The Exegetic Elements of the Cosmosophical Work, Sepher Yesira

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Themes, Topics and Typologies

Mystics of the Book

Edited by R.A. Herrera

Peter Lang
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Edited and with an Introduction by
R.A. Herrera
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The Exegetical Elements of the Cosmosophical Work, Sepher Yeşirah

Asher Finkel

Introduction

In the contemporary scholarship, the cosmosophic work, Sepher Yeşirah, is enigmatic, in view of its particular language, style and content. Although it is ascribed to the Tannaitic circle of yorde merkahah, the nature of the work and its dating remain in question. Does it reflect a Jewish gnostic tradition that incorporated neo-Platonic and Pythagorian ideas, magical and cosmogonic elements of Greek and even Persian origins? However, this diminutive work enjoyed a prominent place in the proto-mystical tradition of the Geonim and it generated reflective commentaries in Rabbinic and Kabbalistic circles, beginning with Saadia Gaon and his contemporaries. The book itself was transmitted in two versions, a fate shared by other significant writings. Sepher Yeşirah influenced the cosmogonic view of the philosophical works of Saadia and Yehudah Halevi. It became the ground text for early mystical Midrash of the "Bahir" and all other major works of Kabbalah cite it. Sepher Yeşirah indeed influenced the early Hasidic circles at the turn of the millennium. These circles developed neo-prophetic, mystical and meditative systems that were claimed to be rooted in earlier esoteric tradition.

Contemporary scholarship tends to reject their claim of early roots for the mystical tradition, even though a marked difference exists between exoteric and esoteric transmission. Historically, Sepher Yeşirah already belonged to the earlier period of the Geonim, but it was viewed as an ancient manual of esoteric wisdom. It is to be traced to the first believer, Abraham, and indeed a pseudonymous ascription marks visionary tradition. The epilogue of Sepher Yeşirah refers to Abraham, in both versions. Although it enjoyed a Midrashic expansion in the longer version, the exegetical elements about Abraham existed in the end of the work, as found in the original version of Saadia’s commentary. Furthermore, its final statement on Abra-
hamic dual covenant appears also at the beginning of the work, as will be shown. No wonder that Sepher Yesirah enjoys a common tradition with the Tannaitic “ma’aseh merkabah” (the work of the chariot) and “ma’aseh bereshith” (the work of creation), while echoing the liturgical formulary of numinous hymns. Its formative historical setting belongs to the early centuries, the period of Jewish apocalypticism.

**Exegetical-Cosmosophic Elements**

Exegetical elements of cosmosophic tradition appear in Sepher Yesirah. They are linked with liturgical phraseology of the numinous type, that is replete with God’s names and doxological terms. It exhibits, therefore, affinity with the early apocalyptic tradition of theosophy and cosmosophy. The numinous liturgy was associated with angelic hymns, that were marked by repetitive and antiphonal forms of address to God, as the sublime Wholly Other. In early Rabbinic tradition it was connected with the Isaianic *Trishagion* or *Kedushah* service, with its doxological refrains. Such numinous liturgy was known during the latter part of the Second Temple period, as is attested by the writings of Qumran and early Christianity. In Tannaitic times, this liturgy was inserted in the Dawn-prayer of “Yoṣer ‘or”, displaying correspondence to the angelic praise in Heaven, at that experienced time. The purpose was to relate the numinous to the cosmogonic awareness of morning light in prayer experience. This basileomorphic vision of God in the upper expanse of the cosmos is depicted in the apocalyptic writing of the latter part of the Second Temple period.4

Apocalypse does not only offer a disclosure of the End-Time, the historiosophical eschatology. It is, moreover, a disclosure of protology, relating to the works of creation and God’s appearance on the Chariot. Such a vision resulted from a meditative reflection and pietistic discipline. Its meditative point of departure was the Holy Scripture, as the case was with Daniel reflecting on Jeremiah’s words concerning the seventy years of Babylonian exile (Dan 9:2). In protological disclosure, the points of departure are the account of creation (Gen 1) and the account of the chariot (Ezek 1). Such visions necessitate angelic guidance to interpret the esoteric meanings of letters, numbers and configurations, that are captured in God’s words. This is the experience described in Daniel and in Enoch. Thus, angelic guidance marks the proto-mystical writings of Hekhaloth, that depict a mystical ascent of the Tannaim (the yorde merkabah). Only in the company of a heavenly guide can the seeker gaze into the works of creation. This is stipulated in Mishnah Ḥagigah 2,1 and it is
corroborated by Origen in his introduction to the Commentary on Canticles.⁶

Apparently Sepher Yeṣirah emerged out of such exegetical cosmosophical reflection, that the early esoteric circles of Provence Ḥasidim recalled in view of their transmitted tradition of meditative practice. This is described in the "Rokeah" by R. Eleazar of Worms,⁷ a disciple of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Ḥasid. He also authored a commentary to Sepher Yeṣirah and an exegetical guide to mystical interpretation of the Scriptures and prayers.⁸ His account is corroborated by the Nasi Rabbi Yehudah of Barcelona, who was highly acquainted with the Geonic tradition. He also wrote a commentary to Sepher Yeṣirah. Both cite earlier Geonic sources and variants. They write⁹ that Sepher Yeṣirah evolved out of the meditative reflection by Abraham, the first believer. They conclude with the following account: "When Abraham was all alone, meditating on the works of creation but could not comprehend, God appeared to him and told him to seek out a haver (a guiding partner), namely Shem, the son of Noah. Together you will gaze and understand and at the end of three years of reflection, you will be able to "sketch" (laṣur) the cosmos".

In view of Sepher Yeṣirah, God creates the world through the word in three distinct ways, that are captured in the threefold reading of sepher, sephor and sippur. These represent the graphic configuration of letters, their numerological value and their spoken form. Rabbi Eleazar of Worms offers the mystical keys of exegesis (sode raze), as they open the gates of esoteric knowledge in the reflection of God's words of the Torah. According to his view, the meditative exercises that are defined in Sepher Yeṣirah of "da', hašov and șor", were practiced by Abraham (as described in the above legend), with regard to the configuration, number and spoken forms of letters.

"Sepher Yeṣirah" is also designated by Nasi Rabbi Yehudah of Barcelona as "Sepher de Otiot of Abraham". This designation recalls a similar ascription to an early medieval work of proto-mystical tradition, that is known as "Sepher Otioth de Rabbi Akiba".¹⁰ This work focuses also on the graphic configuration, the numerological value and speech forms of letters, incorporating exegetic-cosmosophical materials. For this common tradition affected the mystical approach of early Ḥasidim, that gave rise to letter mysticism. The theurgic use of letters, as related to the divine employment of Hebrew alphabet in creation and its corresponding use in building the microcosmic Tabernacle, was known in early Rabbinic times.

The exegetical understanding of a mystical view of letters is connected with multifaceted seeing and hearing the consonantal
words, that offer various vocalization, combinations, transpositions and permutations. One word and its relatedness to other words produce many sparks for visionary understanding. Sepher Yeṣirah opens with a similar reading of the Biblical story of creation. The last letter of the Pentateuch is “lamed” and the first letter of Genesis is “beth”. Together they produce the numerical value of 32. The reading of the opening verse, then becomes “lb r’s yibr” which means “through 32 (paths) of wisdom was it created.” This is the opening line of Sepher Yeṣirah, which reflects then on the next word of the Biblical text. The word is “Elohim”, or God representing creative power, which is employed 32 times in the account of creation. Thus Sepher Yeṣirah relates that there are 32 creative forces. These are represented in the Biblical text by ten references to speech, vayô’mer (He spoke), and twenty-two references to becoming “yehi-vayehi” (let it become; and it became). Such an exegetical understanding provides the key to Sepher Yeṣirah. The cosmos is issued by ten “sephirot” and it formed by twenty-two letters. Thus, the nine “sephirot” that generate from the Holy Spirit produce the configurations “mr” and “yhw”. The first configuration represents the acronym ’es, Mayim and Ruah (fire, water and air), the primordial forces of God’s speech. The second configuration represents six permutations of the graphic letters “yhw”, that denote the six vectors of becoming in space. The synchronic reading of the words “vayô’mer” and “yehi-vayehi” governs the understanding. For this reason, Sepher Yeṣirah does not cite the Biblical verse, as it is found in Rabbinic Midrash. It offers only the resultant visionary reading of the Biblical text. This phenomenon has puzzled the researchers and comes to distinguish between the protomythical work and its Midrashic accretions in the epilogue.

The use of God’s Name in prayer also elicits exegetical-cosmosophical explanations to insure proper intention (“kavannah”) in prayer. Aside from the meditational significance of the six points of Iaw (God’s Name), Sepher Yeṣirah offers an exegetical account of God’s other names. A similar account appears in the interpretative account of the seventy names of God in Midrash Canticle Zuṭta. In the longer version of Sepher Yeṣirah, the exegesis ends with a depiction of the “Kedushah” service of the angelic hosts. For this concludes the introductory trilogy of praise in daily prayer, which opens with an address to God. This address offers attributes and names that were revealed to Abraham and Moses. Similar names appear in Sepher Yeṣirah and even the doxological refrain is preserved. There is no question that this composition was anchored in the practice of visionaries, who used numinous liturgy.
The Epilogue on Abraham

The apocalyptic backdrop to Sepher Yeṣirah is most striking in the concluding paragraph that describes the epiphanic reply to Abraham's search for the Creator. God's revelation to Abraham results in two covenantal expressions. One seals his organ of speech and the other circumcises the reproductive organ. This theme appears also in the beginning of the work: "The covenant of the Unique One is directed towards the middle (of the person) in the word of the tongue and in the circumcision of the organ" (ch. 1,3). The Biblical texts cited in the expanded epilogue shed light on the meaning. They refer to the covenant of pieces (Gen 15) and the covenant of circumcision (Gen 17). The latter chapter refers to the change of Abraham's name, which designates him "a father of many nations". However, Sepher Yeṣirah (including the original version) explains the divine intention as a prophetic commission, "I placed you a prophet to the nations" (alluding to Jer 1:5). Apparently, the motifs of prophetic reception, divine revelation and covenant-making were stressed in the original epilogue. Abraham is the model of the first person who sought God the Creator in a world of nature worship and polytheism. He enjoys a covenantal relationship to God through speech and circumcision. The former governs the esoteric knowledge and the latter the exoteric. Sepher Yeṣirah guides the initiated Jew into the dual way of Abraham.

The primordial event of God's revelation to a person is captured in early legends about Abraham.\textsuperscript{13} For he becomes an ideal type for any person of faith, who takes a journey in his religious philosophical quest for the Creator. However, in the apocalyptic tradition Abraham's encounter with God as the first prophetic experience was at the "covenant of pieces".\textsuperscript{14} The apocalyptic view of history is determined by millennial cycles; for a millennium is but one day of God (Ps 90:4). Thus, the first encounter follows the first two thousand years of chaos and opens the historical period of revelation over the next two thousand years. The last two millennia represent the Messianic Times, leading to the final thousand years of the perfect Sabbath.

At the age of seventy, Abraham is engaged by God at the "Covenant of pieces". He receives a historiosophical disclosure about his descendants in bondage ending in exodus and a return to the promised land. In the early rabbinic tradition, the disclosure included the eschatology on successive empires, Temples and the final messianic redemption. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba even claim\textsuperscript{15} that the world to come and resurrection following the
End were revealed to him. In his tradition, the first disclosure to Abraham was all inclusive. It not only embraced historiosophy and eschatology but also protology, the cosmosophic and theosophic traditions. Sepher Yeṣirah offers the latter disclosure. Abraham's new name is now associated with creation and not only with proselytization in human history. The opening verse of the second story of Creation reads: “This is the genesis of heaven and earth when they were created”. The last words translate the Hebrew “behibar'am”. Through a transpositional reading of the Hebrew word16 as “be'abraham”, the verse states; “This is the genesis of heaven and earth through Abraham.” A scribal rendition of a petit “he” in the Torah scroll reflects the change of the name from Abram to Abraham.

In early circles of apocalyptic thought, such as in the circle of maskilim who issued the Book of Jubilees, the “covenant of pieces” is associated with first covenant of speech. The creative use of the Hebrew alphabet was made known to Abraham. “He took then the books of his ancestors, Shem and Noah, which were written in Hebrew. He copied them and meditated through them and all the complexities were revealed to him” (12:12). Most significantly this covenant was performed on the Day of Pentecost in accordance with the fixed calendar of the sun, that determines it on the fifteenth day of the month of Sivan, which always falls on Sunday (the “Morrow of the Sabbath”). “On that day”, it continues, “a covenant with Abraham was cut, as the one that Noah entered in the same month (refer to ch. 6) and which prefigured the covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai”.

Such a covenantal event was instituted for the Day of Pentecost in perpetuity, according to the Book of Jubilees of the Second Century B.C.E. It is most remarkable that this tradition governed the covenantal life at Qumran and its fixed seasonal calendar. The period of initiation, in accordance with the Maskil’s instruction, culminates with the event of covenant making on Pentecost. This is clearly stipulated in the recent finding of 4Q244, a variant of Damascus Document. It is apparent that during the latter part of Second Temple period, a dual covenant with Abraham was known.

The Dual Covenant and the Apocalypse of Abraham17

The early tradition on the dual covenant with Abraham, the covenant of pieces on speech and the covenant of circumcision was known to the author of Sepher Yeṣirah. A mystagogic covenant kept the cosmosophic and theosophic knowledge secret. Thus, Sepher Yeṣirah (1,8) declares: “Keep your mouth shut and your mind from reflect-
ing; concerning this matter a covenant was cut.” Hekhalot literature also relates such a practice among the Tannaim and Mishnah Ḥagiga 2:1 restricts the study of the esoteric tradition.  

The Tannaitic tradition relates that “Moses was sanctified through entering the cloud”, upon ascending Mount Sinai to receive God’s law. This portrays a particular initiation that prepared Moses for a spiritual encounter with God’s speech. The rabbis determine this to be a period of seven days of sanctification to be distinguished from the three days of separation (hagbalah) required of the people in facing God’s presence at Mount Sinai. In rabbinc historiography the ascent of Moses occurred on the Sabbath, the seventh day of Sivan. Thus, that day provided the setting for initiation, following a period of discipline in esoteric circles of Tannaim. In the early Christian tradition (Acts 2) the event of glossolalia is associated with Pentecost. It was the day on which a new ecclesia was established, which eventually dismissed the covenant of circumcision in view of the new covenant of sanctification through the spirit.

In light of this background, Sepher Yeširah indeed shared common exegetic-cosmosophical elements with the Apocalypse of Abraham, a pseudepigraphic work to be dated in the early Tannaitic period. The Slavonic Apocalypse from the original Hebrew utilizes the Greek word “stoicheion” for element and letter, as in Sepher Yesirah “otiōt-yesod”. It also refers to fire, water and air, the very primordial elements associated with “šāl” in Sepher Yeširah. The Apocalypse opens with the known Targumic and Midrashic tradition on Abraham, who seeks the true God, smashes the idols of his father’s shop and then is cast into the furnace of fire. His doubting brother Haran is also thrown into the furnace but he dies. This legend explains the scriptural juxtaposition of Haran’s death with the first trial of Abraham in Ur, meaning “furnace”, that led to Abram’s departure to Canaan (Gen 11:28).

In the Apocalypse, the above legend is now related to the initial epiphanic experience. “As I was thinking about the elements of fire, water and air, about the luminaries of the sun, moon and stars, then the voice of El Shaddai came down from heaven in a stream of fire, saying: ‘Abraham, Abraham’ and I said ‘Here I am’. God said ‘You are searching for the God of gods, the Creator of all, in the understanding of your heart. I am He (Ani Hu) depart from Terah (Gen 12:1). Then the voice said ‘It is I, fear not for I am your shield (15:1), take the sacrifices of pieces, and through these sacrifices I will set down a covenant’ (15:18).” Apparently this vision in the Apocalypse is connected with covenant-making that came to seal Abraham’s organ of speech upon initiation into the divine mystery. Thus the Apoca-
lypse continues: "I will announce to you guarded things (Gk "syntermēnā" Heb: "nesurim") and you will see great things."

Abraham is first asked to abstain from food, drink and ointment for forty days, i.e. the period of initiation. Then he brings the sacrifice on the High Mountain, namely on Mount Ḥoreb (the site of Sinaitic theophany). Consequently God shows him "things made from ages ago by my word, which I affirmed, created and renewed". This disclosure of cosmogony necessitates an angelic interpreter for the apocalypticist. In the cosmosophic tradition, it is Iawel, who is identified with the Metatron in the Rabbinic tradition. He represents the supreme angel who sits at God's throne in the Seventh Heaven, as described in the Apocalypse of Abraham. For he is charge of the angelic hosts of hayyot and cherubs, who offer daily praise. Thereupon, Abraham addresses God with his revealed names of El Shaddai, Elohim hayyim, Holy Sabbaoth and Iaw. These very names appear in the opening paragraph of Sepher Yeṣirah.

In the Apocalypse of Abraham, God is described as "the One who makes the light shine before the morning light appears on the creation". This is God of creation, who issued light on the first day, before He creates the luminaries on the fourth day. This distinction governs the exegetical-cosmosophical tradition. For it comes to separate the upper realm of angelic pleroma in God's eternal light from the lower realm of earthly life under the luminaries. Thus, the eternal Almighty says to Abraham: "Look from the High at the stars below". This is the Apocalypse's cosmosophical rendering of Gen 15:15. The apocalyptic Midrash of Canticles describes the climactic experience of ascent in the last verse of the Song of Songs. It interprets "Flee my beloved" (8:14), as "soar high, my beloved Abraham (see Isa. 41:8) and become like deer or young gazelle upon the elevated realm in Heaven." "Hare bešamim" of Canticles is read as "Hare bašammai".

Through the ascent experience, the apocalypticist views the world below and its historical development from beginning to end. According to the early formulation of Mishnah Ḥagigah 2:1, cosmosophical gazing includes "what is above and what is below". This describes the vertical dimension of ascent experience, as the two worlds are separated by a cosmic veil (the Belom). "What is in front and what is in back". The Tosefta (ibid 2:1) explains it represents the horizontal dimension of cosmic history, namely what happened before the creation and what will happen after the End. Thus, the Mishnah concludes with the warning: "Anyone who gazes in these four areas, it is pity for him that he came into this world". Such an
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admonition points to extra caution requiring a special guide and to the restriction of the covenant of the lips for the initiated.

The Apocalypse of Abraham offers the cosmosophic vision through the angelic guide, Yaoel. “Look from on the High at the stars and then look beneath the firmament and understand the creation that was sketched (skiagraphen = Heb. sar) of old on the expanse.” Sepher Yeşirah presents the sketch of the divine creation, in view of the particular understanding of Isa 26:4 (beyah YHWH šur ‘olamim). It translates the verse to mean, “through the Tetragrammaton, God sketched the [two] worlds”. In the view of Sepher Yeşirah and the Apocalypse, Abraham not only gazed on “what is above and what is below” but also on “what is in front and what is back”. The Apocalypse concludes that Abraham is led at the Covenant of Pieces to see what God has decreed was to exist and already has been previously at the time of creation. Then Abraham saw what happened since then until the end of time.

Sepher Yeşirah has related the exegetic-cosmosophic elements to Abraham’s initial revelation at the Covenant of Pieces. For it stressed the Covenant of the lips for the initiated, who also had entered into the covenant of circumcision as the “son of Abraham”. God has called Abraham his beloved and the initiated is called “my son, the beloved”. The cosmosophic tradition of the creative use of the holy Hebrew letters, as determined by configurations, number and speech, is offered to the initiated, who already undergone circumcision and now committed himself to the covenant of the tongue. Through the dual covenant Abraham became the model in Tannaitic circles of esoteric discipline and thought, as found in Sepher Yeşirah. However, under the influence of Paul and his followers, who claimed apocalyptic experiences, early Christians sought to separate these two covenants. They placed the stress on the former “covenant of pieces,” in which God reckoned Abraham’s faith as righteousness, to seal the faith experience through the spirit. Sepher Yeşirah’s linkage to the Apocalypse of Abraham and their common view of the dual covenant offers a most significant background that guided Talmudic and Geonic thought on exoteric and esoteric knowledge.
Notes


2 The so-called “riders of the divine Chariot” were engaged in a mystical discipline and their circles produced cosmosophic and theosophical works. Their practice is described in Hekhalot literature (see in particular Hekhalot Rabbati ed. Wertheimer in Bate Midrash).


8 See *Perush Harokeah ‘al Hatorah* (Bnei Berak, 1986) introduction and *Perush Siddur Hatefillah Larokeah* (Jerusalem, 1992) 2 volumes.

9 See their commentaries in the Collection of Sepher Yesirah (Jerusalem, 1962). It contains also several versions. However, the original commentary of Saadia Gaon and his version are to be found in the recent translation from the Arabic by Y. Kafih, *Sepher Yesirah Hashalem* (Jerusalem, 1972).


11 See Bahye ben Asher Commentary on the Torah, final verse, New York: Keter, 1948.
12 Sepher Yeṣirah, ch. 1, 9-14. The first 'sephirah' is the Holy Spirit, from which emanate Ruah, Mayim, and 'esh and they are followed by the six directional points of the permuted name Iao.

13 See L. Ginsberg's Legends of the Jews, volumes I and V, notes.


15 See Midrash Genesis Rabbah 15 (par. 44).

16 See Bahye's commentary on Gen. 2:4; Midrash Hagadol Gen 2:4 (p. 72).


18 Compare Paul's description in II Corinthians 12:2-4. Upon his ascent into Paradise (compare, Tannaitic "Niknas lapardes"), he received words that were forbidden to utter. This also explains the coming of Nicodemus to Jesus at night (John 3).

19 The opening chapter of Aboth de Rabbi Nathan, ed. S. Schechter, versions A and B.

20 Compare the account of Jesus' trial in the wilderness in Mark 1:13 and parallels.

21 On the Metatron, refer to G. Scholem, Kabbalah, part 2, 17 and refer to Alexander's introduction to Hebrew Third Enoch.

22 See Midrash Genesis Rabbah 15:5 (par. 44, 12).