Notes on Editions of *Sefer Yetzirah* in English

Don Karr

Sefer Yetzirah (BOOK OF FORMATION, hereafter SY) is the oldest known speculative treatise in Hebrew. There are three prime recensions of SY: short, long, and 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.[1] 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.[2] It 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, 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."[2]

---

[1] 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). Aryeh Kaplan adds a fourth: the GRA/ARI version; see below, p. 13.

[2] 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) in the session titled "*Sefer Yesirah*: Mystical and Philosophical Intertexts."

See Wasserstrom's articles, (1) "Sefer Yesira and Early Islam: A Reappraisal" (in *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, vol. 3 no. 1: 1993) and (2) "Further Thoughts on the Origins of *Sefer yesirah*," (in *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, NO. 2 (2002), edited by Gad Fruedenthal, Indiana University Press, at http://inscribe.iupress.org/loi/ale). See also Wasserstrom's comments in *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, pages 463-466).

Within a substantial (42-page) paper,[3] 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).

Most versions of SY have six chapters containing brief, even laconic, statements, similar in tone to the *hekhalot* texts. 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."[4] Gruenwald was commenting on the state of editions in Hebrew, the inadequacies of which would inevitably be reflected—if not compounded—in any translation.

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*,[5] which is the most thorough scholarly treatment of SY 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 Peter Schäfer's treatment of *hekhalot* texts in *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*.[6]

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 are discussed in PART 1: TRANSLATIONS. These are dealt with in chronological order, starting with the first, that of Isadore Kalisch from 1877, and concluding with the most recent excerpts in Daniel M. Horowitz' book from JPS, *A Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism Reader* (2016).

---

[3] "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 (Winter 2007), pages 101-142—online at http://www.jsri.ro/.

[4] In the introduction to "Preliminary Critical Edition...."

[5] Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004.

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

PART 1: TRANSLATIONS

Kalisch, Isadore. *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; more recently [late 'eighties] reprinted by Heptangle [Gillette] in an overpriced *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—see below, page 13).

Kalisch translated what appears to be the long version.[7] 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).

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 upon a rather terse version of SY (which, for instance, omits the "predominations" of the letters from chapter 4).

---

[7] The short version, thought by some to be more 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 11) ends Mishna *Aleph* (*i.e.* paragraph 1), "He creates His world in three forms, In letter, in number, in sound."

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 (pp. 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 YOAH, 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.[8]

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 an 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.[9]

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."

---

[8] 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* (p. 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, p. 103), Ronit Meroz develops the idea that "the *sefirot* are themselves the *belimah*."

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

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 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.[10]

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.)

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

[10] It is puzzling that, out of all the possible translations, David Meltzer chose Mordell's quirky rendering to represent SY in *The Secret Garden*. Alas, this is not the only doubtful aspect of this well-circulated anthology. See below, page 8: "**Raskin**."

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.

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 Kabalistic 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.[11]

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*, introduction, p. iv)

[11] Waite's version of *The Thirty-two Paths* can be found in *The Holy Kabbalah*, pp. 213-219.

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 translation: pp. 114-16)

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

Doreal, Dr. M. *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 photocopied 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.

With Doreal, we come to the end of a cycle of fairly frequent productions of SY in English. Between Doreal's translation and the next one reviewed here (that of Work of the Chariot, 1971), there is a lapse of thirty years. Falling between is a translation from a book which I have seen only in pictures on the Internet:

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

This work is listed in

- Aryeh Kaplan's *Sefer Yetzirah* [see below] under "Translations/English"
- Spector's bibliography, where it is listed twice:
  (1) under "Introductory Surveys," C7
  (2) under "The History of Kabbalah, F. Merkabah Mysticism and Jewish Gnosticism," F17.

Kabbalah in Word and Image... came up for sale on ebay (November 2004); the display page provided numerous images of the cover, text, and illustrations, which, while skillfully rendered, are rather melodramatic and adolescent.

A passage from what is almost certainly this book is used to introduce the section on Abraham Abulafia in Meltzer's *Secret Garden*, pp. 117-119, where the book is called *Kabbalah, Book of Creation, the Zohar*, but the date is the same.

The ebay images confirm the title as given by Kaplan and Spector.

The more recent cycle of SY translations—that of the last few decades—begins with an 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; also at www.workof thechariot.com. The 2nd edition includes two appendices: 1. Diagrams; 2. *Shuo Kua/I Ching* with diagrams; plus SY in Hebrew and Gezer/Sinatic, and a depiction of the Gan Eden alphabet.)

This version has been neither well known nor, until recently, generally available [see the website shown above]. It is included here in part because it is the version of SY on which David Blumenthal (*Understanding Jewish Mysticism* [1978], pp. 13-46) based his translation in no small way. While Blumenthal made revisions and additions here and there, he 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. Goldschmit...and *Sefer Yetsira*, anon. ed. (Jerusalem: 1964)." 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 1, paragraph 1). Further, Blumenthal used Work of the Chariot's format in the setting of lines and phrases.

Blumenthal 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.[12]

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:

[12] 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)

> 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 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: pp. 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 poet" 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 *khaqaq* ("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*, p. 271—see below) 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 and Counter-History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979: page 89)

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.

(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 *Utruisque Cosmi*.

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.[13]

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

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 collection 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.)[14]

Hayman's article offers a summary/analysis of SY, along with a translation of "the earliest manuscript of the Long Recension" and an appendix on "The Structure of the

[13] A certain type of purist might fault Friedman and others for choosing the word "creation" for *yezirah*. According to some conventions, "creation" is reserved for *briah*, and "formation" is applied to *yezirah*, even as "emanation" is used for *azilut* and "making" or "action" for *asiah*.

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

Sefer Yetsira." Alas, this fine piece 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 eventual critical edition and translation of SY (*Sefer Yesira* [2004]—see below, page 15).

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).

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.

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

Kaplan's SY is the most extensive of the works reviewed thus far. We are given *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 Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac). It is the Gra-Ari version on which Kaplan bases his extensive commentary—chosen because it is the most consonant with what Kaplan considers to be *the* Kabbalah, namely, Lurianic Kabbalah.

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 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.[15]

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

Glotzer's book gives SY one paragraph at a time (in English and Hebrew), each followed by an extended commentary. Glotzer freely draws from rabbinic sources ranging from Saadia to Moses Cordovero, Hayim Vital, and the Gaon of Vilna. This means that the commentary stays within the bounds of traditional Jewish Kabbalah, even if straying from the stated contents of SY. Glotzer's translation and extended 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 Raivad[16], 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.

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 segments translated.

Dan Cohn-Sherbok's *Jewish Mysticism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995: pp. 60-66) gives slightly condensed renditions of chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5. These expand slightly 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."

In the midst of **Steven Fisdel**'s "how-to" book, *Practice of Kabbalah: Meditation in Judaism* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 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

[15] Kaplan's works do not fare well in the judgment of academics. For example, Scholem refers to Kaplan's translation and commentary, *The Bahir* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1979) as "worthless" (*Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 51, n. 1). Kaplan's SY is, however, a favorite among *Haredi* students—as is Leonard Glotzer's *Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism*.

[16] Also spelled *Rabad* or *Ravad*, Abraham ben David of Posquiêres (12th century), well-known critic of Maimonides.

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.

SY, "attributed to Avraham Avinu," is the focus of CHAPTER 5 in the anthology by **Avraham Yaakov Finkel**, *Kabbalah: Selections from Classic Kabbalistic Works from RAZIEL HAMALACH to the Present Day* (Southfield: Targum Press, 2002—distributed by Feldheim Publishers). 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.

The next addition to our list is in many regards the *ultimate*: **A. Peter Hayman**, *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 commentaries[17] 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 critical edition and its translation follow specific manuscript versions[18]: short, long, and Sa'adian, presented side by side, with extensive notes and commentary.

Hayman's *Sefer Yesira*... is the first of a promised 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 SY[19]; and the third, "a commentary on the content of the book" (page v).

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

Reiss sets up his translation/commentary with chapters summarizing "Greek Philosophies on Creation" and "Jewish Theologies of Creation." The new translation

---

[17] The commentaries of Saadya Gaon, Dunash Ibn Tamim, Shabbetai Donnolo, and Judah ben Barzillai.
On these commentaries, see Raphael Jospe's "Early Philosophical Commentaries on the *Sefer Yesirah*: Some Comments," in *Revue des etudes juives*, 149 (Paris: 1990).

[18] 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.

[19] See above, page 12, for articles which are sure to be included in such a collection.

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 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*,"[20] 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, $^{3}/_{2}$ 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 while spaces show nothing and represent the hidden wisdom.

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)

Worch, J. Hershy. *Sefer Yetzira: Chronicles of Desire. A New Hebrew/English Translation & Commentary* (Lanham [MD]: 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 me[21] that "drinking the 'Waters of Siloah'" alludes to studying *Mei Hashiloach*,[22] THE LIVING WATERS, a commentary on the Torah by

[20] On-line at http://www.fredreissbooks.com/page6.html.

Polish Hasid 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.[23] *Mei Hashiloach* is quoted "about 35 times in my [Worch's] commentary to Sefer Yetzira."[24]

As to the approach this book takes to SY, Worch's PREFACE states,

> 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. (—page *xiii*)

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 *Tzetl Koton* (from "most versions of the book *Noam Elimelech*") is cited—and interpreted—throughout this chapter. *Tzetl Koton* teaches of "the ideal of imagined and visualized martyrdom," that is, profound selflessness, which Abraham, Akiva, and Elimelech embodied.—pages 446 & 450.

Collé, E. and Collé, H. *Sefer Yetzirah/The Book of Formation: The Seven in One English-Hebrew Edition* (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*.

---

[21] Email—11/11/2011.

[22] See the translation/edition by Betsalel Philip Edwards, *Living Waters: The Mei Shiloach*, by Mordechai Yosef (Northvale: Jason Aronson, Inc., 2001), and Morris Faierstein, *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).

[23] "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.

[24] Worch, email—11/11/2011.

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.[25]

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...," wrapped in commentary and annotations.

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

[25] On the basis of the dates given by Collé and Collé, we might speculate that
- the two 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 1874 was published in Jerusalem, with GRA commentary.

PART 2: STUDIES ON *SEFER YEZIRAH*

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*. Liepzig: 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:

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)

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)

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)

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).

This title 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 to provide bibliographic details, yet in the second section he lists editions and translations. 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 later Zoharic Kabbalah. Waite then moves into a discussion of Azriel, 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* (pp. 213-219).

Waite is 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)

The 1906 edition of *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York – London: Funk & Wagnalls Company – vol. XII, pp. 602-8)[26] contains the article "Sefer Yezirah" by Louis Ginzberg.

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.

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

Ponce's sections on SY may well be the strongest parts of his book, for elsewhere there are numerous errors and omissions. The first segment on SY (pp. 100-111) resides in a discussion of the *sefirot*; here we find the first twelve paragraphs of SY in English. Ponce 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 Ponce used Westcott's 1st edition.) Finally (pp. 157-64), we endure *The Thirty-two Paths* yet again; Ponce calls his presentation a "compilation of the translation of Westcott, Waite, and Stenring."

Comments:

Ponce:

> 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*, p. 284: "Additional notes to footnote 3, page 39")[27]

Robert Saks [on Ponce]:

> ...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. ...it is hard to excuse his claim that Moses Cordovero wrote "Lechah Dodi," his use of *pereks* as the plural of

[26] Reprint edition: New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1964.

[27] The Stenring and Rabbi A[kiva ben] Joseph translations mentioned in Ponce's note are, in fact, one and the same. Further, Stenring's "tabulation" of *The 32 Paths* is already based on Waite and Westcott. Ponce missed Kalisch altogether.

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

> *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)

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.

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 Anfange 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 origins de la Kabbale*, Paris: 1966.]

In the longest section on SY in *Origins of the Kabbalah* (pp. 24-35), Scholem discusses the dating of SY, then summarizes the fundamental concepts with attention to the language used (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 (pp. 46-8), its influence on the German Hasidim (pp. 97-8), its development as a manual for creating a *golem* (pp. 102-3), its links with *merkabah* mysticism (117-8), and notes on the commentaries on SY of Joseph ben Shalom (p. 224), Isaac the Blind (pp. 257-8), and Nahmanides (pp. 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, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). Regarding Idel's and Scholem's conclusions regarding the roots of the *golem* tradition, see 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).

Joseph Dan devoted a chapter to SY in his valuable book, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: M[inistry] O[f] D[efense] 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).

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

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

Stan Tenen's book, *The Alphabet That Changed the World: How Genesis Preserves a Science of Consciousness in Geometry and Gesture* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2011), offers a full summary of the "Meru Hypothesis," which may not fall into line with our other entries, but it does touch 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.[28]

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

[28] The Meru Foundation website, at http://www.meru.org/

> 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, "*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."[29] 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.[30]

All of this is based on the assumption that "Genesis has an embedded structure: there are recognizable patterns in the distribution of its letters,"[31] and these patterns contain *meaning* which "can specify physical and psychological states simultaneously."[32]

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 in 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.[33] 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.

---

[29] This is the mysterious *beli mah* discussed above in note 8.

[30] *The Alphabet*..., page 16, note 24.

[31] *Ibid.*, page 105.

[32] Meru website, "An Introduction to the Meru Project," ¶ 3.

[33] The diagrams which adorn kabbalistic texts and commentaries have not, for the most part, been the focus of study. Some exceptions are

- Busi, Giulio. *Qabbalah Visiva*. Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 2005. This work treats well over 100 kabbalistic diagrams from Italian manuscript collections.
- 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'alchemie, la kabbale et Guillaume Posetel* offerts, à l'occasion de son 90e anniversaire, à François Secret par ses élèves et amis. Genève: Librarie 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 hau moyen age: 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.

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.
- Finkel, Asher. "The Exegetic Elements of the Cosmological Work, *Sepher Yesirah*," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies*, edited by R. A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).
- 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).
- 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).
- Langermann, Y. Tzvi. Introduction to "A New Redaction of *Sefer Yesira*?" in *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 2, edited by Daniel Abrams and Abraham Elqayam (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1997).
- 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 (Winter 2007), pages 101-142—online at http://www.jsri.ro/
- Segol, Marla. "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).
- Shulman, David. "Is There an Indian Connection to the *Sefer yesirah*?" in *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, Number 2: 2002, edited by Gad Fruedenthal, Indiana University Press, at http://inscribe.iupress.org/loi/ale.
- Wasserstrom, Steven M. "Further Thoughts on the Origins of *Sefer yesirah*," in *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, Number 2: 2002, edited by Gad Fruedenthal, Indiana University Press, at http://inscribe.iupress.org/loi/ale.
- _____. "*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. (Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH, 1993).
- 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).

Part 3: COMMENTARIES ON *SEFER YEZIRAH*

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

Sources in Print

The first book-length study to be published 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).

Sa'adiah Gaon's commentary on SY, *Tafsir Kitab al-mubadi*, referred to so often, has still not been published English.[34] 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 are posted on the Internet by Scott Thompson and Dominique Marson at www.wbenjamin.org/saadia.html.[35]

---

[34] Ithamar Gruenwald writes, "The two oldest commentaries of *Sefer Yezirah* are those of Yitzhak Ha-Yisra'eli (died ca. 952) and Sa`adya Ga'on (died 942). Sa`adya 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." (note of 01/28/2013).

[35] At the same site there is another page, "SEFER YETZIRAH *Biography*" compiled by Scott Thompson, at http://www.wbenjamin.org/biblio_yetzirah.html, 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.

Sa'adiah's most important work has been translated a couple of times:

- Rosenblatt, Alexander (trans). *The Book of Opinions and Beliefs* [YALE JUDAICA SERIES, Volume 1] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948).
- Altmann, Alexander (trans). *Saadya Gaon: The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).
  This translation was reprinted in *Three Jewish Philosophers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960).

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).

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/.

Judah Halevi included a commentary on SY in his renowned *Kuzari*: Chapter 4, § 25. The *Kuzari* has been translated a number of times. Note that some editions do not include the SY section (for example, Isaak Heinemann's translation in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, mentioned above). Translations which include the SY commentary are

- Hartwig Hirschfeld's 1905 rendition, *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel* (reprinted New York: Schocken Books, 1964).
- N. Daniel Korobkin, *The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith* (Northvale – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998; this edition 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).

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 view is Tzahi Weiss, "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).

Chapter 4, titled "The *Sefer Yetzira*," of 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.

Chapter 12 discusses "The Commentaries on the *Sefer Yetzira* by Elhanan ben Yakar." Dan points out (p. 37) that SY served as the main source of mystical speculation for *Sefer ha-Bahir*,[36] the Iyyun circle,[37] the Provence school as headed by Rabbi Isaac the Blind, and the Ashkenazi Hasidim.[38]

Note also Klaus Herrmann, "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 Elior and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

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. 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 Barzilai 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 substantive discussion of R. Isaac the Blind's commentary on SY; see in particular pp. 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.

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

---

[36] 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).

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

[38] For references on the Ashkenazi Hasidim, see the source list in my "Notes on the Study of Early Kabbalah in English," §5, *Hasidei Ashkenaz*.

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 by a couple of paragraphs on page 37.

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-qabbalistic" period in Gikatilla's development, concentrating on his *Ginnat 'Egoz*, which is fundamentally a commentary on SY. This text stands in contrast with Gikatilla's later "theosophical-qabbalistic" period, which produced *Sha'are Orah*, GATES OF LIGHT.

Another one of Joseph Gikatilla's works, *Sefer ha-Niqqud*, also amounts, in part, 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 Giqatilla: 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." Note in particular Martini's § RECEPTION OF THE *SEFER YESIRAH* WITHIN THE *SEFER HA-NIQQUD*, pages 83-97.

Israel Sandman's abstract of THE *MAŠŌBḒḆ NATĪBŌṮ* 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 *MaŠŌBḒḆ NaTĪBŌṮ*, 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 running commentary on SY.

Refer to Shlomo Pines, "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), pp. 63-142.

The commentary of Gaon of Vilna (Elijah ben Solomon Zalman) on SY is discussed in several places:

- 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's Elliot R. "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).