
Genre as Argument in the *Sefer Yetsirah*: A New Look at Its Literary Structure

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The *Sefer Yetsirah*, the *Book of Creation*, is a cosmogonic work, narrating the creation of the world with the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The text is semantically difficult, its reception is varied, and its structure is poorly understood. Various commentators have made competing claims about the nature of the *Sefer Yetsirah*. Some say it is practical, or theosophical, while others believe it to be a work of philosophy. I propose that there is a discernible pattern in its organization which is key to understanding its meaning and function. This pattern is a ring composition, a form commonly used in the Hebrew Bible and in late antique and early medieval works. The ring-composition form highlights passages that emphasize the practical application of the *Sefer Yetsirah*. Its generic form is just as important as its words in conveying meaning. With the aid of formal analysis, it is possible to better understand the meaning and function of the text, as well as the history of its reception.

THE *SEFER YETSIRAH* (*SY*) is a cosmogonic work, narrating the creation of the world with the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, written in Hebrew and composed anywhere from the third to the ninth centuries. It is one of the core texts of kabbalah, and while it and its commentaries introduce and develop some of the

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symbols and theologies¹ that characterize the kabbalah of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the SY is not itself considered a kabbalistic work.² As much as it is a cosmogonic text, it is also a cosmological one, showing relations between the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and objects in the created world. There are three categories of created things, and these are “the universe, the year, and the soul,” referring to the celestial realms, time, and the human being. The SY primarily aims to verbally map these relationships, and to provide instructions for actions based in these relationships.

The *Sefer Yetsirah* is famously difficult to understand. Contemporary scholars have tried to establish the dating of the text;³ its place of origin (Wasserstrom 2002); its literary (Liebes 2000; Meroz 2007), linguistic,⁴ and historical influences;⁵ its use and reception;⁶ and, of course, its semantic content.⁷ There is a wide range of perspectives on all of these questions, but, unfortunately, there is no scholarly consensus on any of them.⁸ As such, it is not possible to establish its milieu, its semantic content, or its reception. However, it may be possible to better understand its structure. This is worthwhile because the *Sefer Yetsirah* employs a teaching strategy whereby the very structure of the work is critical in conveying its worldview. Genre contains instructions for reader reception, and these instructions are key to understanding the function of the work. The present study examines its literary genre to better understand the ways in which the *Sefer Yetsirah* may have been used.

¹Specifically, it introduces the category of *sefirot*, but some commentaries develop them according to a theosophic model. In the *Sefer Yetsirah*, they have a different meaning than they do in later kabbalistic sources.

²This is true because the SY predates the emergence of kabbalah in the twelfth century by at least three centuries. It is also the case that if we define kabbalah as possessing a theosophic, sefirotic cosmology, then the *Sefer Yetsirah* is not explicitly kabbalistic.

³See Hayman (2004) for a comprehensive and current discussion of the dating of this text, especially the introductory chapters (1–39). For an excellent and shorter synthesis of scholarship on the dating and origins of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, see Wasserstrom (2002) and Dan (1998: 155–187).

⁴For linguistic analysis of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, see especially “The Language of Creation and Its Grammar” and “Three Phases of the History of the *Sefer Yezira*” (Dan 1998). See also Gruenwald (1994) and Sed (1973).

⁵Other important contributors include Pines (1989) and Stroumsa (1994).

⁶See Idel (2002) for several discussions of SY, especially the section “Sefer Yezirah and Linguistic Creational Processes” in Chap. 1, “The World-Absorbing Text”; see also Janowitz (2002).

⁷While many have written about its semantic content, it is often the case that they do so from insider, theological perspectives, as in the case of Aryeh Kaplan’s *Sefer Yetzirah*.

⁸Scholars have argued for dates of composition ranging from the second to the ninth centuries, and for places of origin ranging from Babylonia to Palestine and even India. There are a range of opinions on its genre, with some considering it a work of philosophy, magic, astrology, mathematics, geometry, or even grammar.

The *Sefer Yetsirah* is an unadorned book, with few words (from 1,300 to 2,737, depending on the version and manuscript; Hayman 2004: 2), written in very simple Hebrew. Yet it is not easy to understand, and as a result it has generated a wide range of commentaries. Moshe Cordovero, a famous sixteenth-century kabbalist, wrote that “The words of this book are deep, high, and hidden from the stare of those who study it, notwithstanding that many have tried to explain it” (Cordovero 1862: Gate 1: Chapter 1, folio aleph). The text is remarkably unstable besides, with the first copies of the work appearing in the tenth century in three different versions, including the Short Version, the Long Version, and the Saadya Version, named after its first and best-known commentator, Saadya Gaon (d. Baghdad, 942). The diversity in the textual tradition at the time of its appearance attests to an earlier composition, but it is not possible to tell precisely how much earlier. The Short and Long Versions are similarly arranged, but the Long Version elaborates on certain parts of the work, paying special attention to transitions. Most argue that the Long Version grew as it gradually incorporated scribal glosses (Hayman 2004: 61).⁹ The Saadya Version largely differs from the other two in the arrangement of its compositional elements and in some of its word choices.¹⁰ Its structure is markedly different from that of the other two versions (Hayman 2004: 86).

The commentaries manifest this instability as well; they show a widely divergent reception as they express a variety of mutually exclusive understandings of the work. By the tenth century, there are already at least two separate commentary traditions, arguing different uses for the *Sefer Yetsirah*. This first, tenth-century generation of commentaries includes those of Saadya Gaon, Dunash ibn Tamim, and Shabbetai Donnolo.¹¹ The former two are Babylonian in provenance, and they are philosophical works, grounded in the rationalist intellectual culture of tenth-century Islam (Jospe 1990). They attempt to situate the cosmology described in the *Sefer Yetsirah* within that described in scripture,

⁹This is most likely the case, but more important to our purposes is the attention paid to its structure. Generally, the Long Version adds language to better articulate transitions and connections between compositional elements, indicating that its glossators understood the structure of the work and added material in a manner consistent with it.

¹⁰The differences between the Saadya Version and the Short and Long Versions appear to be ideologically motivated. See Ben-Shamai (1988: 1–9) and Segol (2009). Peter Hayman shows how Saadya adds biblical quotations in order to reconcile the *Sefer Yetsirah* with revealed scripture (2004: 86).

¹¹Also included is a lost work by Isaac Israeli. Fragments of this work appear in ibn Ezra’s commentary (Jospe 1990).

and to reconcile its cosmogony with the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*, current in tenth-century Babylonia but not yet established in Byzantium. While there are no earlier textual witnesses or commentaries, these philosophical tenth-century works do not appear in a vacuum. Instead they already dispute previous, unnamed interpretive traditions positing magical and astral-magical functions for the text.

The magical understandings of the text most likely precede its philosophical interpretation. They are rooted in earlier sources, following an account in the Babylonian Talmud that narrates the rabbis' use of a text called *Hilkot Yetsirah* to create a calf, which they then cooked and ate for a Sabbath meal.¹² Proponents of an early date for the text, and of its practical use, identify the *Hilkot Yetsirah* with the *Sefer Yetsirah*. They cite this narrative as evidence for a pre-fifth-century dating and for categorizing it as a magical text.¹³ Those holding the opposite view claim that there is no way to identify the *Hilkot Yetsirah* as the *Sefer Yetsirah* (Kohler and Ginzberg 2002), and that this account should not be considered. However, the Talmudic account does provide valuable evidence for a tradition of Jewish thaumaturgy in late antiquity. The best way to consider this passage, then, is to think of it as indicating a tradition which preceded the *Sefer Yetsirah*, and with which the *Sefer Yetsirah* was identified whenever it was composed. This means that when it did appear, some of its readers were already prepared to see it as a magical text.

Shabbetai Donnolo's tenth-century Byzantine commentary, *Sefer Hakhmoni*, emphasizes its astral-magical function. For him, the *Sefer Yetsirah* is a practical text, used for astrological divination, among other things. According to Shabbetai, the heavens can be read just as one may read the human body, and its physical marks can be used to gain insight into the future:

The universe has its signs of the zodiac, and those who observe the stars know how to foretell future events. Similarly, man has signs: when a man has scabs but no boils, lice, or fleas, experts in such learning can tell his fortune by it. (Sharf 1976: 36)

¹²B. Sanhedrin 65b, 67b. 67a reads, "What [magic] is entirely permitted? Such as [the magic] performed by R. Hanina and R. 'Oshaia, who spend every Sabbath eve in studying the Laws of Creation, by means of which they created a third-grown calf, and ate it" (Neusner, tr. 1972: 80).

¹³See Idel's interpretation of Sanhedrin 65b–67b to categorize the SY as a magical text (Bilski and Idel, 1988: 10–14).

For Shabbetai, the power of the astral-magical elements is grounded in a theosophical view of the universe (Wolfson 1992). This is the idea that it is possible to gain knowledge about the creator from the created world because of their homologous relation to one another. According to this reasoning, if it is possible to perceive their homologous relation, it is also possible to comprehend patterns in the unfolding of events. In Shabbetai's tenth-century work, astral-magical and theosophical interpretations are joined to pre-existing conceptions of Jewish thaumaturgy.

In the tradition of Shabbetai's *Sefer Hakhmoni*, later medieval commentators found both practical and theosophical applications for the SY. In the practical applications, human operators are thought to use the Hebrew alphabet for creative purposes in *imitatio dei*. Commentaries of the twelfth through fifteenth centuries continued this thaumaturgic tradition, especially the Ashkenazim, the Jews of Italy, France, and Germany, whose writings contained references to, and recipes for, the creation of an artificial anthropoid, or a *golem*.¹⁴ These writers clearly believed that the text was practical in its aim. At the same time, other commentators from Southern France and Northern Spain emphasized and developed the theosophical aspects of the text, seen already in Shabbetai Donnolo's tenth-century commentary. These, too, are practical insofar as the knowledge gained from contemplation of the universe was meant to be applied in religious and ritual life. These newer commentaries developed the emanational theology of the SY, eventually developing the ten *sefirot* introduced in the SY into the divine pleroma that is the central symbolic system of the thirteenth-century *Zohar* and of kabbalah as we know it.¹⁵

The Jewish magical *oeuvre* continued to grow, and philosophers continued to develop the rationalist views of their tenth-century Babylonian predecessors. The *Sefer Yetsirah* has been continually interpreted according to these outlooks.¹⁶ And now the Jewish commentarial corpus has grown as the Yetsiratic tradition has been reinterpreted as a Jewish text on meditation (Kaplan 1989), effectively fusing Jewish traditions with those of Buddhist and Hindu meditation. Clearly, divergent interpretive traditions were part of *Sefer Yetsirah* from the beginning. The manuscript tradition is unstable, the reception is variable, and its uses vary widely.

¹⁴The most important of these commentaries are those of Eleazar of Worms (twelfth century), the Pseudo-Saadya (twelfth to thirteenth century), and Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi (thirteenth to early fourteenth century).

¹⁵See Wolfson (1992).

¹⁶See especially the commentary of Isaac the Blind, and Sender (1994).

These disagreements regarding the meaning of the text derive from its polysemous literary style;¹⁷ it is written in language that is spare, cryptic, and seemingly self-contradictory. For example, in all three versions, the first verse alone contains a number of words with multiple significations, while the second contains a confusing *hapax legomenon* that is central to its meaning. The translation of SY1:1 follows:

By means of thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom Yah, the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, the Living God, God Almighty, high and exalted, dwelling forever, and holy is his name, carved out. He created this universe with three groups of letters (*sefarim*), with *sefer*, *sefer*, and *sefer*. (Hayman 2004: 59)¹⁸

This requires some explanation. The Hebrew *Hakak Yah* is here translated as “God carved out.” But these words might mean that “God carved out” the “thirty-two wondrous paths” or that the “thirty-two wondrous paths” were “carved out of God.” Each of these is a reasonable translation. This manuscript then supplies nine names for the divine,¹⁹ while others supply eight,²⁰ seven,²¹ three,²² or only one.²³

Finally, this verse asserts that God “*bara et olamo, b’shloshah sefarim, b’sefer, v’sefer, v’sefer,*” that he “created his world in (or with) three *sefarim*, in *sefer*, and *sefer*, and *sefer*” (Hayman 2004: 59). *Sefarim* is the plural of a root word with many meanings, including book, number, story, speech, or even sapphire, among others. It could refer to letters as well, because numbers are represented with letters in Hebrew. We expect some development of this category as the text breaks it down into three separate subcategories, but alas, they thrice repeat the polysemous *sefer*, this time in the singular: “*sefer, sefer, and sefer.*” This conveys no more information than before. In this way, the text creates an expectation for well-articulated categories, but frustrates that desire immediately.

The same dynamic occurs in the second verse, which breaks down the thirty-two paths into ten *sefirot* and twenty-two letters. However, the category of “*sefirot*” is also poorly articulated; once again it is

¹⁷It is also attributable to cultural differences among its readers over time and space.

¹⁸I refer here to Hayman’s Ms. K, which is Ms. Parma 1390.

¹⁹SY1, Mss. K and A (Hayman 2004: 59). For a list of the corresponding Mss. see Hayman (2004: 12–14).

²⁰Ms. Z.

²¹Ms. C.

²²Ms. P.

²³Ms. Q.

merely another form of the word root *sefer* of verse one. One might expect examples of items fitting into this category, but precisely the opposite occurs. The *sefirot* are described in SY2²⁴ as “*‘eser sefirot b’limah*,” which can be translated as ten of a cognate of the word *sefer* modified by the word *b’limah*, a *hapax legomenon* indicating, by its component parts, *b’li*, without, and *mah*, meaning “what,” so that together they likely denote “without what?” or “without substance.” Thus, the writer creates undefined polysemous categories that purposefully avoid conveying concrete information about their referents. And these are the basis of all creation, which is the subject of the text and which, we might imagine, the reader hopes to better comprehend.

At the same time, the SY presents an unmistakable call to action. The text narrates the divine creation of the universe by the manipulation of the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. Various portions of it describe the divine manipulation of the letters, while others contain instructions for its readers to do so. This is evident in recurring phrases within the text; SY4 directs the reader to “Get the thing clearly worked out and restore the creator to his place” (Hayman 2004: 69). Other passages, including SY6 and SY24, instruct the reader to “know and ponder and form” (Hayman 2004: 74, 110–111), a list of verbs which progressively become more active and direct. The list progresses from the verb “know” to the more active “ponder” and from there to the material, active “form,” which specifies direct action on an object.²⁵

In the SY we have an interesting dilemma; readers experience difficulty fixing its semantic meaning, while at the same time, the text asks them to complete actions based in the structure of the cosmos it describes in this manner. As a parallel case, it is worth considering the debate sparked by Staal’s (1979) article, which asserts that ritual is meaningless because “it is pure activity without meaning or goal” (9). When he says rituals have no meaning, he does so in part because he believes that they have no referents—they do not refer to any object existing in the material world. This may be just one article, written decades ago, and effectively rebutted by scholars of religion, but it is an argument heard over and over again by them. The argument goes as follows: if it is not possible to fix the semantic meaning of the text, then the text is meaningless. This argument is similar to the ones made

²⁴*Sefer Yetsirah* verse 2, henceforward abbreviated as SY plus the number of the verse.

²⁵Here Hayman inserts the bracketed phrase “a mental image” after the word “form,” which is clearly indicated as an interpretation of the word “form.” But in this case I do not think it is a correct one, since the instructions for the reader, to “know, ponder and form,” progress from the abstract to the concrete.

by proponents of the theory that Jesus never existed because the gospels disagree with one another, and to those made in the films of the New Atheists, such as “Zeitgeist” and “Religulous.” In these, the presence of polysemy, rendered contradiction, indicates that there is simply no meaning at all. The texts should be thrown out.

Yet sacred texts are typically polysemous. Scholars of midrash such as David Stern argue that polysemy is a deliberate strategy that makes it possible to include the varied communities using the texts, and that it contributes to their longevity as they are more easily applied in different times, places, and situations (1988).²⁶ This explanation can be applied to the *Sefer Yetsirah*, used by practitioners of magic, theosophers, philosophers, and New Age syncretists alike. But given this wide range of interpretation, how is it possible to say that this text means anything at all? In an article challenging Staal’s claims, Hans Penner posits that “The fact that we have not been able to adequately resolve the problem of the meaning of myth and ritual by determining their reference should alert us that we may well be asking the wrong question” (1985: 4). He argues that “Given the modern developments in linguistics, we can no longer assume that the meaning of something is its reference” (ibid.). Perhaps, then, we have asked the wrong questions of the SY as well.

If the semantic meaning of the text is difficult to establish, if its reception is varied and even contradictory, our best hope lies elsewhere. The field of semiotics can help identify it. The contemporary study of semiotics is typically divided into three branches: semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics.²⁷ These three branches designate three different modes by which signs generate meaning. Thus far we have discussed two of these three in relation to the *Sefer Yetsirah*. Semantic meaning generally refers to the meaning of signs, especially the relation between signs and the objects to which they refer.²⁸ Applied here, this is the attempt to establish the referents of particular words and sentences appearing in the *Sefer Yetsirah*. As discussed above, the text frustrates this effort. On the other hand, syntactics studies relations among signs in a formal structure, such as genre. The third branch of semiotics is pragmatics, which concerns the relations between signs and their effects on those who use them. The commentary tradition reflects the “pragmatics”

²⁶See also Stern (1998).

²⁷In 1922, the Vienna Circle decided on this threefold division. It is described well in *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, by Charles W. Morris (University of Chicago, 1938: 1–2). He defined semiotics as grouping the triad syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

²⁸For example, Ruth Kempson writes in her book, *Semantic Theory*, “Our semantic theory must be able to assign to each word and sentence the meaning or meanings associated with it in that language” (1977: 2).

branch of semiotics. The commentaries are divergent because of the polysemous semantics of the SY, and because of the diversity of its readers across time and space. Because both the semantic and pragmatic meanings of the text are unstable, and the structure of the work is well articulated, its syntactics (the formal, literary structure of the work) play a greater role in generating meaning in the *Sefer Yetsirah* than they might if the semantic meanings were more easily established.

Levi-Strauss argues for the importance of syntactics in making meaning. He writes that in mythology as well as in linguistics, “formal analysis immediately raises the question of meaning” (1976: 165). For Levi-Strauss, the meaning of myth is not in its material referents, but in the structures of narrative (1976). And as such, meaning is not isolated within the specific semantic parts of the myth, but rather within the composition of these parts. In his work he argues that the composition of the myth can refer to the human mind or to the social structure of the group that generated these myths. In a similar fashion, David Stern argues that according to the writers of midrash, “To know Torah, to read and follow the divine blueprint is, in this sense, a way to come to know the mind of the divine architect, and ultimately, to imitate Him and construct a human existence modeled after God’s creation of the world” (1988: 155). In a manner analogous to the thought of Levi-Strauss, Stern writes that interpreters of midrash believe that the structure of their own myths emulates that of the divine mind. Either way, the structure of the myth is mimetic.

Likewise, the literary structure of the *Sefer Yetsirah* is also mimetic, referring instead to its most important theme, the structure of the cosmos. Its generic structure reproduces and communicates conceptions about the created world and how it works. The author has chosen a literary structure that, when visualized, emulates the circular structure of the cosmos it describes. The *Sefer Yetsirah* produces a model of the cosmos as the basis of natural law, articulating universal structures meant to guide human behavior. Structure and application work together. Similarly, the generic structure fulfills a teaching function by which its reader is instructed to visually map the structure of the text and the cosmos, emphasizing certain instructive parts over others. Semantic polysemy participates in the construction of this model, drawing attention to its generic form and reflecting conceptions about complex relations between referents, and between the reader and those referents. This pattern is typical of sacred texts; it is often difficult to fix their semantic meaning. Yet, those that hold sacred texts as such see them as authoritative, presenting arguments for action in the form of

particular ritual practices, forms of community organization, and of institutional authorities (Lincoln 2002: 5–7).

To that end it is worth considering whether the semantic complexity of the SY is meant to stand as it is, or whether it is meant to be glossed and explained. In a recent conference paper, Lang argued that “coded” texts, specifically esoteric ones, are coded *only* to be decoded (2010). Often they include detailed instructions for accomplishing precisely that. For example, complicated charts and diagrams for performing magical or mystical operations are often coded and as such they are nearly incomprehensible on their own. Yet these same texts containing the coded instructions also contain keys. According to Lang, the point of this is to involve the reader in the text by ritually decoding it and enacting its instructions. Because comprehension requires immediate application, this mode of composition facilitates a deeper involvement with the text. Postmodernists tend to argue that polysemy reflects a particular attitude toward the possibility of making truth claims. In this way the medium is the message. Benedik Lang’s model is probably better used to characterize the goals of the *Sefer Yetsirah*. The text contains a puzzle, but it also contains a key. It may not explicate every aspect of the text, but it will direct the reader to make meaning of it. While the polysemous language of the text communicates conceptions about the complexity of the created world, it also directs the reader’s attention to other modes of meaning-making employed in the text, and its literary genre is one of them.

Genre is a form of syntactics that contains conventionalized instructions for reader reception, and it is key to making sense of the SY. These instructions provide valuable clues for interpreting and using the work.²⁹ To that end, I propose that there is a discernible pattern in the organization of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, and that this pattern is a ring composition. The ring composition is a literary form commonly used in the Hebrew Bible and in other late antique and early medieval works. It has a chiasmic structure, A–B–C–B–A, which works as follows: first there is an introductory section, a prologue that presents the theme and context. The story then proceeds toward its crucial center: the turning point and climax. Once there, the beginning is invoked again and the tale reverses direction. The second half of the story echoes the first, as if the writer is walking backward through the plot. The ending is a return to the beginning (Douglas 2006: 31–42). In the ring composition, the

²⁹Understanding of the genre can also shed light on text-historical questions, since in some versions the form is better articulated than in others.

center is most important to the message. This is where the theme introduced in the beginning is theorized and applied, and it is where the work's most important questions are answered. So in order to make meaning of the text, the reader must visualize its elements in spatial relationship to one another.

Ring compositions are common in biblical and classical literature, on a small and large scale. Contemporary scholars have identified chiasmic structures in the Hebrew Bible, showing that they are key to conveying meaning.³⁰ In his analysis of Genesis, Gary Rendsburg argues that its editors used chiasmic and parallel structures to organize their material. Throughout his analysis, Rendsburg defines symmetrical units through shared vocabulary and themes.³¹ He shows that catchwords often effect a smooth transition between consecutive units, much as in the fully developed ring structure. Already part of the tradition for Hebrew composition, these chiasmic structures provide the guiding element for the ring composition. The ring composition appears prominently and in its fully articulated form in the Book of Numbers. In her last book, *Thinking in Circles*, Mary Douglas shows that the Book of Numbers, which generations of readers have considered disorderly and chaotic, is in actuality an orderly ring structure. It is a double-banded ring, according to Mary Douglas, that works to "bridge two worlds" (2006: 70): that of Exodus and Leviticus, in which the Levites figured hardly at all, and that of Chronicles–Ezra–Nehemiah, in which they are given special duties and rich properties.³² The alternating bands of the ring juxtapose these two worlds and bring them together in the latch, the closure of the ring structure. The same occurs in classical works. In his analysis of Pindar's poems, Glenn Most finds a chiasmic structure serving to develop the plot, arguing that structure and function are closely related.³³ Others have made similar arguments about Homer's

³⁰For a good survey of the uses of this approach, see Alter and Kermode (1987).

³¹Rendsburg (1996) argues that the editor(s) of Genesis used chiasmic and parallel structures to organize their material. Throughout the analysis, he defines symmetrical units through shared vocabulary and theme. He notes that catchwords often effect a smooth transition between consecutive units. This is also true of the *Sefer Yetsirah*.

³²See Douglas (2006: 43–58, 70–71).

³³In his review of Most's book, E. Robbins points out that "Much of the trouble is that scholars of poetry have manufactured problems through their traditional habits and concerns (and limitations, it may be added). Difficulties and methodology go hand in hand, and methodology has been generally the same since the time of the scholiasts: texts are fragmented for inspection into units of a phrase or a word rather than seen as wholes, single definitive explanations are sought for each unit, and particular elements of a fragmented text are seen to hold the key to understanding of the entirety" (Robbins 1990). In his book, Most argues that we have focused on the semantic mode of generating meaning to the exclusion of the syntactic (1985: 235).

Odyssey and other classical works (Reece 1995). The ring structure was common in antiquity, in both Jewish traditions and in the wider Mediterranean world.

It is not so common in the present, however. Douglas argues that our unfamiliarity with ring composition has led to contemporary misinterpretation of ancient texts.³⁴ It is well established that the ring composition was used and recognized in antiquity. It is also accepted that this was so in late antiquity. It became less common as the middle ages advanced, until the present, in which it is barely recognized. I contend that this is the case with the *Sefer Yetsirah*: our unfamiliarity with its structure has clouded our conception of the work. This is true because genres encode expectations (Fowler 1989: 215), and “they limit the meaning-potential of a given text” (O’Sullivan et al. 1994: 128). For an audience to make sense of any text, it requires certain competencies that are sometimes called “cultural capital.” Generic knowledge is one of these competencies, and like most of our everyday knowledge, genre knowledge is typically tacit and gained only through the experience of repeated exposure.³⁵ Fowler suggests that “readers learn genres gradually, usually through unconscious familiarization” (1989: 215). Because we do not typically encounter ring compositions in our daily lives, we do not undergo this process of gradual and unconscious familiarization, and so we are not likely to recognize a ring composition or any other literary genre we do not frequently encounter.

If we are unfamiliar with the genre, we miss the writer’s instructions for reading it, we experience it differently than we would if we shared its author’s conception of its form, and, possibly, we misunderstand it. For example, readers familiar with a ring composition will visualize its components, imaginatively mapping the piece. In doing so, they will relate and compare the parts opposite one another in the ring, listen for the turn, and then connect it to the first and last narrative units. This means that their experience of the work is different from that of those who do not interpret it in this manner. Thus early commentaries on

³⁴Douglas writes that “This book turns out to be another example of what Glenn Most has called ‘the Pindar Problem’ for Western Greek Classicists: the misinterpretation of the text due to a misunderstanding of its structure. Numbers’ problem is the same: a poet highly esteemed in his time is found to be quite impenetrable in modern times” (2006: 43).

³⁵Allen (1989) and Freedman and Medway (1994). Allen writes that “A reader must encounter sufficient examples of a genre in order to recognize the shared features that characterize it” (1989: 52).

the SY did not treat the work as opaque,³⁶ while later sixteenth-century commentaries such as Cordovero's did so.³⁷

Thus, the ring structure is important to the SY in elucidating its argument. This occurs in three ways: First, it instructs the reader to visualize the structure of the narrative. In doing so, it serves to reinforce the concentric cosmological model the text describes. Second, the ring structure emphasizes key questions by virtue of their placement in it. In this it serves as a teaching device. Third, it highlights instructions for action, also by their placement. In probing these questions and highlighting instructions for action, the structure of the piece can also shed light on problems in its interpretation, namely: what is the purpose of the text? Is it philosophical, theosophical, or magical? In directing the reader to pay special attention to certain parts of the text, it conveys information about its application.

Douglas provides seven rules for identifying ring compositions. According to her, all rings "must first include an exposition or prologue that states the theme and introduces the main characters" (2006: 36). Subsequent sections systematically develop those themes in the order of their introduction, up to the turn, at which point the order is reversed and the composition works back to the beginning. For example, this means that the second section from the introduction shares themes and vocabulary with the one directly opposite it in the ring, second from the close of the ring, and that the latter section speaks to the former. Second, "the composition is split into two halves" (2006: 43), the first working toward the turn of the ring and the second working back toward the beginning. Third, these two halves have parallel sections that are thematically related (2006: 36). Fourth, it must possess indicators to mark individual sections (*ibid.*), such as the repetition of key words or phrases. Fifth, the rings are "centrally loaded," so that their most important message is delivered at the turn or the center of the ring (2006: 7). One significant clue for this is the repetition of key terms or themes appearing in the introduction. Sixth, "there are rings within rings" (2006: 37) such that the main ring may be structured by smaller, subsidiary rings. Seventh, and finally, "the ring must achieve closure at two levels. By joining up with the beginning, the ending signals completion. It is recognizably a fulfillment of the initial promise" (*ibid.*). This structure is distinct from a well-composed traditional essay in its parallelistic repetition of key words and phrases and especially in the emphasis of

³⁶Early medieval commentators simply proceeded chapter by chapter with their analysis. They did not draw attention to the difficulty of the text.

³⁷*Cf. above, Cordovero (1862).*

the turn. Similarly, a ring argues implicitly by ordering, juxtaposition, and sequence, while this is generally deemed poor argumentation in a contemporary argumentative essay. Hence it is the case that some ancient and late antique texts are judged lacking because their mode of argumentation does not accord with contemporary methods.

The *Sefer Yetsirah* fits Douglas' description of a ring composition. It is a master ring consisting of a collection of primary rings which in turn contain subsidiary rings that develop aspects of the material narrated in the primary rings (Figure 1). It is a composition split into two halves, with parallel sections thematically related, and these conclude with a latch, which achieves closure of two different narratives on two

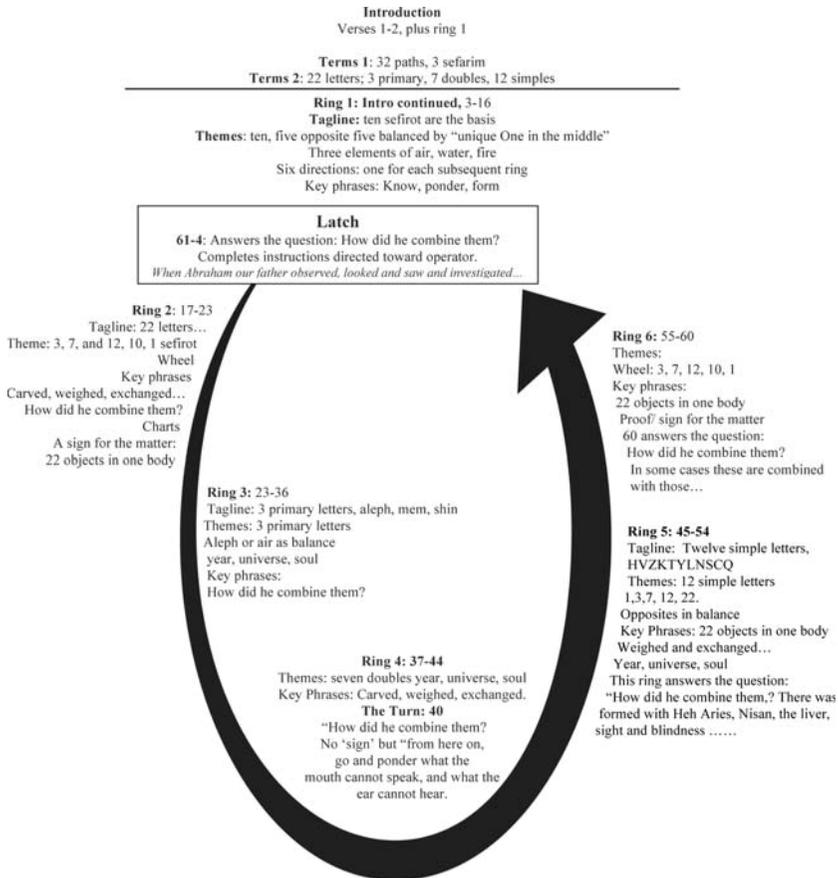


FIGURE 1. The Master Ring Structure of the *Sefer Yetsirah*.

different levels. The two narratives discussed in the *Sefer Yetsirah* consist of the answers to two questions. The first question is that of the divine creation process. The text asks repeatedly: "How did He combine them?" The second is that of its use by human operators. This consists of challenges and instructions addressed to the reader, such as "know and ponder and form," or "go out and calculate." Both are answered in relation to the development of the key numeric categories in the work, apparent in their patterned repetition.

The first narrative (How did He combine them?) focuses on the development of the numeric categories employed in the divine creation process. The major numeric categories are 1, 3, 7, 10 and 12. These play an important role in the structure of the SY. The introduction presents the categories of the thirty-two paths used to create the universe, broken down into ten *sefirot* and twenty-two letters. The letters are then further divided into three groups of three, seven, and twelve letters in this order. The category of one is implicit; it refers to the one God who made these categories, and to the notion that together, they make up one unit, that of instruments used in the process of creation. At times they also stand for the entire created world. Phrases describing the relation between the numeric categories of 1, 3, 7, 10, and 12 recur throughout, appearing in all primary rings except the introduction, the turn, and the latch. This serves to distinguish these parts from each other.

Aside from phrases and themes, there are also recurring questions and instructions. These, too, help to shape the SY and to convey its message. All primary rings either ask or answer the question, "How did He combine them?" The question is asked in the first half and answered in the second. This exploration of the divine creative process is coupled with instructions for the human reader. For example, the reader is directed to "know, ponder, and form." (SY4) Like the question, "How did He combine them?" the directive to "know, ponder, and form" occurs only in the first half of the work, with concrete examples of items created by these processes occurring in the second half, after the turn. The introductory section does not ask this question but merely states that God created the universe by combining letters. In the same way, the rings before the turn contain the phrase "He weighed and exchanged," but those in the second half do not.³⁸ The phrase appears again, modified, in the latch of the ring when Abraham is the one completing the operation. Thus, the rings before the turn (at Ring 4) ask a question and

³⁸This is true with the exception of Ring 5, with the phrase appearing in 49b, which Hayman believes to be a later addition.

provide instructions, while the ones occurring thereafter answer the question and list items created via the recipes provided in the first half of the work. The latch concludes the narrative exploring the process of divine creation and it exemplifies its application by a human operator.

An intact ring proceeds as follows: the first line or two of each ring contains a repeated phrase, known here as the tagline, and it introduces the terms that the ring will develop. For example, the first ring begins with the phrase “*eser sefirot b’limah*” (ten *sefirot* without substance) and it repeats that phrase at the beginning of each verse. Over the course of each ring, these terms are placed in relation to one another and to other elements that are introduced in the course of the narration, and they are fleshed out and given content. This often takes the form of listing or narration. For example, the introductory line contains the term *sefirot*, and in the course of the ring, these *sefirot* are listed, though unnamed.³⁹ Alternatively, the verse may narrate the processes by which a particular element came into being. The terms are developed in order of their initial presentation, until the ring arrives at its turn, which addresses the introduction and adds to it.⁴⁰ The “turn” theorizes the materials presented in list and narrative form in other parts of the ring. The ring then reverses direction and it concludes with a repetition of the initial formula and, often, a transition to the next thematic unit.

METHODOLOGY

The remainder of this article shows how the *Sefer Yetsirah* conforms to the criteria outlined by Douglas, and uses the ring structure model to produce meaning. Given the variability in the manuscripts, as well as the differences between versions, it was not easy to examine this as a “text.” Neither was it possible to consider all the manuscripts with all their variants. This rules out the possibility of a definitive structural analysis. To get as close as possible to this, I chose to examine Hayman’s best, earliest Mss. of all three recensions of the SY. In determining the best ones, I largely accepted his opinion. Therefore, I have relied exclusively on Mss. A, K, and C. Ms. A is a tenth-century copy of the Long Version.⁴¹ Ms. C is a tenth-century copy of the Saadyan Version,⁴² and Ms. K is a thirteenth-century copy of the Short Version

³⁹Meroz argues that this is the central problem in the book. It is my view that *Sefer Yetsirah* presents several different answers to the question of the meaning of these claims (2007: 106).

⁴⁰The turn often theorizes the material presented so far.

⁴¹Vatican (Cat. Assemani) 299(8) fols 66a–71b.

⁴²The Geniza Scroll, Cambridge University Library, Taylor/Schechter K21/56+Glass 12/813.

and the earliest that Hayman considered.⁴³ In each verse I identified the words and themes appearing in all three versions. Then I chose the one that best typified the group, and used it to establish the theme of the verse of that number. On a larger scale, in order to get a sense of the shape of the work, I noted the repetition of key questions, themes, and phrases in all three versions. Then I traced their recurrence throughout, using them to plot the points of the structure of the work.

THE RULES FOR RING COMPOSITION AS THEY APPLY TO THE *SEFER YETSIRAH*

Introduction

According to Douglas, all rings must first include an exposition or prologue that states the theme and introduces the main characters. In the SY, verses 1–16 comprise the introduction to the text as a whole.⁴⁴

By means of thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom, Yah, the Lord of Hosts, The God of Israel, the Living God, God Almighty, high and exalted, dwelling for ever and ever, and holy is his name, carved out. He created his universe with in three sefarim, in sefer, and sefer, and sefer. (SY1, Ms. K)

This section introduces the numeric categories that will be developed throughout the work. It introduces the thirty-two paths, consisting of a group of ten and another group which is further divided into three groups. SY2 clarifies the divisions in these groups: “The ten *sefirot* are the basis, and the twenty-two letters are the foundation; three primary letters, [seven] double [letters] and twelve simple [letters]” (SY2, Mss K and C). Each of these categories becomes its own primary ring; this first ring, containing the introduction, develops the category of the ten *sefirot*. Ring 2 discusses the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. Ring 3 describes the three mother letters. Ring 4 concerns the seven double letters, and Ring 5 narrates the actions of the twelve simple letters.

⁴³Ms. Parma 2784, DeRossi 1390, fols. 36b–38b.

⁴⁴Most recently, Ronit Meroz has characterized the introduction as an editor’s preface of sorts. She writes: “It is my view that *Sefer Yezirah* presents several different answers to the question of the meaning of these claims [about the nature of the *sefirot*]: alternative solutions whose conceptual worlds are close to one another, yet nevertheless differ in several significant aspects. The opening of the book may therefore be read as presenting a shared, common claim or, alternatively, as posing the question presented for discussion. By the nature of things, such a presentation is done by one who knows and is familiar with the possible solutions—namely, the editor of the text” (2007: 106).

Ring 6 is structured differently, lacking the verbal cues that identify it as a ring. It repeats the themes of the introduction, and of the individual rings, and acts as a latch, linking the previous rings together. In this way Ring 1 acts as an exposition, presenting all of the major categories developed in it, including thirty-two paths, ten *sefirot*, twenty-two letters, three mothers, seven doubles, and twelve simples. These terms are elaborated and theorized throughout, until they have all been discussed. The ten *sefirot*, developed first in the introduction, appear once again as a category of ten in the last ring. The work ends as it summarizes the divine creation process, and then models its application.

Rules Number 2 and 3: Two Halves, Thematically Related

The composition is split into two halves with the first working toward the turn of the ring and the second working back toward the beginning. These two halves have parallel sections that are thematically related. Aside from phrases and themes, there are also recurring questions and instructions. These, too, help to shape the SY and to convey its message. The question is asked in the first half and answered in the second. The key question addressed throughout is “How did He combine them?” This exploration of the divine creative process is coupled with instructions for the human reader. For example, the reader is directed to “know, ponder, and form.” Like the question, “How did He combine them?” the directive to “know, ponder, and form” occurs only in the first half of the work, with concrete examples of items created by these processes occurring after the turn.

Generally, Rings 1–4 ask the question “How did He combine them?” and the second half answers it with concrete examples of objects made with that combination, up to the turn in 4, which both asks the question and answers it concretely. For example, Ring 2 asks, “How did He combine them? And Ring 6, opposite it, refrains from asking the question but asserts: “In some cases these are combined with those. . . .” The same dynamic occurs in rings 3 and 5; 3 asks the question, “How did He combine them?” and 5 supplies a material example: “There was formed with Heh Aries, Nisan, the liver, sight and blindness” (SY54, Ms A). It is important that Ring 2 asks this question and supplies an example of the way that the letters were combined, but it does not name anything created in the physical world with them. Ring 4, the turn, is split according to this pattern. The first half of the ring asks the question: How did He combine them? And it answers the question in the first part of the ring by supplying the categories created by the letters, such as planets in the universe, days in the year, and the apertures in mankind (39, KAC). SY40 is the actual turn and it

asks: “How did He combine them?” SY40 answers the question by theorizing: two stones build two houses, three build six; four build twenty-four. This does not explain precisely what was built, and neither does it provide the correct letter combination. Instead, it provides a mathematical theory that the reader might apply to letter combination to create unspecified objects. The second part of Ring 4 (the beginning of the second half of the composition as a whole) does specify material objects created by letter combination. SY41 supplies a catalogue of objects made by combining the seven double letters, the first appearing in the book, and it reads as follows: “He made Bet rule, and bound it to a crown, and combined one with another, and formed with it Saturn in the Universe, the Sabbath in the year, and the mouth in mankind.”⁴⁵ SY41 continues to enumerate the elements created with each of the seven double letters. Hence, the turn at Ring 4 makes the transition from theoretical to practical.

The instructions to “know, ponder, and form” receive a similar treatment: they are articulated in imperative form in SY4, 6 (Mss. A and C but not K), and 24, but only applied in the second half of the work. The turn repeats the instruction and elaborates upon it, commanding the reader: “From here on go out and ponder what the mouth cannot speak, and what the ear cannot hear” (SY40). Past the turn, the second half of the ring contains narratives describing what was “formed” with the letters. We do not encounter this in the imperative form again, but the latch reports the action as Abraham has already accomplished it. The final verse reads: “when Abraham our father observed, and looked, and saw, and investigated, and carved, and hewed, and combined, and formed, and succeeded, the Lord of all was revealed to him” (Hayman 2004: 137).⁴⁶ He has fulfilled the instructions articulated in 4, 6, and 24, and he has been rewarded for it.

Four: Indicators for Sections

Fourth, a ring must possess indicators to mark individual sections, such as the repetition of key words or phrases. It is possible to identify the rings in the *Sefer Yetsirah* by looking for repeated words, phrases,

⁴⁵Hayman notes that SY41 does not occur in the short version, and neither does SY52, which follows a similar structure. Just the same, SY42 and 43a do appear in the short version Mss., and they supply concrete information about material elements created with the letters. It reads: “and with them were carved out seven firmaments, seven earths. . . .” 43a reads: “These are the seven planets in the Universe, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars. . . .” Although the Long and Saadyan Versions present a fully articulated catalogue, the short Mss. also provide information about created elements.

⁴⁶SY61, Mss. A, K, C. Hayman (2004: 181–182).

and themes, beginning with the first lines of each verse. Each ring begins with a verse that presents the terms to be elaborated in that unit, and it ends with a verse that repeats some of this introductory material. The first verse also contains the phrase that will be repeated in each of the verses in the ring. I am calling this the tagline. The first line or two of each ring contains the tagline and it introduces the terms that the ring will develop. For example, the first ring begins with the phrase “*eser sefirot b’limah*” (ten *sefirot* without substance) and it repeats that phrase at the beginning of each verse. The same is true of each ring, and even of those subsidiary rings within them. Subsidiary rings often repeat a phrase different from the tagline, usually taken from inside the verse. A list of the taglines for each ring is described below.

List of Rings and Their Taglines

1. 1–10: *Primary*. Ring 1 develops the category of the ten *sefirot*. Its tagline is “ten *sefirot* without substance,” עשר ספירות בלימה

1a:11–16: *Subsidiary, Included Within 1*. Ring 2 describes a process of development in which one *sefirah* leads to the next. It identifies the three as the first elements of the ten that then give rise to spatiality. Its last line contains the tagline identifying it as part of Ring 1, and this is how we know that the subsidiary ring is concluded. Sixteen begins with the words: אילו עשר ספירות בלימה

2: 17–22 *Primary*. This ring is introduced with materials repeated from Ring 1, in verse 9, and this shows that Ring 3 continues to develop themes laid out in 1. Its tagline is *esrim vshstayim otivot yesod*, twenty-two foundational letters. It develops the theme of creation by combining them: עשרים ושתיים אותיות יסוד

3: 23–31/36: *Primary*. This ring describes the three mother letters. Its tagline is “three mother letters, aleph, mem, shin.” *Shloshah imot AMSH*: שלוש אימות אמש

In addition to their shared tagline, the *prakim* in this ring end with another shared line: air is the law holding the balance between them: ורוח חק מכריע בנתיים

3a: 31–36 *Subsidiary, Included Within 3*. Ring 5 develops the theme set out in Ring 3 by listing the items created with the three letters—it describes what they created, how they did so, and the categories that organize them: the universe, the year, and the soul. These verses are highly formulaic: המליך את אלף בריה וקשר לו כתר וצרפן זה בזה וצור בהן אויר זכר וקבה

This is verse 32, and in *prakim* 32–35 the formula is repeated with changes in terminology according to the letter described.

4. 37–44: *Primary (Including the Turn, at SY40)*. This ring describes the seven double letter. Its tagline is *שבע כפולות בגד כפרת*

5. 45–55 *Primary*. This ring describes the creation by the twelve simple letters. Its tagline is *שתיים עשרה פשוטות הוחטילןסעצק*

6. 57⁴⁷–64: *Concluding Ring*. This links all the rings together, and the end to the beginning. It does not have a tagline; instead, each of its verses relate to other rings. They do so by further developing the terms presented in them and by placing them in relation to each other and to new terms. Its primary functions are to map and model, so that each of the groups is placed in contiguity to others, and organized within a larger rubric governed by the T'li, a master constellation thought to move all of the other constellations. The T'li was visually represented as an *ourobouros*, a snake eating its tail, so that it represents eternal cyclical motion.⁴⁸ The T'li functions much like the master ring does, containing within it the orbits of all the other astrological elements. The instructions contained in the work are then modeled by the figure of Abraham, who uses them to create and receives a reward for it. There are many key phrases and formulations repeated from earlier rings. The section begins as follows: “Twelve below and seven above on top of them, and three on top of seven.” SY58 includes the category of ten, such that in the first two verses of this ring, the text recapitulates the thirty-two paths and all their constituent elements.

Centrally Loaded

Fifth, the rings are “centrally loaded,” so that their most important message is delivered at the turn or the center of the ring. One significant clue for this is the repetition of key terms or themes appearing in the introduction. The master ring also follows this pattern. Ring 4 is its turn, and it recapitulates the terms supplied in one and two, and theorizes their function. This ring explicates the main ideas in the text: creation with letterforms. It begins with the main question asked in the introduction, and it elaborates upon it, theorizes it, and provides formulae describing their use and instructing the reader to do so as well. Similarly, it elaborates the instructions provided for the reader in the

⁴⁷Verse 56 is not present in Ms. A

⁴⁸See JTS 1895, a fourteenth-century pseudo-Saadyan commentary on the SY, folio 17b.

first half of the ring. These plots, the one occurring inside the text in divine action, and the one outside the text in the actions of the reader, are actualized together in the latch when Abraham successfully completes the operations described in the text.

Significantly, Ring 4 elaborates on the “God carved” of SY1, with the phrase “He carved, weighed, exchanged.” It asks the central question in its first half: “How did He combine them?” Then it answers it in the second half in the form of a catalogue. While earlier rings, such as two, answer the question with formulae described as “a sign for the matter,” Ring 4 provides concrete examples in its second half. It develops the second plot, elaborating the instructions provided for the reader, directing him outside the narrative to “go and ponder what the mouth cannot speak, and what the ear cannot hear” (SY40). This instruction to “go and ponder what the mouth cannot speak . . .” is central to the meaning of the text because it draws attention to the inscrutability of the SY’s semantic reference, and directs the reader to take action. Specifically, it asks the reader to take the indeterminacy of the semantic meaning as a starting point for action. This is one of the three most important verses in the text and as such it is key to establishing its significance and its use.

Rule 6: Rings within Rings

Sixth, there are rings within rings, such that the main ring consists of smaller ones. This is true on a small and large scale in the SY. The *Sefer Yetsirah* is structured as a large ring made up of smaller ones. There are three different sorts of rings in this work. The first is the master ring, and it comprehends all the others, arranging them in ring form. This is the larger structure of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, a ring made of all the other rings. The second is the primary, simple ring-unit, identified by the repetition of the same phrase at the beginning of each verse contained in it. The third sort is a subsidiary ring developing one of the verses within a primary ring. This pattern is clear in the list of taglines provided above. Rings 1a and 3a are good examples of this. Each of these repeats a single phrase occurring in one of the verses in the primary ring without containing its tagline. For example, Ring 1a develops the theme of the ten *sefirot* of Ring 1. The tagline of the primary ring reads “ten *sefirot* without substance (*b’limah*).” But Ring 1a does not contain that line. Instead the center of all its verses contains the phrase “ten *sefirot* are the basis.” The last line of Ring 1 proper, SY16, returns to the tagline “ten *sefirot b’limah*,” and closes the ring.

In each of the versions examined here, there are six primary rings arranged in the master ring structure, and two of them contain

subsidiary rings, for a total of eight rings. Their order is laid out in the introductory verses.⁴⁹ The first and last of these rings open and close the circle. This structure operates as follows: the introduction lays out the terms developed in the work, the grouping of numbers and letters and the nature of the *sefirot*, and it describes their role in the divine creation. Primary ring structures form the constituent parts of the large ring structure and each of these develop the cosmogonic elements described in the first ring. The subsidiary ring structures develop particular aspects of the simple ring structure. The final ring, containing the latch, repeats the terms laid out in the introduction, sums up those elaborated in each ring, theorizes them, and models their application. This final ring closes the master ring.⁵⁰

Rule 7: The Double Closure of the Latch

Seventh, and finally, the last ring must achieve closure at two levels. By joining up with the beginning, the ending signals completion and recognizably fulfills the initial promise (Douglas 2006: 36–37). The first closure of the ring as a whole occurs in SY57–60, and it sums up the development of the numeric themes introduced in SY1–2. It restates the numeric categories of ten, twelve, seven, three and one, with SY57 and SY58 reproducing the order of the rings (Hayman 2004: 176). SY57 sums up the structure of the work, repeating important vocabulary from SY19 to 22, specifically the conception that combination of the twenty-two letters in their three groupings acted as a sign for “the matter”:

. . . twelve below and seven above on top of them, and three on top of seven. And from the three of them he founded his abode. And they all

⁴⁹There are a number of different schemes for chapter divisions, which often but do not always coincide with the large ring structures.

⁵⁰Primary rings are often dedicated to exploring one theme or element. As stated above, the *prakim* included in a ring share a tagline. The next criterion for their inclusion in the ring is that they develop the terms contained in the tagline and in its first verse or two. The introductory material is recapitulated and then theorized in the center of the ring, and again summarized in the last verse in the group. While it would be convenient to simply count *prakim* and to identify the middle one as the turn, it is not always appropriate to do so. This is because these units vary from manuscript to manuscript, and because often they fulfill more than one function. Some develop more material than others, and this material corresponds to more than one verse opposite, and so semantically, they function as several units rather than as one. At the same time, some *prakim* are short, they lack a tagline, and they function with others to develop one term or idea. In that case they are counted together as one unit in the ring. It is important to note here that throughout the work there are a few verses that do not begin with the taglines common to all the others in its grouping. This sort of formulation points to the possibility that these *prakim* are either glosses to previous verses or ones that have been divided in the course of transmission. Just the same, the tagline is key in identifying units within the ring.

depend on one, a sign for the One who has none second to him, a King unique in his universe, for he is one and his name is one.

Here, “the matter” is identified as God, and so closure is achieved where this was unexplained previously.⁵¹ SY61 also emphasizes the role of the ten-group by restating its relation to the covenant as the introduction does. It reads: “He made with him a covenant between the ten fingers of his hand. . . .”⁵² These verses recapitulate the actions described in Rings 2–5, the formation of the created world with the three groups of letters. This is the closure for the strand of the text that develops numeric categories.

The second closure occurs in the final portion of the text in SY61–4, which shows the application of its theories. It narrates Abraham’s success in combining letters, and his consequent reward. The final verse shows the biblical Abraham following the earlier instructions (SY4, 6, 24, 40) repeating the directions “carve and hew” and to “know, ponder, and form” and following them with the word “succeeded,” so that when Abraham carries out these actions he also completes the text.⁵³ It reads: “when Abraham our father observed, and looked, and saw, and investigated, and carved, and hewed, and combined, and formed, and succeeded, the Lord of all was revealed to him.”⁵⁴ It grounds this knowledge in the structure of the cosmos itself, one of the main subjects of the book. “The omnipresent revealed to him his secret. He drew them out into water, he burned them into fire, he shook them into the air, he branded them into the seven, he led them into the twelve constellations.” Clearly Abraham has ritually used the letters, following the instructions contained in the SY to do this. As a reward, God appears to Abraham and embraces him: “. . . and he made him sit in his lap and kissed him upon his head.”⁵⁵ This action literally brings the two plots physically together by placing its two main actors in an embrace (Mss. A, K, and D).⁵⁶ In doing so, it provides an example of human success in performing the letter-combination ritual, it restates the main numeric categories

⁵¹This passage in particular also incorporates the *hehkalot* imagery, the imagery of the divine palace, appearing elsewhere in the text; where previously the reader was instructed to restore God to his place, here that place is described.

⁵²Ms. K, (182), Ms. A also includes a covenant between Abraham’s ten toes.

⁵³Many argue that the final verses are a late addition, but they appear in every early version included in Hayman’s book, and in the manuscripts that I have seen. Therefore, practically speaking, this is part of the book from the beginning of its recorded history, and it should be treated as such.

⁵⁴SY6. This wording appears in most of Hayman’s Mss. (182).

⁵⁵Mss. K, A.

⁵⁶These Mss. have God kiss Abraham, as above.

of the introduction, it grounds this knowledge in the created world, and it completes the plot and closes the ring.

Thus the latch brings us back to the beginning via the middle. The turn includes two formulae for both divine and human creation with the letters, and the SY ends by asserting the dual use of the letters, by God and then by human beings. Thus, the beginning, the middle, and the end of the SY work together to create a blueprint for the process of divine creativity and to show that the reader is instructed to imitate it.

Roughly, then, the SY is divided into an introduction, two halves, a turn, and a latch. The introduction lays out key terms, categories, questions, and instructions. The first half of the ring poses these questions and repeats these instructions. The second half answers them by example and shows their application. The turn theorizes the questions in its first half, provides material examples of their application in its second half, and instructs the reader to go out into the world, think beyond the text and the senses, and to try to do what God has done in the introduction. The latch reintroduces the main terms and categories, and, in narrating Abraham's success in letter combination and emphasizing his reward, models the applicability of the text's instructions as well as their value.

Most important here is the message conveyed by the structure. It brings us a long way toward answering key questions about the work: is it a philosophical, theosophical, or a magical text? From the beginning, the SY is action-oriented, describing the divine action of letter-permutation while addressing the reader in the imperative to "know, ponder, and form." The turn addresses both of these, further theorizing the question and sending the reader out into the world once again, with the words, "from here, go out and calculate". Finally, the text concludes with a model of its application. The SY is itself a model, presenting in ring compositional form a cosmos that was also conceptualized via the interrelation of its elements on a ring model. The relation of the elements to the ring structure is theorized in the latch with the addition of the T'li, a circular entity motivating the circular orbits of the constellations and planets. This embodies the structure of the work as a whole. It ends with an example of using the model, as it shows Abraham completing the instructions provided in the text and receiving a divine reward. There is a great deal of thinking described in the SY, but this thinking is geared toward action at every significant position in the ring-composition plot. It is, then, a text about transforming thought and language to action and objects. And as such it is practical in its aim.

This allows a new look at the various commentary traditions attached to the *Sefer Yetsirah*. The Saadyan interpretations wrote

against the grain of previous interpretations, and even against the grain of the text as they worked to reconcile it with their previously held notions of biblical cosmogony interpreted according to the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*. They changed the structure of the work, and reconceptualized some of its most important aspects. They did so for ideological reasons, and because the semantic inscrutability of this text allowed it. Shabbetai Donnolo's astral-magical interpretation shows an interpretation consistent with the directions provided the reader. He places it in the tradition of thaumaturgy described in the Talmudic narratives, but resituates it in the astral-magical outlook current in tenth-century Byzantium. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ashkenazi commentaries describe golem-creation, also emphasizing the instructive aspects of the text. They interpret the text both according to the astral-magical bent of Donnolo's work as they emphasize astrological conditions in the process of creation, and in the vein of the Talmudic sources that use the *Hilkot Yetsirah* to produce a living creature. In thinking this way, these writers privilege one aspect of semiotics over another. This is to say that choosing one mode of semiotic analysis over another is in actuality to choose one interpretation over another. And yet, the text directs us to do so via its literary structure. Its ring structure is crucial in understanding the practical function of the text. If the ring structure is really there, then its practical function must be asserted.

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