

Sefer Yeşira and Early Islam: A Reappraisal

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A book impenetrable by contingency,
a mechanism of infinite purpose,
of infallible variations,
of revelations lying in wait,
of superimposed light . . .

Borges

The short, cryptic *Book of Creation*, *Sefer Yeşira*, (SY) entered Jewish academic life, if you will, with full tenure. From obscurity to the sustained close attention of several major Jewish thinkers of the tenth century, this work seemed to come out of nowhere. This apparently instant eminence, and the absence of any historical background on this treatise, has reduced most scholars searching for the origins of SY to look for isolated motifs in various works of late antiquity. This largely fruitless procedure has resulted neither in a substantial consensus nor in anything near a precise dating.*

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The *status quaestionis* is given by Nehemiah Allony in “The Time of Composition of Sefer Yetzira,” [Heb.] pp. mem-aleph to nun in *Temirin* 2 (1981) and Nicolas Séd, “le Sefer Yeşira, L’Édition critique, le texte primitif, la grammaire et la métaphysique,” *Revue des études juives* CXXXII (1973) pp. 513–528. Also Vajda, “Recherches récentes sur l’ésoterisme juif,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 192 (1977) pp. 42–45; and Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, 1987) pp. 24–35. These surveys include a review of the available texts. Notice may also be taken of *Sefer Yetzirah. The Book of Creation, In Theory and Practice* by Aryeh Kaplan (York Beach, Maine, 1990): while not academic in orientation, this work does translate four versions of SY, and provides perhaps the fullest available overview in English of the traditional commentaries on SY.

A review of the early philosophical commentaries now is provided by Raphael Jospe, “Early Philosophical Commentaries on the Sefer Yetzirah: Some Comments” *Revue des études juives* CXLIX (1990) 369–415.

Jorge Luis Borges, “A Vindication of the Cabala”, *Borges. A Reader*, (eds.) E.R. Monegal, A. Reid (New York, 1981) 22–24, at 24.

In the present essay I shall reappraise the arguments that SY may have been redacted in the form received by its first commentators sometime in the ninth century. This hypothesis was set forth, most notably, by the Islamicists Louis Massignon, Paul Kraus and Henry Corbin.¹ Other scholars who specialized in the early Islamicate period, especially Georges Vajda and Nehemia Allony, further modified this theory.² I will begin my discussion with a review of the Kraus hypothesis. Next, I shall present circumstantial evidence demonstrating that in the early ninth century we can find forms of cosmic semiotics and gnostic encyclopedism closely related to those found in SY. In addition, I will try to show that this historical context does satisfy adequately the form, content and function of this strange text.

By a review of context, form, content and structure, then, I hope to do more than present circumstantial evidence; to list yet another litany of selected parallels; or to engage in one more comparative motif-analysis. In so doing, however, I shall neither venture a close reading of SY as such, nor of the early commentaries on it. I intend to be neither conclusive nor comprehensive. My modest goal herein is (for what I believe to be the first time) to review and reappraise the historical evidence pertaining to the Islamicate setting for the earliest known versions of SY. This historical period must be reconsidered in studies of SY, if we are to account for the unique form, content, function of the extant redactions of SY.

Part I: The Kraus hypothesis

The Immot Alef/Mem/Shin

It was Louis Massignon who first noticed that the “Mother-letters” (Heb. *immot*; Ara. *ummahāt*) of the third chapter of SY — *alef*, *mem* and *shin* —

¹ Louis Massignon, *Salman Pāk et les prémices spirituelles de l’Islam iranien* (Publications de la Société des Études Iraniennes et de l’art persan, # 7) Tours, 1934, p. 394, subsequently amplified in his “La Philosophie orientale d’Ibn Sinā et son alphabet philosophique”, *Mémorial Avicenne, Institut français d’archéologie orientale* IV (1952) 1–17, at p. 12. Kraus followed Massignon’s suggestion (which was published later than the work of Kraus), and provided the most important parallels to date (see below, esp. nn. 19–20). This notion also was fully approved by Henry Corbin: *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (New York, 1960, repr. Dallas, 1980) p. 276. Gershom Scholem, likewise, was impressed with Kraus’ findings: see *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1941, repr. 1972), where he acknowledges that Kraus had adduced “some remarkable similarities between the Book of Creation and early Islamic gnosticism . . .” (p. 368 n. 128). But Scholem does not make the argument for priority made by Massignon and Corbin.

² Georges Vajda, “Les lettres et les sons de la langue arabe d’après Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī”, *Arabica* 8 (1961): 113–130; “Le commentaire kairouanais sur le ‘Livre de la Création’”, *Revue des études juives* (105) 132–40; 107 (1946/47) 99–156; 110 (1949/50) 67–92; 112 (1953) 5–33; 119 (1961) 159–161; Nehemia Allony, “The Time of Composition” (see first note above).