gotha Research Library which “consists of mystical speculations about the Hebrew alphabet and allusions to the *Book of Creation (Sefer Yesira)*,” find Andreas Lehnardt, “Shedding Light on Metatron – Recently Discovered Fragments of Mystical Writings in Germany,” in *Jewish Manuscript Cultures: New Perspectives*, edited by Irina Wandrey [STUDIES IN MANUSCRIPT CULTURES, Volume 13] (Berlin – Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), pp. 131-154. “Mystical Writings in Germany” refers to the literary output of the Ashkenazi Hasidim.

⁴¹ In *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, Vol. 12, edited by Daniel Abrams and Avraham Elqayam (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2004), p. 47.

B. Dissertations & Sources in Print: Kabbalistic Commentaries

^{13th cent.} **R. Isaac the Blind of Provence** (d. 1235) wrote “the first systematic treatise of Kabbalah,” namely his *Commentary on SEFER YEZIRAH*. This commentary is fully analyzed and translated by Mark Brian Sendor in *THE EMERGENCE OF PROVENÇAL KABBALAH: RABBI ISAAC THE BLIND’S COMMENTARY ON SEFER YEZIRAH, Volumes I & II* (Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994). Volume I is an in-depth discussion of Rabbi Isaac the Blind’s commentary on SY and its milieu; Volume II is an annotated translation of the text.⁴² Sendor also offers a neat summary of commentaries on SY in his third chapter, “The Reception of *Sefer Yezirah*,” discussing Saadia, Dunash Ibn Tamim, Shabbetai Donnolo, Judah Halevi, and Judah ben Barzillai al-Barceloni.

Seth Lance Brody’s *HUMAN HANDS DWELL IN HEAVENLY HEIGHTS: WORSHIP & MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY KABBALAH* (Ph.D. dissertation, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1991) contains a substantial discussion of R. Isaac the Blind’s commentary on SY; see in particular pages 419-446.

In *MYSTICAL UNION, INDIVIDUALITY, AND INDIVIDUATION IN PROVENÇAL AND CATALONIAN KABBALAH* (Ph.D. dissertation, New York: New York University, 2001), Yechiel Shalom Goldberg analyzes key passages from R. Isaac the Blind’s *Commentary on SEFER YEZIRAH*, as well as passages from the commentary of Azriel of Gerona. Refer to Goldberg’s CHAPTER 6, “Azriel of Gerona: A Phenomenology of Individuality,” pages 442-546.

A passage within a “Commentary on the Tetragram” by **Asher ben David** (the son of Abraham ben David of Posquières and the nephew of Isaac the Blind) discusses the letters *alef* and *bet* as these are treated in SY. By way of a somewhat convoluted route, we have an English translation of this passage in Volume 6 of *THE KABBALISTIC LIBRARY OF GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA: Four Short Kabbalistic Treatises: Flavius Mithridates’ Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version*, edited by Saverio Campanini (Castiglione delle Stiviere: Fondazione Palazzo Bondoni Pastorio, 2019), pages 131-134.

Azriel of Gerona [116?-1238]: *Commentary on the Ten Sephiroth*, Footnotes, Preface and Translation from the Hebrew by Josef Blaha (Praha: Josef Blaha, 2015) presents the work of one of the most important early kabbalists. With Ezra ben Solomon, Azriel founded the Gerona circle, the most prolific group of kabbalists before the *Zohar*. Other prominent members of this circle were Nahmanides (Moses ben Nahman) and Jacob ben Sheshet.

Passages from Azriel’s commentary, referred to as “Explanation of the Sefirot,” appear in Joseph Dan (ed.)/Ronald Keiner (trans.), *The Early Kabbalah* (New York – Mahwah – Toronto: Paulist Press, 1986), pages 87-96; these are introduced in a couple of paragraphs on page 37. Also, as noted above, Christian D. Ginsburg presents the *Commentary on the Ten Sephiroth* of R. Azriel b. Menachem (= Azriel of Gerona), “following the lucid analysis of it as given by the erudite [Adolf] Jellinek, according to Spinoza’s form of Ethics” (*The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development and Literature*, pp. 177-179).

⁴² Sendor’s Volume Two can be viewed online at

<http://www.ma.huji.ac.il/~kazhdan/Shneider/Sendor,MarkBrian.Rabbi.Isaac.the.Blind.onSY.ch.1-2.pdf>

Influenced by previous writings on SY, in particular Eleazar of Worms' *Sodei Razaya*, § *Perush al Sefer Yetzirah*, “prophetic,” or “ecstatic,” kabbalist **Abraham Abulafia** (1240-c.1291) wrote three commentaries on SY: *Otzar Eden Ganuz* (1286), *Gan Na'ul* (1289), and an untitled commentary. The first two have been put into English:

- *Otzar Eden Ganuz – Concealed Treasure of Eden*, in four volumes (*i.e.*, Tome 1 of 4, Tome 2 of 4, etc.), translated by Alexandru Munteanu ([n.p.]: David Smith, LLC, 2016); edited by Fabrizio Del Tin ([n.p.]: eUniversity.pub, 2018).
- *Gan Naoul – Locked Garden*, edited by Fabrizio Del Tin ([n.p.]: eUniversity.pub, 2018).⁴³

The four volumes of *Otzar Eden Ganuz* offer more than the commentary on SY with which the text begins (in the first ten sections). Abulafia gets into discussions on all sorts of topics: the *sefirot*, letters and names and their permutations, aspects of the soul, messiah, lunar astrology, bits of *kabbalah ma'asit*, and accounts of his own life.

Harvey Hames writes,

In his *Otzar Eden Ganuz* (*Treasure of a Hidden Garden*), written in Messina in 1285-86, Abulafia mentioned that ‘When I was thirty-one years old, in Barcelona, I was awakened by God from my slumber, and I studied *Sefer Yetzirah* with its commentaries...’. This period of intense study in Barcelona can be dated to the early 1270’s and provided the impetus for Abulafia’s Kabbalistic writings. Abulafia listed twelve commentaries that he had studied, some of them philosophical in nature, such as those of Sa’adiah Gaon and Dunash ibn Tamim, and others Kabbalistical, such as those of Ezra, Azriel, Nahmanides, and his own teacher Baruch Togarmi. About the latter’s commentary, Abulafia wrote: ‘And my Rabbi and teacher, R. Baruch, his whole commentary [to *Sefer Yetzirah*] is all numerology, acrostics, letter combinations and conversions’.⁴⁴

With *Haye ha-Olam ha-Ba* (LIFE IN THE WORLD TO COME—1280), and “Abulafia’s great systematic manuals” *Imrei Shefer* (WORDS OF BEAUTY—1291)⁴⁵ and *Or ha-Shekel* (LIGHT OF THE INTELLECT—1282),⁴⁶ *Otzar Eden Ganuz* is one of the principal works cited in the major Abulafia studies of Moshe Idel and Elliot R. Wolfson.

An anonymous follower of Abulafia described his unnamed mentor’s techniques within a commentary on SY of sorts called *Shaare Tzedek* (GATES OF JUSTICE—1295), which is often erroneously attributed to Rabbi Shem Tov Sefardi de Leon due to notations in some manuscripts. Two of the four extant manuscripts of this work are unusual in that, along with giving details on methods to achieve prophetic experience, they offer autobiographical information.

⁴³ See Robert J. Sagerman’s discussion of *Gan Na’ul* in CHAPTER FIVE of *The Serpent Kills or the Serpent Gives Life: The Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia’s Response to Christianity* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2011), § “Yesod, the Saddiq, or Righteous One, as Alpha and Omega,” pages 307-334.

⁴⁴ *The Art of Conversion* (Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill, 2000), page 133.

⁴⁵ Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1941; rpt. London: Thames and Hudson, 1955), page 380, note 44.

⁴⁶ Avi Solomon describes *Imrei Shefer* as a “Jewish handbook of meditation” in which “Abulafia creatively combines ideas from Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Moreh Nevuchim*), the ancient *Book of Creation* (*Sefer Yetzira*) and Eleazar of Worms’ *Book of the Name* (*Sefer ha-Shem*) into an integrated method of concentrating on the Divine Name that opens the path to fulfilling the soul’s deepest spiritual longings.”—*Ohr ha-Sechel – Light of the Intellect*, integral edition in English and Hebrew, translated by Avi Solomon, Adam Shohom, and Sharron Shatil (Belize City: Providence University Inc., 2008), preface, pp. xii-xiii.

This brief work has been put into English: *Shaarei Tzedek – Gates of Righteousness*, by Shem Tov Sefardi, translated by Yaron Ever Hadani (Monfalcone: Providence University, 2006); reprint edited by Fabrizio Del Tin ([n.p.]: eUniversity.pub, 2018).

Gershom Scholem gives the nine-page autobiographical excerpt from *Shaare Tzedek* (in English) as the conclusion to his “Fourth Lecture,” which is on Abulafia, in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1941), pp. 147-155.⁴⁷

Schlomo Blickstein’s BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM: A STUDY OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL-QABBALISTIC WRITINGS OF JOSEPH GIQATILA (1248-c.1322) (Ph.D. dissertation, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1983) treats the philosophical-kabbalistic period in Gikatilla’s development, concentrating on his *Ginnat ’Egoz*, which is fundamentally a commentary on SY. This text stands in contrast with *Sha’are Orah*, GATES OF LIGHT, which Gikatilla—who was a student of Abulafia—produced in his later theosophical-kabbalistic period.

Gikatilla’s *Ginnat ’Egoz* has appeared as *HaShem Is One*, A translation and adaptation into English of the wondrous book *Ginat Egoz* of Our Master and Teacher, The Holy and Godly Tzaddik Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla, Peace be upon him, adapted into English by Rabbi Amiram Markel and Yehudah Shimon Markel ([n.p.]: The Neirot Foundation/Lulu.com), 4 volumes:

- Volume 1 (א), The Foundations (2020)
- Volume 2 (ב), The Letters of Creation, Part I (2020)
- Volume 3 (ג), The Letters of Creation, Part II (2020)
- Volume 4 (ד), The Vowels of Creation (2020)

Another work by Joseph Gikatilla, *Sefer ha-Niqqud* also, in large part, amounts to a commentary on SY. This text is available in English through a project under the general editorship of Giulio Busi, THE KABBALISTIC LIBRARY OF GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, VOLUME 4: *Yosef Gikatilla: The Book of Punctuation – Flavius Mithridates’ Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version*, edited with introduction and notes by Annett Martini (Torino: Nino Aragno Editore, 2010). *Sefer ha-Niqqud*, like *Ginnat ’Egoz*, is among Gikatilla’s early philosophical-kabbalistic works. It concerns the Hebrew vowels as “the guarantors of motion and thus the mainspring of the process of creation.” Find in particular Martini’s analysis in § RECEPTION OF THE SEFER YESIRAH WITHIN THE SEFER HA-NIQQUD, pages 83-97.

^{14th cent.} A brief commentary which makes reference to SY—as well as *Sefer ha-Bahir* and the *Zohar*—“likely composed in the early fourteenth century in Castile or Catalonia,” is given context, reproduced, and translated by Hartley Lachter, “An Anonymous Commentary on the Ten Sefirot: Text and Translation,” in *To Fix Torah in Their Heart: Essays on Biblical Interpretation and Jewish Studies in Honor of B. Barry Levy*, edited by Jaqueline S. du Toit, Jason Kalman, Hartley Lachter, and Vanessa R. Sasson (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2018), pages 331-372.

⁴⁷ Scholem’s translation of the autobiographical portion of *Shaare Tzedek* has been reproduced many times, e.g.,

- Dan, Joseph. *The Heart of the Fountain* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 130-138;
- Jacobs, Louis. *Jewish Mystical Testimonies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 63-71;
- Meltzer, David (ed.) *The Secret Garden* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 137-145.

The abstract to Israel Sandman's dissertation, *THE MAŠŌBĒB NATĪBŌT OF SAMUEL IBN MATUT ("MOTOT")*: INTRODUCTORY EXCURSUS, CRITICAL EDITION, AND TRANSLATION, VOLUMES 1-4 (Ph.D. dissertation, Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), states,

Samuel Ibn Matut lived in Guadalajara, Spain, where, in 1370, he authored *MaŠŌBĒB NaTĪBŌT*, a Hebrew work incorporating a commentary on *Sefer Yesira* (= 'The Book of Creation'), in which he harmonizes Græco-Arabic philosophy with Jewish mysticism, 'Kabbalah.' In his view, these two disciplines compliment [*sic*] each other both in man's quest for knowledge of the true nature of reality, as well as in man's resultant connection to divinity." (page xii)

VOLUME TWO (PART D) of Sandman's dissertation contains the annotated English translation of two recensions of the commentary on SY.

^{15th cent.} In **SHEM TOB IBN SHEM TOB'S** KABBALISTIC CRITIQUE OF JEWISH PHILOSOPHY IN THE "COMMENTARY ON THE SEFIROT": STUDY AND TEXT (Ph.D. dissertation, Waltham: Brandeis University, 1981), David S. Ariel writes that throughout his "Commentary on the Sefirot," Shem Tob ibn Shem Tob (1380-1440)

quotes from the anonymous neo-Pythagorean *Sefer Yeširah*, which probably dates from the late Tannaitic or early Amoraic period [\approx the first five centuries CE]. This text, which served as the literary basis for his notion of linguistic cosmogony, is interpreted by Shem Tob according to the letter-mysticism of the *Commentary on "Sefer Yeširah"* written by Isaac the Blind (*Sagi-Nahor*) (—Ariel, p. 23)

In the commentary, Shem Tob quotes from a range of kabbalistic writings (for example, *Sefer Ha-Bahir*, Nahmanides, *Sefer ha-Zohar*, writings from the *Iyyun* circle), showing his "predilection for the thirteenth century Spanish kabbalah" (—Ariel, p. 20).

^{16th cent.} The ten brief chapters of the first treatise (of thirty-two) in **Moses Cordovero's** voluminous *Pardes Rimmonim* (ORCHARD OF POMEGRANATES) comprise a commentary on SY titled "Ten and Not Nine." Cordovero immediately establishes the number of *sefirot* as ten and the idea of their being emanated *beli mah* (OUT OF NOTHING, or WITHOUT SUBSTANCE). He goes on to explain SY according to the doctrines of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, that is, with doctrines expressed in various sections of the *Zohar*.

Cordovero returns to SY in the twelfth treatise of *Pardes Rimmonim*, named "Paths," *i.e.*, the Thirty-Two Paths of Wisdom. Here, Cordovero draws on the SY commentary within *Sefer ha-Qanah*, which Cordovero attributes to Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi (called by Cordovero "Yosef ha-Arokh").⁴⁸

The first *mishna* of SY Chapter 2 (on the three types of letters: mothers, doubles, and singles) is taken up in the fourteenth treatise of *Pardes Rimmonim*, called "Existence," chapter 2, "Further Explanation of the *Sefirot*."

Within the twenty-first treatise of *Pardes Rimmonim*, "The Treatise of Particular [Sacred] Names," there is a five-chapter section (CHAPTERS 6-10) on the Twelve Boundaries, or Directions, [of space] and the Names associated with these. In CHAPTER 8, "Teli, Wheel [or Cycle] and Heart," Cordovero elaborates on SY 6:3 ("The *Teli* in the Universe is like a

⁴⁸ Kaplan attributes the commentary that Cordovero cites to Abraham ben David of Posquières, *Sefer Yetzirah*, page 334.

king...”⁴⁹). *Teli*, often referred to as “the Dragon,” is “the axis around which the universe revolves.”⁵⁰

- “Ten and Not Nine,” in *Pardes Rimonim: Orchard of Pomegranates, Parts 1-4*, translated by Elyakim Getz (Monfalcone: Providence University, 2007) ≈ *Pardes Rimonim – Orchard of Pomegranates*, Tome 1 of 12, edited by Fabrizio Del Tin ([n.p.]: eUniversity, 2018), pp. 3-49.
- “Paths,” in *Pardes Rimonim: Orchard of Pomegranates, Parts 9-12*, translated by Elyakim Getz ([Belize City]: Providence University, 2010) ≈ *Pardes Rimonim – Orchard of Pomegranates*, Tome 4 of 12, edited by Fabrizio Del Tin ([n.p.]: eUniversity, 2018), pp. 101-137.
- “Further Explanation of the *Sefirot*,” in *Pardes Rimonim: Orchard of Pomegranates*, Tome 5 of 12, translated by Elyakim Getz ([Belize City]: Providence University, 2010) = *Pardes Rimonim – Orchard of Pomegranates*, Tome 5 of 12, edited by Fabrizio Del Tin ([n.p.]: eUniversity, 2018), pp. 46-52.
- “*Teli* (fulcrum), Wheel and Heart,” in *Pardes Rimonim: Orchard of Pomegranates*, Tome 7 of 12, translated by Sharron Shatil ([n.p.]: David Smith LLC, 2016) / edited by Fabrizio Del Tin ([n.p.]: eUniversity, 2018), pp. 52-61.⁵¹

A commentary attributed to “**Chayim Vital**,” *Sefer Yetzirah – Book of Formation*, has been translated by Yair Alon ([n.p.]: David Smith, LLC, 2016), reprint edited by Fabrizio Del Tin ([n.p.]: eUniversity.pub, 2018). After noting the *four* versions of SY—“short, long, Saadia, and Gra”—the preface by Baal Even in the 2016 edition states,

In the 16th century, the Ari (Isaac Luria) redacted the text (Short Version) to harmonize it with the *Zohar*, and then in the 18th century, the Gra (Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna) further redacted this, now called the Gra Version. ... With the Lurianic commentaries, this edition became perhaps the longest and most complete, giving new glimpses into this ancient holy text.

The title page of the text-with-commentary reads

Book of Formation / Attributed to our Forefather Abraham – may the Peace be with him / According to the version of our Master and Rabbi, the Arizal / With explanations of our teacher and our Rabbi, the great light, The holy Gaon and divine kabbalist, Rabbi Chaim Vital of blessed memory / published for the first time out of an unique manuscript in the world

SY proper is dispersed through the pages of lengthy commentary. Two noticeable features of the commentary are the numerous references to the *Zohar* and the frequent mention of the kabbalistic *parzufim*, in particular *Zeir Anpin*, through whose realm the powers described are revealed.

In his lecture, *Sefer Yetzirah: The BeGeD KaPoReT of Chap. 4* (CASSETTE TAPE – Chicago: Yeshivat Benei N’vi’im, 1994), Ariel Bar Tzadok identifies this commentary as being part of the *Ktavim Chadashim l’Rabbi Chaim Vital* (NEW WRITINGS OF RABBI HAYYIM VITAL), which were not published (in Hebrew) until 1988 (Jerusalem).⁵²

⁴⁹ Kaplan’s translation, *Sefer Yetzirah*, page 244

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

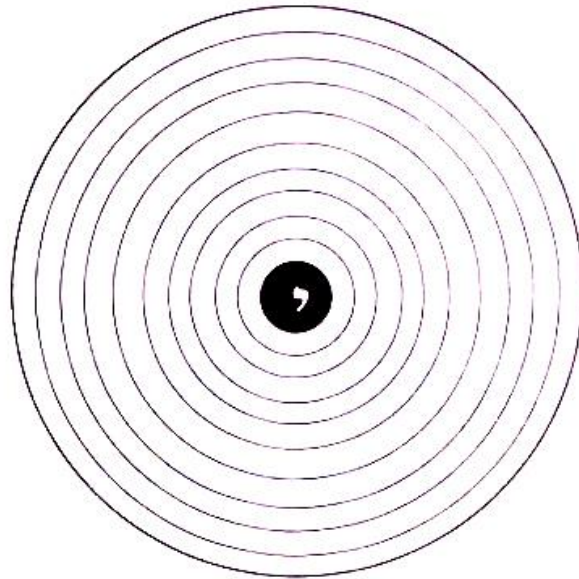
⁵¹ For details on this confusion of editions of *Pardes Rimonim*, see my “Notes on the Study of Later Kabbalah in English,” https://www.academia.edu/38974270/Notes_on_the_Study_of_Later_Kabbalah_in_English_The_Safed_Period_and_Lurianic_Kabbalah or <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/contributed/Karr/Biblios/lkie.pdf>, pp. 6-7.

⁵² The two principal portions of Hayyim Vital’s *Ktavim Chadashim* are a commentary on and re-presentation of *Brit Menucha* (COVENANT OF REST) and the suppressed fourth part of *Sha’arei Kedusha* (GATES OF HOLINESS). These sections have been published in English: *Ktavim Chadashim/New Writings: Brit Menucha – COVENANT OF REST* and

Bar Tzadok's lecture consists of his reading the Hebrew text of SY: CHAPTER 4 and Vital's commentary sentence by sentence, then translating these into English. Indeed, his translation of the text is generally clearer than that of Yair Alon. Generously intermixed are Bar Tzadok's further explanations, which are, in the main, edifying.

^{18th cent.} The commentary of **Gaon of Vilna** (Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, or the GRA) on SY is discussed in several places:

- Glotzer, Leonard R. *The Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism: The Book of Creation and Its Commentaries* (Northvale – London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1992); Glotzer draws on the Gaon's commentary to SY throughout. (See immediately below, § C.)
- Stern, Eliyahu. *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2013); the Gaon of Vilna's commentary on SY is discussed in connection with "divine mathematics" where Stern draws a comparison between the Gaon and Leibniz (pages 40-44).
- Wolfson, Elliot R. "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation," in *History of Religions*, 27 (University of Chicago, 1987), pp. 189-215; also in Wolfson's *Circle in the Square* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 29-48.
- _____. "From Sealed Book to Open Text: Time, Memory, and Narrativity in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, edited by Steven Kepnes (New York: University Press, 1996), pp. 145-178.



Shaarei Kedusha – GATES OF HOLINESS, translated by Yaron Ever Hadani and Elyakim Getz (Monfalcone: Providence University, 2006; republished, as edited by Fabrizio Del Tin, [n.p.]: eUniversity.pub, 2018).

C. Sources in Print & Kindle: Commentaries by Recent Authors

Glotzer, Leonard R. *The Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism: The Book of Creation and Its Commentaries* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1977 & 1992).

Glotzer's book gives SY one paragraph at a time (in English and Hebrew) followed by extensive commentary. Glotzer freely draws from rabbinic sources ranging from Saadia to Moses Cordovero, Hayyim Vital, and the Gaon of Vilna. This means that the commentary stays within the bounds of traditional Jewish *kabbalah*, even if straying from the explicit contents of SY.

Glotzer's translation and commentary are preceded by a brief introduction to *kabbalah* and followed by eight appendices covering particular points of doctrine related to SY, even if only by tradition: the *sefirot* in the shape of a man, the numerical values of the Hebrew letters, names of God, the thirty-two paths according to Raivad⁵³, the soul and the five faces, and two versions of the 231 gates.

Overshadowed by Kaplan's SY, which has been reprinted several times, Glotzer's *Fundamentals* has not received the attention that it deserves.

Kaplan, Aryeh. *Sefer Yetzirah. The Book of Creation in Theory & Practice* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1990, 1997, and subsequently).

Kaplan's SY is one of the most extensive works reviewed in this paper. We are given translations of *four* recensions: the short and long versions, the Saadia version, and the Gra version—or Gra-Ari version—being the edition produced by Rabbi Eliahu, Gaon of Vilna (GRA, from the initials of Gaon Rabbi Eliahu) according to the text of SY “refined” by Rabbi Isaac Luria (called the ARI, the Lion, from the initials of Eloki Rabbi Isaac, DIVINE RABBI ISAAC). It is the Gra-Ari version on which Kaplan bases his extensive commentary,⁵⁴ chosen because it is the most consonant with what Kaplan considers to be *the kabbalah*, namely, Lurianic *kabbalah*.⁵⁵

Kaplan offers a magnificent survey of commentaries and interpretations of SY, with all sources fully noted. The book provides a wealth of information and insight into the practical and speculative workings upon SY as no other book reviewed in this paper does. Here, we

⁵³ Also spelled *Rabad* or *Ravad*, Abraham ben David of Posquières (12th century), well-known critic of Maimonides.

⁵⁴ “[Kaplan] based his rendition primarily on Rabbi [Asher Zelig] Margolios’ [1890-1969] authoritative commentary.”
—Rabbi Eliyahu Shear of Chessed Ve’Emet,
“Yeshivat Shaar HaShamayim – a Genuine Kabbalistic Yeshivah in the Centre of Jerusalem,”
at <https://www.lovingkindness.co/2017/09/27/yeshivat-shaar-hashamayim/>

“Not all of Kaplan’s mathematical insights are original. He drew some of them from a little-known, unpublished commentary to SY, *Even Shoham*, written by Isaac Ibn Sayyah, who worked in Jerusalem and Damascus early in the 16th century, shortly before the Ari...”

—Tzvi Langermann, “‘Sefer Yesirah,’ the Story of a Text in Search of Commentary,”
in *Tablet Magazine* (Notebook Inc., 2017),
<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/243868/sefer-yesira-text-commentary>

⁵⁵ Note the unpublished paper by Gary M. Jaron, “Kaplan’s Error: 1884 *Sefer Yetzirah* of the GRA and the Fiction of the Natural Array of the GRA” (2017—accessed via Academia.edu, 2/11/2018),
https://www.academia.edu/34008579/Kaplan_s_Error_1884_Sefer_Yetzirah_of_the_GRA_and_The_fiction_of_the_Natural_Array_of_the_GRA_A_version_of_this_essay_is_found_in_my_book_The_Qabalah_Paths_of_Light

See also Jaron’s discussion of Kaplan’s SY in *Qabalah Gates of Light: The Occult Qabalah Reconstructed* (2nd ed., Charleston: CreateSpace, 2014—revised edition, 2019).

find *The Thirty-two Paths of Wisdom*, the 221 *Gates* according to Eleazer of Worms, the 231 *Gates* according to later Kabbalists, plus a thorough list of editions, translations and commentaries.⁵⁶

See Alan Brill's "Aryeh Kaplan's Quest for the Lost Jewish Traditions of Science, Psychology and Prophecy," in *Kabbalah in America: Ancient Lore in the New World*, edited by Brian Ogren (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2020), pages 211-232:

This paper explores Aryeh Kaplan's approach to Kabbalah, specifically the topics of mystical consciousness, meditation, God, and prophecy as presented in his *Sefer Yetzirah* commentary. ... Kaplan portrays God as a computer system and as an abstract principle similar to math and to Buddhist Nothingness. (—ABSTRACT, page 211)

Bar Tzadok, Ariel.⁵⁷ "Alien Communications through Telepathy and Channeling," § SEFER YETZIRAH – THE BOOK OF FORMATION, in *Panu Derekh – Prepare the Way*, Issue No 10. (Chicago: Yeshivat Benei N'vi'im, Oct./Nov.-Dec. 1995/Jan. 1996), pages 45-49.

_____. "The Holy *Sefer Yetzirah* – Original Translation and the Commentary," in *Panu Derekh – Prepare the Way* (Chicago: Yeshivat Benei N'vi'im):

- Chapter 1, Mishna 1, "Shoshana Tekhelet" – Issue 8 (June/July 1995), pages 25-30, with excerpts of Vital's commentary on SY and *Sha'arei Kedusha* (3,5)
- Chapter 1, Mishna 2, "Shoshana Tekhelet" – Issue 9, (August/September 1995), pages 19-24.
- Chapter 1, Mishna 4, "Oscillating Consciousness: Bridging the Gap between Rational Thought & Metaphysical Reality" – Issue 7 (April/May 1995), pages 21-26.
- Chapter 1, Mishna 5, "Shoshana Tekhelet" – Issue 25 (December 1998), pages 49-56.
- Chapter 1, Mishna 8, "Ten Sefirot of Nothingness..." – Issue 15 (August/ October 1996), page 34, excerpts of Vital's commentary on SY and Cordovero's *Ohr Yakar*.

In these *Panu Derekh* entries, each short Mishna of SY is followed by extensive commentary. Rabbi Bar Tzadok draws on the writings of Maimonides and notable kabbalists, such as Moses Cordovero and Hayyim Vital. Toward the end of the introduction to the commentary of SY 1:1 in Issue 8, Rabbi Bar Tzadok writes,

Sefer Yetzirah, when properly studied and applied, releases the Shekhina from Her prison within the unconscious of the human mind. The Shekhina, or as Shlomo HaMelekh called her, the *Shoshana (Rose) of Sharon*, is not a Rose as we know earthly flowers. The Shekhina is the source of life. She is the Malkut of Atzilut. She is the thread of Tekhelet in the Tzitzit, the color of the sea, the sky and the Throne of Glory. The Shekhina is thus the *Shoshana Tekhelet*, the Blue Rose. (— page 26)

⁵⁶ Kaplan's works do not fare well in the judgment of many academics. For example, Scholem describes Kaplan's translation and commentary, *The Bahir* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1979) as "worthless" (*Origins of the Kabbalah*, page 51, n. 1). See, however, Weiss' comments on Kaplan in "'Sefer Yesira,' the Story of a Text in Search of a Commentary." Kaplan's SY is, however, a favorite among *haredi* students—as is Leonard Glotzer's *Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism*.

⁵⁷ Find also KOSHER TORAH SCHOOL videos on YouTube where, as of 10/19/2021, Rabbi Bar Tzadok has posted 99 lessons on the SY: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCo4lhnF7mmfkWTSjM7qDHDg>. My thanks to Michael Alter for calling these videos to my attention.

Fisdell, Steven. *Practice of Kabbalah: Meditation in Judaism* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996; rpt. Albany [CA]: Katriel Press, 2014).

In the midst of this “how-to” book, one finds SY chapter 1, paragraphs 1-6 and 8, Hebrew and English, in a chapter entitled, “The *Sefirot* of the Formless: Imprinting as the Foundation of Creation.” From these SY passages, various meditations are derived: on the names of God listed in SY’s initial segment; on the interrelationship of the letter families (i.e., mothers, doubles, and simples) as introduced in SY’s second segment.

Finkel, Avraham Yaakov. *Kabbalah: Selections from Classic Kabbalistic Works from RAZIEL HAMALACH to the Present Day* (Southfield: Targum Press, 2002—distributed by Feldheim Publishers).

SY, “attributed to Avraham Avinu,” is the focus of CHAPTER 5 of this ranging anthology. After a two-page introduction, Finkel offers “Selections from *Sefer Yetzirah* with Commentary.” The selections are SY 1:1 (on the thirty-two paths of wisdom), 1:6 (on Infinity), 2:1 (on the “Three Groups of Letters”), 4:11 (on space, time, and the soul), 4:12 (on letters and words), and 6:4 (on God’s covenant with Abraham).

The commentary is drawn from the *Kuzari* of Yehudah HaLevi (CHAPTER 4, § 25), the *Pri Yitzchak* of Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik of Mohalov (Horodno: 1798), the SY commentary of the Vilna Gaon (known as the GRA, namely Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, 1720-1797), and Rabbi Moshe Botarel (1809-1879), along with Finkel’s own insights.

Worch, J. Hershy (aka Jeremy Hershel Worch). *Sefer Yetzira: Chronicles of Desire. A New Hebrew/English Translation & Commentary* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2010.)

“[A]rtist, musician, writer and rabbi,” Worch writes of himself

Everything I know about God was learned from an Italian biker covered in tattoos.
Everything I know of the mysteries was revealed by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.
Everything I know of Torah was acquired drinking the ‘Waters of Siloah’; absorbed while steeping myself in them for 30 years.

(§ ABOUT ME at http://community.livejournal.com/kabbalah_101/profile - DEFUNCT LINK, 01/02/2014: “Purged Account”)

Rabbi Worch kindly informed me⁵⁸ that “drinking the ‘Waters of Siloah’” alludes to studying *Mei Hashiloach*,⁵⁹ THE LIVING WATERS, a commentary on the Torah by Polish Hasid

⁵⁸ email—11/11/2011.

⁵⁹ See the translations by Betsalel Philip Edwards, *Living Waters: The Mei Shiloach*, by Mordechai Yosef (Northvale: Jason Aronson, Inc., 2001), and by Morris Faienstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven: The Teachings of Rabbi Mordechai Joseph Leiner of Izbica* (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1989/Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2005); and Worch’s own annotated translation, *Mei Hashiloach: An expanded Hebrew-English translation of the Hasidic commentary on the Torah by the Izbicy Rebbe Mordechai Yosef Leiner* (Melbourne: Stonehill Publishing, 2019).

Faienstein’s introduction opens,

“Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica was one of the most original thinkers in the history of Hasidism. His theology, based on the concept of determinism, is both unique and controversial.” (—page 3)

Moshe Idel’s preface to Faienstein notes that Mordecai Joseph was one of the major figures

“distancing from the kabbalistic axis in Hasidism in favor of a more individualistic approach” (—page xii).

Further see, Israel Koren, “‘Clarifications of Truth’ in Mordechai Joseph of Izbica’s *Mei ha-Shiloah*,” in *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, Volume 48 (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2021), pp. 197-257.

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbicy (1800-1854), who is described by Joseph Weiss as “the most radical of the Jewish mystics” in the Hasidic circles of his time.⁶⁰ *Mei Hashiloach* is quoted “about 35 times in my [Worch’s] commentary to Sefer Yetzira.”⁶¹

As to the approach this book takes to SY, Worch’s PREFACE states (—page *xiii*),

The basic idea is simply this: In the beginning was God’s desire for us. That’s all there is. Desire. Desire is the stuff of which the universe is made. Sefer Yetzira describes the process.

Worch’s lengthy commentary is rich with quoted material from a wide range of rabbinic, kabbalistic, and hasidic sources.

CHAPTER ONE, Our Patriarch Abraham’s Chapter

Abraham “disqualified the original act of Creation, retroactively bringing about a fresh Genesis born of divine compassion without constriction.”—page *xiv*.

CHAPTER TWO, Our Matriarch Sarah’s Chapter

“*Aleph* represents Sarah at the level of Breath, *Mem* represents Miriam at the level of Water, *Shin* represents Eve at the level of Fire.”—page 136.

CHAPTER THREE, Rabbi Akiba’s Chapter

“The greatest mystery of Judaism is that of Rabbi Akiba....”—page 182.

CHAPTER FOUR, The Seven Women’s Chapter

Rebecca, Jocheved, Ruth, Tamar, Leah, Rachel, and Esther: “Each maps a new high-road in the worship of God...”—page *xv*.

CHAPTER FIVE, The Twelve Tribes’ Chapter

“Each tribe has a unique and individual predilection for worshipping God, studying Torah and serving the Jewish People”—page *xv*.

CHAPTER SIX, Rebbe R. Elimelech’s Chapter

All is “proven by the three trustworthy witnesses”: WORLD, YEAR, and SOUL. Rebbe R. Elimelech = Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum of Lyzensk (or Lizhensk) (1717-1787). R. Elimelech’s *Tzetzl Koton* (from “most versions of the book *Noam Elimelech*”) is cited—and interpreted—throughout this chapter. *Tzetzl Koton* teaches of “the ideal of imagined and visualized martyrdom,” that is, profound selflessness, which Abraham, Akiva, and Elimelech embodied—pages 446 *et* 450.

Horowitz, Daniel M. *A Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism Reader* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2016)

Chapter 6, “*Ma’aseh Bereshit, Sefer Yetzirah, and Sefer ha-Bahir: The Roots of Kabbalah,*” gives excerpts of the first chapter of SY, along with the concluding paragraph of the work, “When our father Abraham came...,” all wrapped in commentary and annotations.

It is refreshing to see a book on Jewish mysticism and *kabbalah* that does *not* commence with SY or *Book Bahir*. Rather, Horowitz places his treatment of SY after a presentation of biblical, apocalyptic, rabbinic, and *hekhalot* passages.

On the dynasty “inaugurated” by Rabbi Mordecai Joseph, refer to Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica & Radzin Hasidism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). In this book, Magid’s real focus is Mordecai Joseph’s grandson, Rabbi Gershon Henokh Lainer of Radzin.

⁶⁰ “A Late Jewish Utopia of Religious Freedom,” in *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, by Joseph Weiss, edited by David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press/The Littman Library, 1985), page 211. Weiss’s article (pages 209-248) is “concerned with the *Saddik* Mordecai Joseph Leiner.”

⁶¹ Worch, email—11/11/2011.

Thiele, Shlomo Weiss. *Perplexed by Ten Sefirot: Approaching Final Revelation* ([n.p.]: CreateSpace, 2017).

“Jewish Tradition has always kept the knowledge of how and why our world was created as it was a Sacred secret, with only a hint of this knowledge passed on through the symbol of the Star of David.” (—back cover)

Drawing on SY throughout, particularly in his final chapter, “The Sefer Yetzirah,” Shlomo Weiss “uses his more than thirty years of study in Bible symbolism as the catalyst for his dedication to recovering the lost meaning behind the Star of David, reclaiming it as the paradigm of Torah thought and analysis. He also uses his intense studies to uncover the importance of a philosophical relationship with our Maker and to bring enlightenment to the modern Jew.” (—back cover)

Hammer, Rabbi Jill. *Return to the Place: The Magic, Meditation, and Mystery of Sefer Yetzirah* (Ben Yehuda Press, 2020).

“*Sefer Yetzirah*’s fundamental claim is that God creates the world through the Hebrew letters. God engraves each letter as a channel for a particular energy: the energy of water, say, or of breath, or of the left eye. Moving through these letters and their energies, the book describes, step by careful step, the diverse mystery that is creation.

“But the book does not only offer a story. *Sefer Yetzirah* directly addresses its readers, expecting them to become active participants in the book’s imaginal incantations, channeling God’s creative energy into the world. How do we do this? By sounding the letters, by imagining the images, we tune ourselves to the energies of creation. We become the network of channels through which divine energy flows into the world.”

(—Introduction, page vii)

Part IV: WESTERN ESOTERIC ∅ “NEW AGE” TREATMENTS OF SY

The Western Esoteric Tradition, or Western Mystery Tradition, claims SY as an ancient foundation text. This tradition is epitomized by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and exponents of what is called “Hermetic Kabbalah,” or “Qabalah.”

PART I A of the present paper is littered with translations and interpretations by representatives of this tradition: Wm. W. Westcott, Papus, Peter Davidson, Knut Stenring, Manly Palmer Hall, M. Doreal, all within the early wave of efforts to put SY into English. One could make strong case for relocating these works to the selection of books outlined here. Listed immediately below are books from the esoteric tradition which were published or reprinted in the period corresponding to our translation survey, PART I B, that is, after 1971.

Frater Achad [Charles Stansfield Jones]. *The Anatomy of the Body of God, Being the Supreme Revelation of Cosmic Consciousness* (Chicago: The Collegium Ad Spiritum Sanctum, 1925; rpt. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969 ∅ 1973).

Chapter III of *The Anatomy of the Body of God* commences Achad’s commentary on SY. After quoting the first four stanzas of “Dr. Westcott’s translation,” Achad states,

It is well to notice that the ancient Qabalists made a particular point of the fact that there are TEN Sephiroth, neither more nor less. If we examine the formation of the “Tree of Life” in the following Figure (XIII), we shall understand why they were so careful to make this plan.

Beginning with quotes from *The Canon*,⁶² Achad provides a broad rationale for the geometric structure of the Tree of Life, noting that its proportions correspond to those of the Vesica Pisces, a figure which “possessed an unbound influence on the details of sacred architecture; and it constituted the great and enduring secret of our ancient brethren.” (—Weiser edition, 1969, page 23, Achad’s italics)

Achad goes on to treat the twenty-two paths and their correspondence to the Hebrew letters and the *tarot*. This discussion, which continues into Chapters IV through VI, draws the symbolism of SY together with that of Aleister Crowley’s *Book of the Law*.⁶³

Chapter V explains Achad’s “wonderful Plan” for a progression of proportionally growing and shrinking Trees of Life and, using the paths’ association with the *tarot* trumps and astrology, for his reversing the progression of the paths from the order taught by the Golden Dawn.⁶⁴

⁶² William Stirling, *The Canon. An Exposition of the Pagan Mystery Perpetuated in the Cabala as the Rule of All the Arts* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1897). Achad refers to *The Canon* as anonymous.

⁶³ *The Book of the Law, or Liber AL vel Legis*, was “received” by Aleister Crowley in 1904 from a praternatural intelligence named Aiwass. It is believed by followers of the doctrine of *Thelema* (Greek for *will*), founded by Crowley, that this book announced and initiated a new æon. Many works discuss the reception of *The Book of the Law*, e.g., Lawrence Sutin’s *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), CHAPTER 4, “The Birth of a New Aeon (1905-05).”

⁶⁴ For more on “turning the paths upside-down,” see Achad’s *Q.B.L. or The Bride’s Reception, Being a Short Qabbalistic Treatise on the Tree of Life* (Chicago: 1922; rpt. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969), “The Appendices to Chapters Three and Four,” and *The Egyptian Revival, or The Ever-coming Son in the Light of Tarot* (Chicago: The Collegium Ad Spiritum Sanctum, 1923; rpt. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1969).

Achad's SY commentary forms the doctrinal basis for various prismatic representations of the Tree of Life, which eventually become "multiplied and crystallized into a Macrocosmic Snow Flake, or Six-fold Star." (*—ibid.*, page 57)⁶⁵

Poncé, Charles. *Kabbalah. An Introduction and Illumination for the World Today* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Press, 1973).

Poncé's sections on SY (pp. 38-47 and 105-110) may well be the strongest parts of his book, for elsewhere there are numerous errors and omissions. Even here, Poncé is thoroughly dependent on Western occult sources.

The second segment on SY (pages 105-110) resides in a discussion of the *sefirot*; here we find the first twelve paragraphs of SY in English. Poncé attributes the translation to Westcott. Though it is similar, it is not the same as the edition used for review above, namely, the 2nd; perhaps Poncé used Westcott's 1st edition.

Finally (pages 157-64), we endure *The Thirty-two Paths* yet again; Poncé calls his presentation a "compilation of the translation of Westcott, Waite, and Stenring."

Poncé notes,

There are four modern translations of the *Sefer Yetsirah* in English: W. Wynn Westcott, Phineas Mordell, Knut Stenring (under the title *The Book of Formation*) & Rabbi A. Joseph. The only work that is at all easily available is the translation by Westcott. It includes a translation of *The Thirty-two Paths*, but those familiar with the original suggest that it is inferior to the other translations of the *Sefer Yetsirah*. The absence of any adequate edition of the *Sefer Yetsirah* in English is typical of the state of affairs of Jewish mystical texts in general. While the texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Tantracism, Shintoism and Sufism are readily available in cheap paper editions, the major texts of Jewish mysticism are mostly untranslated and unpublished.

(*Kabbalah*, page 284: "Additional notes to footnote 3, page 39")

The Stenring and Rabbi A[kiva ben] Joseph translations mentioned in Poncé's note are, in fact, one and the same. Further, Stenring's "tabulation" of *The 32 Paths* is already based on Waite and Westcott. Poncé missed Kalisch, M. P. Hall, and a handful of other translators of SY altogether.

The note quoted above is typical of Poncé: He'll make a pretty good point, only to undermine it with a stunning gaffe. Poncé, more generally, is yet another example of an uncritical pop writer dependent on unreliable translators and commentators.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ See the latter-day inversion and development of this *snowflake* into a "modular system capable of infinite expansion and contraction but in a way very different from that devised by Achad" (p. 5): Llee Heflin 777 404, *The Diamonds of ChAOS – An Interim Report* (Cincinnati: Black Moon Archives, 1982). Heflin's commentary ties his innovations to "the epistemology of Quabalistic/Crowlian Magick." (p. 27) Heflin also wrote *The Island Dialogues: Liber ALAL* (San Francisco: Level Press, 1973), which is considered by some a "leaked" XI^o O.T.O. document dictated by the Secret Chiefs.

⁶⁶ An even more egregious example is Migene González-Wippler, *A Kabbalah for the Modern World: How God Created the Universe* (Huntington: Julian Press, 1974; rpt. Woodbury [MN]: Llewellyn Publications, 2006).

Good popular books on *kabbalah* do exist. Two examples: J. H. Laenen, *Jewish Mysticism: An Introduction*, translated by David E. Orton [= *Joodse Mystick. Een inleidin*, 1998] (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), and Neil Asher Silberman, *Heavenly Powers: Unraveling the Secret History of the Kabbalah* (New York: Gosset/Putnam, 1998).

Robert Saks' comment on Poncé:

...his treatment of German Hasidism is superficial and misses the point on such a basic matter as its concept of the words of prayers as keys, through *gematria*, to the unity of all creation. ... [I]t is hard to excuse his claim that Moses Cordovero wrote "Lechah Dodi," his use of *pereks* as the plural of *perek*, or his description of Luria as being primarily interested in the practical side of Kabbalah. ... [I]t is impossible to ignore his claim that the Hasidic movement believed that "study was worthless."

(“Jewish Mysticism It Ain’t,” in *Judaism* 23: 4, 1974)

Suares, Carlo. *The Sepher Yetsira, Including the Original Astrology according to the Qabala and Its Zodiac* (French original: Editions du Mont-Blanc, 1968; English translation: Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1976.)

His book on SY is one in a series treating what Suares considers “the three great cabalistic works... [namely] Genesis, The Song of Songs and Sepher Yetsira.” Suares does not believe *kabbalah* to be mysticism, stating, “Qabala is a science and ... *The Sepher Yetsira* is a precise and accurate treatise on the structure of cosmic energy, written in a hidden code.” Suares’ thesis rests on the belief that each Hebrew letter “denotes not only a ‘letter’, but also a proof, a symbol and even a miracle revealing its forgotten ontological origin.”

In a chapter which is repeated in all three books of this series, Suares explains the letter-code as he has discovered, or *re*-discovered, it. All this, of course, puts something of a spin on Suares’ handling of SY. Each short paragraph of SY is followed by a lengthy explanation, so the text itself is spread in small pieces over some sixty pages. The translation is mannered in a way that serves Suares’ thesis, so it is not always very clear on its own. However, he does include the Hebrew text next to his translation.

See also § Ψ in *Tree : 2 — צִירָה*, edited by David Meltzer (Santa Barbara: Christopher Books/Painted Cave Books, Summer 1971), pp. 82-163, which includes introductory notes by David Meltzer and the following items from Suares: “The Code,” “The Cipher of Genesis,” “Notes on Biology Functioning with Letters of the Hebrew Alphabet,” and “Sepher Yetsira” (full translation and notes, some of which are reproduced in Suares’ handwriting).

Townley, Kevin. *The Cube of Space: Container of Creation* (Boulder: Archive Press, 1993).

Dr. Paul Foster Case (1884-1954) is quoted: “In the study of the Qabalah there is no more important glyph than the Cube of Space with perhaps the exception of the Tree of Life.”⁶⁷

The book summary of *The Cube of Space* at Treadwell’s notes that Townley’s work “comes from the school of Western Mysteries of the Builders of the Adytum: an important work for those studying in the B.O.T.A tradition.” B.O.T.A. was founded by Case in 1922; prior to that, Case, who is most noted for his books on *tarot*, was a ranking member of the Golden Dawn.

Robert C. Stein, practitioner of and writer on *Thelema*, summarizes Townley’s *Cube of Space*:

Townley presents an analysis of the Cube of Space based on the *Sepher Yetzirah*. His cube orients from the center, with three perpendicular axes extending from it, and twelve edges.

⁶⁷ Case’s quote appears in the review section for Townley’s *Cube of Space* at Amazon:

<https://www.amazon.com/Cube-Space-Container-Creation/dp/0963521187>

They are the origin, six directions (from three mother letters extending outward from the origin), and the 12 signs of the zodiac.⁶⁸

Townley elaborates five pairs of opposites (\approx dimensions). The *sephiroth of belimah* implies the ten have no end: beginning and end, good and evil, height and depth of the abyss, depth of east and west, depth of north and south. ... Each dimension has two contrasting ends or directions, which may later be related to the front and back of the T[ree of] L[ife], or positive and negative existence.⁶⁹

Bain, Alan. *Sepher Yetzirah of Book of Formation together with The 32 Paths of Wisdom*, Being part of *The Keys to Kabbalah / Illustrated by Various [17] Diagrams Including The Kabbalist Ladder, The Temple at Luxor, and Many Cathedral and Abbey Churches* (Bristol: privately printed, [ca. 1995])—clip-bound photocopies.

Sepher Yetzirah and *The 32 Paths of Wisdom* are presented “in a relatively simple and meaningful way so as to aid the student who wishes to investigate matters further.” Bain uses Westcott’s *Sepher Yetzirah: The Book of Formation and the Thirty-two Paths of Wisdom*, along with A. E. Waite’s paraphrases of SY (*The Holy Kabbalah*, pp. 98-103) and Waite’s version of the *32 Paths* (*ibid.*, pp. 213-219).

For those who wish to pursue Bain’s work further, refer to *The Keys to Kabbalah: Parts One through Three* (Bristol: privately printed, [ca. 1995])—online at [The Keys to Kaballah \(tripod.com\)](http://TheKeysToKaballah.tripod.com)—which also treats the correspondence between *Sepher Yetzirah* and the *32 Paths*.

Morello, Bettina. *Timeless Kingdom: A Study in Son of Man, Science and Sefer Yetzirah* (Bloomington – Central Milton Keynes: AuthorHouse, 2006)

Morello mixes superstrings, M-Theory, and “quantum mechanics” with concepts like the “unique cherub” and *tzimtzum*.

[Morello] is pioneering a new way of reading mysterious ancient [e.g., New Testament and apocalyptic] texts. ... [Morello] has steeped herself in the ancient texts and allows them to control her. ... There are remarkable similarities between the discoveries of modern physicists and cosmologists and the revelations of the ancient seers...

(—preface by Margaret Barker, page xix)

Reiss, Dr. Fred. *Ancient Secrets of Creation: Sepher Yetzira, The Book that Started Kabbalah, Revealed* (New York – Lincoln – Shanghai: iUniverse, Inc., 2007)—revised edition: *Sepher Yetzirah: The Book that Started Kabbalah* (CreateSpace, 2018).

Reiss sets up his translation/commentary with chapters summarizing “Greek Philosophies on Creation” and “Jewish Theologies of Creation.” The new translation is supplemented by lengthy explanations, complete with diagrams and tables. With its somewhat Rosicrucian tone, Reiss’ “reinterpretation,” has been written more for the “thinker” or “seeker” than for the academic. Alas, his historical and conceptual summaries are often misleading and frustratingly lacking in nuance, e.g., his statement, “The knowledge that we call *Kabbalah* is based on the doctrine and teachings of Isaac Luria, who was born in Jerusalem during the 16th

⁶⁸ Robert C. Stein, *The Mystery of the Letters and the Tree of Life: Interrelationships among Symbols in the Æon of the Child* (York Beach: Black Jackal Press, 2012), page 36. Stein refers to SY frequently, tying its symbolism to that within Aleister Crowley’s *Book of the Law, Liber Trigrammaton*, and *Atus of Tahuti*.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, page 31.

century” (—*Ancient Secrets...*, page 87). Reiss does go on to mention the *Zohar* and Moses de Leon.

In “An Excerpt from an Interview with the Author of *Ancient Secrets of Creation: Sepher Yetzira, the Book that Started Kabbalah, Revealed*,”⁷⁰ Dr. Reiss begins

To understand why God chose the aleph, mem, and sheen to be the mother letters of creation, we have to know three things. The first is that the author of Sepher Yetzira understood that the scroll of the Five Books of Moses, called in Hebrew, the Torah, was the blueprint for the world because it contains the story of creation. The second is that Pythagoras found that the harmony of music lays in the ratio of the whole numbers less than four. Among the ratios, $\frac{3}{2}$ is the ratio of the perfect fifth, the most concordant sound in music.

The third is the very strange statement of the Jewish sages who said that the Torah is written with black fire on white fire. This statement is interpreted to mean that the Torah contains both open and secret knowledge. The actual scroll of the Torah is written in straight lines of black ink letters separated by white spaces, the parchment, itself. The black letters are clearly visible, so the black is the open knowledge, while the white spaces show nothing and represent the hidden wisdom.

Nagy, Andras. *Sepher Yetzirah, or the Book of Creation: Understanding the Gra Tree and Kabbalah*, translated by William Wynn Westcott (Ancient Wisdom Publications/[n.p.]: Andras Nagy/Amazon Digital Services, 2010—print and KINDLE).

While descriptions of the book on the back cover and at Amazon.com indicate a Jewish orientation, sources referred to in Nagy’s introduction (e.g., Eliphaz Levi, S. L. M. Mathers, Anna Kingsford, Franz Bardon, Rawn Clark) and the use of Westcott’s version of SY suggest otherwise.

Benton, Christopher P. *The Book of the Assembler: A Retranslation and Revisioning of the Sefer Yetzirah, the Ancient Book of Formation* [The Kabbalah Series 2] ([n.p.]: Amazon Digital Services/Stone of Foundation, 2011—KINDLE ONLY).

Among Benton’s “First Words” on the subject are these:

[SY] is a fine document, but, nonetheless, it can still be improved. Consequently, there are one or two places where I have made what some will see as radical changes. Most notably in the fifth section of the text, I replace the enumeration of body parts ... with a listing of the twelve acupuncture meridians.

Tenen Stan. *The Alphabet That Changed the World: How Genesis Preserves a Science of Consciousness in Geometry and Gesture* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2011).

Tenen offers a full summary of the “Meru Hypothesis,” which touches on a proposed *general theory* as to nature of SY’s contents.

The Meru Project is based on 30 years of research by Stan Tenen into the origin and nature of the Hebrew alphabet, and the mathematical structure underlying the sequence of letters of the Hebrew text of Genesis.⁷¹

⁷⁰ On-line at “Books by Fred Reiss,” <http://www.fredreissbooks.com/page6.html> [DEFUNCT LINK—3/17/2022].
Now see [Fred Reiss Books](#).

⁷¹ The Meru Foundation website, at <http://www.meru.org/>

The back cover of *The Alphabet...* describes Tenen's thesis:

Tenen examines the Hebrew text of Genesis and shows how each letter is both concept and gesture, with the form of the gesture matching the function of the concept, revealing the implicit relationship between the physical world of function and the conscious world of the concept.

"An Introduction to the Meru Project" at the Meru Foundation website opens,

We have discovered an extraordinary and unexpected geometric metaphor in the letter sequence of B'reshit (the Hebrew text of Genesis), a text which underlies and is held in common by the spiritual traditions of the ancient world. This metaphor models embryonic growth and self-organization. It applies to all whole systems, including those as seemingly diverse as meditational practices and the mathematics fundamental to physics and cosmology.

Appendix B of *The Alphabet...*, "Sefer Yetzirah and the Meru Hypothesis," gives an interpretation of SY 1:2.

The first line [of SY] consists of fourteen letters. Usually, the last five letters are grouped together in a single word which would literally mean "without what," and which is usually translated "nothingness."⁷² But if one instead groups together the last eight letters, they are an explicit list of letters used to "unlock" the woven structure of the first verse of B'reshit.⁷³

All of this is based on the assumption that "Genesis has an embedded structure: there are recognizable patterns in the distribution of its letters,"⁷⁴ and these patterns contain *meaning* which "can specify physical and psychological states simultaneously."⁷⁵

DuQuette, Lon Milo. *The Chicken Qabalah of Rabbi Lamed Ben Clifford* (York Beach: Weiser Books, 2001), pages 25-36; this segment reprinted as *The Sepher Yetzirah of Rabbi Lamed Ben Clifford* (ebook edition, San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2012.)

The prolific DuQuette in the guise of R. Lamed Ben Clifford brings a conversational approach to the "bigger Qabalistic picture." The gist of DuQuette's interest is summarized in the introduction:

There are three important features that make the Sepher Yetzirah particularly attractive to the lazy and pretentious. First of all (and most importantly) it is very short and relatively easy to understand. Second, it introduces us to the concept of the 10 Sephiroth, or Emanations that emerge from the primal unity. In later Qabalistic literature the concept of the 10 Sephiroth develops into the Tree of Life, a very helpful schematic, especially for Chicken Qabalists. (—*The Chicken Qabalah*, page 25)

⁷² This is the mysterious *beli mah* discussed above, page 5, note 14.

⁷³ *The Alphabet...*, page 16, note 24.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, page 105.

⁷⁵ Meru website, "An Introduction to the Meru Project," ¶ 3.

Stone, Karl. “The Sexual Ritual of the Sepher Yetzirah,” in *The Moonchild of Yesod: A Grimoire of Occult Hyperchemistry or Typhonian⁷⁶ Sex Magick* ([n.p.]: The Imaginary Book Co. Ltd., 2012), pp. 190-196; also see pp. 184-186, *et passim*.

THE SEPHER *Yetzirah* is a sexual working which is divided into three stages. Each stage represents a process by which the Divine Logos (cosmic consciousness) emanates magickal radiation into manifestation. The stages are as follows; The TRIADIC WORKING, The HEPTADIC WORKING and lastly, The DODECADIC WORKING. The use of this system enables the Adept to manifest the Magickal Will according to the law of qabalistic principles.

...

The elements which overshadow and power the sexual ritual of the *Sepher Yetzirah* are the Triad of the three mother letters; *Aleph*, *Mem* and *Shin*. The candidate is required to search, cultivate, meditate and nurture an understanding of what these three qualitative aspects of cosmic consciousness mean, and to observe how these principles work within the structure of magickal operations. (—pp. 190-191)

Ninan, Prof. M. M[amen]. *A Glance through the Book of Creations: Sefer Yetzira of Father Abraham* (Normal: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

Here we have yet another copy of Westcott’s SY with an introduction composed of an inconsistent array of material pilfered from all-too-familiar sources.

Wall, Amy. *Sefer Yetzirah: Magic and Mysticism* ([n.p.]: Deep Mystery Publishing, 2017).

The *Sefer Yetzirah* ... serves as the very foundation stone of the Western Mystery Tradition: much of what is considered gospel by students of Tarot, magic and Kabbalah is derived from one or another particular translation of the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

Sefer Yetzirah: Magic and Mysticism explores the deep mysteries of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. By comparing translations of different versions of the text, the mystical meaning hidden in each verse is revealed. Suggested meditations and exercises are provided to aid the spiritual student. (—back cover)

Douglas, Patia Jo; and Broun De Poher, R[oger] C. *The Code in the Raw: A Discussion of Simulation Theory through a unique interpretation of the Sefer Yetzirah & The Simulation Tarot* ([n.p.]: PoDo Enterprises/CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018).

A couple of paragraphs from the preface suggest the vantage point of *The Code in the Raw*:

I am not Jewish but I have a deep respect for the Jewish people and have been interested in Jewish mysticism since the early 90’s. I personally believe the teachings of Master Ishua (Jesus) to be a hybrid of Jewish mysticism and Druidic thought.

I have read Kabbalah books that have run the gamut between traditional Jewish interpretations to flat out Pagan speculation. I have found the basics presented in the *Sepher Yetzirah* to be a wonderful core and a perfect framework for my spiritual, magyco-metaphysical world view.

⁷⁶ “Typhonian” = the school of the prolific occult writer Kenneth Grant (1924-2011), self-proclaimed heir to Aleister Crowley who founded the Typhonian Ordo Templi Orientis, later called the Typhonian Order. See Peter Levanda, *The Dark Lord: H. P. Lovecraft, Kenneth Grant, and the Typhonian Tradition in Magic* (Lake Worth: Ibis Press, 2013), and Dave Evans, *The History of British Magick after Crowley* ([n.p.]: Hidden Publishing, 2007), pp. 284-344.

The back of the book asks,

Is it possible that the entirety of our experience and our very existence is a computer simulation? Is it possible that “God” is the Prime Operator, Programmer and Prime Architect of a massive software composition that is the Universe as we “Avatars” perceive it? If this is true, is it then also possible that somewhere hidden within this simulation are the lessons and tools necessary to understand our place within the code?

Their answer:

This book presents you with two possible tools.

The first is a centuries old deck of cards that some say is just a game but others say is a tool for enlightenment. The Tarot is full of archetypal symbols whose origins are shrouded by the mists of time. Yet, these symbols have stirred the emotions and the imagination of users since their creation.

The second is a millennia old text called the Sepher Yetzirah. This is the foundational text for the Jewish mystical system called the Kabbalah.

We invite you to join us on our journey to decipher the simulations code and use it to our own betterment!

The Amazon “More about the author” blurb begins,

We freely admit it, we like to stir the pot! We like to get people, of all ages, a little agitated and get them thinking outside of their comfortable box.

Frater Akiba. *The Quantum Qabalah and the Secret Cycles of Time – A Final Restoration of the Sepher Yetzirah*, VOLUME ONE ([independently published]: 2018).

The list of “Occult Source Material” gives a good indication of the flavor of Frater Akiba’s thorough (346-page) restoration. The names shown include Paul Foster Case, H. P. Blavatsky, Dion Fortune, Gareth Knight, J. Ralston Skinner, Aleister Crowley, S. L. M. Mathers, Papus, Eliphas Levi, Jacob Böhme, and Emanuel Swedenborg—some of whom we have encountered within the current bibliography. Frater Akiba states (pp. 11-12),

The Quantum Qabalah is an approach of thought which seeks to restore certain elementary conditions of the Unitary volumetric reasoning. Its *restoration* includes three primary modus operandi: (1) the Zodiac, (2) the Cube of Space, and (3) the Tree of Life. As these three are embodied in the Tarot, and I believe in the Giza Pyramids, we will also include them in our discussion.

Westcott’s version of SY and the 32 *Paths of Wisdom*, all “attributed to Ravi-Akiba Ben-Joseph,” are included.

Rankine, David. *Sepher Yetzirah Magic: Magic and Meditations derived from the first and greatest Qabalistic Work* (West Yorkshire: Hadean Press, 2020).

David Rankine is a well-established author of books within the Western esoteric stream,⁷⁷ a few of which treat *qabalah* and *kabbalah*: (with Sorita d'Este) *Practical Qabalah Magic* (London: Avalonia, 2009) and *The Cosmic Shekhinah* (London: Avalonia, 2010), and Rankine's own *Climbing the Tree of Life: A Manual of Practical Magickal Qabalah* (1st ed. London: Avalonia, 2005; 2nd expanded edition, 2022), to which *Sepher Yetzirah Magic* could serve as a chapter or appendix.

While the general approach and tone of *Sepher Yetzirah Magic* are Western esoteric, Rankine does not rely on the curriculum of what Stephen Skinner has called "the G[olden] D[awn], Crowley, Dion Fortune axis."⁷⁸ Instead, he turns his sights back to *kabbalistic* (that is, Jewish) sources, while not failing to mention more antique influences (e.g., Sanskrit, and Greco-Egyptian).

The core of *Sepher Yetzirah Magic* is a letter-by-letter account of the concepts attached to the Hebrew alphabet.

⁷⁷ Rankine has contributed to Golden Hoard Press' SOURCEWORKS OF CEREMONIAL MAGIC series: with Stephen Skinner, *A Cunning Man's Grimoire* (2018), *The Goetia of Dr Rudd* (2012), *The Grimoire of St. Cyprian* (2010), *The Keys to the Gateway of Magic* (2010), *Practical Angel Magic of Dr John Dee's Enochian Tables* (2010), and *Key of Solomon* (2008).

Rankine's other titles include *The Complete Grimoire of Pope Honorius* (London: Avalonia, 2013), *The Grimoire of Arthur Gauntlet* (London: Avalonia, 2011), *The Book of Treasure Spirits* (London: Avalonia, 2009), and other works in the grimoire tradition.

⁷⁸ Stephen Skinner's foreword to the first edition (page 9) to Rankine's *Climbing the Tree of Life*.

APPENDIX

(from the 1992 version of the current paper, slightly expanded & revised)

For anyone looking to SY for a definitive set of attributions/correspondences among the Hebrew letters, paths on the *sefirotic* tree, astrological features, etc., there may be some confusion and frustration.

To demonstrate the problem, example sets of attributions, those of the double letters according to various editions of SY, are tabulated below. Three arrangements (I, II, and III) show the attributions in the SY texts at hand, a clear majority of which agree with COLUMN I. Interestingly, no text of SY among those consulted agrees with column IV, the Golden Dawn scheme—not even that of Golden Dawn founder W. W. Westcott.

	I	II	III	IV
ב	♃	☾	☉	♀
ג	♃	♂	☾	☾
ד	♂	☉	♂	♀
ה	☉	♀	♀	♃
ו	♀	♀	♃	♂
ז	♀	♃	♀	☉
ח	☾	♃	♃	♃

Texts with the arrangement in COLUMN I:

- Donnolo (10th cent.)
- Doria/Lenowitz (1976)
- Friedman (1977)
- Gruenwald (1971)
- Ha Levi (11th cent.)
- Hayman: MSS A & C (2004)
- Papus (1892)
- Soares (1976)
- Work of the Chariot (1971)
- *Zohar* (13th cent.)

Texts with the arrangement in COLUMN II:

- M. P. Hall (1928)
- Kalisch (1877)
- Westcott (1887/1893)
- ARI/GRA (Kaplan – 1990)⁷⁹

Texts with the arrangement in COLUMN III:

- Stenring (1923)

Texts with the arrangement in COLUMN IV:

- Golden Dawn (late 19th century)

⁷⁹ Also GRA, according to Epstein (2018).

