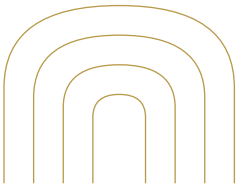
HEKHAL · READER'S EDITION



ספר יצירה

Sefer Yetzirah

Sefer Yetzirah · Book of Formation

W. W. Westcott (1887)

PUBLIC-DOMAIN TRANSLATION

Edition of 2026-08-13 · hekhal.org

About this edition

From W. W. Westcott's 1887 *Sepher Yetzirah*, a public-domain edition of the short recension. Readers undertaking serious study should consult Hayman's 2004 critical edition (Mohr Siebeck), which is the contemporary scholarly standard.

TRADITION	jewish-mysticism
LANGUAGE	Hebrew
PERIOD	c. 2nd–9th century CE (date contested)
ATTRIBUTION	Anonymous; pseudepigraphically ascribed to the patriarch Abraham
TRANSLATION	W. W. Westcott (1887)
LICENCE	Public domain
ONLINE	https://hekhal.org/texts/sefer-yetzirah-opening/

> **Cite this edition:** W. W. Westcott, trans. "Sefer Yetzirah." Hekhal reader's edition, 2026-08-13. https://hekhal.org/texts/sefer-yetzirah-opening/

The *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Formation, is the shortest and most enigmatic of the early Jewish mystical texts. In barely sixteen hundred words it sets out a cosmology in which the created order is generated by the combinatorial play of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the ten **Sefirot**, a term the text appears to coin and which later Kabbalah will inherit and transform.

The work survives in three principal recensions (short, long, and Saadian) with significant textual variation. Manuscripts begin appearing in the ninth century but the content shows considerably earlier provenance, with citations and traditions reaching back to late antiquity. The text below follows the **short recension** as edited and translated by W. W. Westcott in 1887, a public-domain edition.

Westcott's translation is serviceable as an entry point but is not authoritative; serious readers should consult Hayman's 2004 critical edition. Hekhal preserves the Hebrew opposite the English so the reader may track the original even at the level of letter-permutation, which is the level the text itself operates on.

CROSS-REFERENCES

- Sod (סוד), the esoteric register the text inhabits.
- Batin (باطن), the parallel Islamic concept of the inner.
- Apophasis (ἀπόφασις): the negative-theological mode.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Start at Spread 3: Chapter I §§1-3

READS WITH Sefer ha-Bahir · Mishkat al-Anwar

The opening three mishnayot establish the cosmological grammar (the ten Sefirot of nothingness, the twenty-two letters of foundation) that the rest of the book elaborates. Begin there, then return to the prefatory framing once the system is in view.

Sefer Yetzirah

SEFER YETZIRAH · BOOK OF FORMATION

CANONICAL

HEBREW · C. 2ND–9TH CENTURY CE

CHAPTER I · §§ 1–3

פרק א · א-ג

§ 1 In thirty-two mysterious paths of Wisdom did Yah, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, the Living God, King of the Universe, El Shaddai, merciful and gracious, high and exalted, dwelling in eternity, whose name is holy, he is sublime and holy, and create his world by

בשלשים ושתים נתיבות

ליאות חכמה חקק יה יהוה

באות אלהי ישראל אלהים חיים

מלך עולם אל שדי רחום וחנון

ם ונשא שוכן עד וקדוש שמו

three forms of expression: by *Sefer* (Numeration), by *Sippur* (Communication), and by *Sefer* (Writing).

§ 2 Ten are the numbers, as are the *Sefirot*, and twenty-two the letters; these are the Foundation of all things. Of these letters, three are mothers, seven are double, and twelve are simple.

§ 3 The ten numbers formed from nothing are the Decad: these are seen in the fingers of the hands, five and five, and over them is the Covenant by voice spiritual, and the rite of circumcision, corporeal, as of Abraham.

1

ברא את עולמו בשלשה ספרים

ספר וספר וסיפור׃

עשר ספירות בלי מה ועשרים

שתים אותיות יסוד שלש אמות

שבע כפולות ושתים עשרה

שוטות׃

עשר ספירות בלי מה במספר

שר אצבעות חמש כנגד חמש

ברית יחיד מכוונת באמצע

מלת לשון ובמלת מעור׃

2

CHAPTER I · §§ 4–6

פרק א · ד-ו

§ 4 Ten are the numbers of the Sefirot of Nothingness, ten and not

nine, ten and not eleven. Understand with wisdom; be wise in understanding. Examine in them and search out from them, and make every thing clear, and place the Creator on his throne again.

§ 5 Their measure is ten, yet infinite. They are: the Beginning and the End; Good and Evil; Height and Depth; East and West; North and South. And the One only God and Faithful King reigns over them all from his holy habitation for ever and ever.

§ 6 The appearance of the ten spheres of Nothingness is as the Lightning Flash, boundless their origin and limitless their end. The Word of God is in them as they rush forth and as they return; they speak as from the whirlwind, and returning, fall prostrate in adoration before the throne.

עשר ספירות בלימה עשר ולא
שע עשר ולא אחת עשרה הבן
חכמה וחכם בבינה בחון בהם
זקור מהם והעמד דבר על
וריו והשב יוצר על מכונו:

עשר ספירות בלימה מדתן
שר שאין להם סוף עומק
אשית ועומק אחרית עומק טוב
נומק רע עומק רום ועומק תחת
ומק מזרח ועומק מערב עומק
פון ועומק דרום אדון יחיד אל
לך נאמן מושל בכולם ממעון
דשו עד עדי עד:

עשר ספירות בלימה צפייתן
מראה הבזק ותכליתן אין להן
ץ ודברו בהן ברצוא ושוב

למאמרו כסופה ירדפו ולפני

סאו הם משתחוים:

4

CHAPTER I · §§ 7–13

§ 7 Their end is in their beginning and their beginning in their end, as the flame is bound to the burning coal: for the Lord is one and there is no second, and before One what canst thou count?

§ 8 Concerning the number ten of the *Sefirot* of Nothingness keep thy tongue from speaking, and thy mind from pondering on them; and if thy mind run away with thee, bring it back again to thy control. Even as it was said: “Running and returning, the living creatures ran and returned” (Ezekiel 1:14).

פרק א · ז-יג

הערת עורך · Editor’s note

The Hebrew of §§ 7–13 c

the short recension i

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added to Hekhal in

subsequent revision onc

verified against a critica

§ 9 The ten numbers without reality are: One, the Spirit of the Living God, blessed and more than blessed be the Living God of ages. The Voice, the Spirit, and the Word, these are the Holy Spirit.

§ 10 Two: from the Spirit he produced Air, and formed in it twenty-two sounds: the letters; three are mothers, seven are double, and twelve are simple; but the Spirit is first and above these.

§ 11 Three: from the Air he formed the Waters, and from the formless and void made mire and clay, and designed surfaces upon them, and hewed out recesses in them, and formed the strong material foundation.

§ 12-13 Four: from the Water he formed Fire and made for himself a Throne of Glory with Auphanim, Seraphim, Holy Living Creatures, and ministering Angels. Five: he sealed the height; he chose three

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sense. They are th
operations through whic
the Creator creates. Th
Sefirot and the letter
together are the *thirty-tw*
paths of wisdom of th
.opening vers

6

letters from among the simple ones and fixed them in his great Name, *YHV*. With these he sealed the six dimensions.

5

CHAPTERS II–VI · SUMMARY

CHAPTER II: THE TWENTY-TWO LETTERS

The classification of the letters into three mothers (אמ"ש), seven doubles (בג"ד כפר"ת), and twelve simples; the foundation-stones of speech and creation. Treats the *gilgul* (cycle) of the letters in 231 gates and the *gematria*-bearing nature of every utterance.

CHAPTER III: THE THREE MOTHERS (אמ"ש)

Alef, Mem, Shin as the elemental letters: Air, Water, Fire. The cosmic, temporal, and psychic

פרקים ב-ו · תקציר

פרק ב

עשרים ושתים אותיות יסוד

שלש אמות · שבע כפולות · שתים עשרה פשוטות

◆ ◆

פרק ג

שלש אמות אמ״ש

אש · רוח · מים

correspondences (year/world/soul) of each.

CHAPTER IV: THE SEVEN DOUBLES

The doubled-pronunciation letters correspond to the seven planets, seven days, seven gates of the soul (eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth), and the seven pairs of opposites (life/death, peace/evil, wisdom/folly, wealth/poverty, beauty/ugliness, fertility/desolation, dominion/servitude).

CHAPTER V: THE TWELVE SIMPLES

The remaining twelve letters correspond to the twelve months, twelve constellations of the zodiac, and twelve faculties of the human body.

CHAPTER VI: RECAPITULATION AND ABRAHAM

The text closes by tying its system to the patriarch Abraham, who, the

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פרק ד

שבע כפולות בג״ד כפר״ת

◆ ◆

פרק ה

שתים עשרה פשוטות

◆ ◆

פרק ו

אברהם אבינו

closing colophon asserts, perceived these things directly and was given the covenant in consequence.

7

An orientation

The *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Formation, is among the shortest and most cryptic foundational texts in the history of Jewish mystical literature, and quite possibly its earliest. In roughly two thousand words distributed across six chapters, the text presents a cosmology in which the entire structure of created reality is generated by the combinatorial play of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and ten

primordial entities the text calls *Sefirot Belimah*: Sefirot of nothingness, or Sefirot without anything. This is the text in which the word *Sefirot* enters the Hebrew tradition. Eight centuries later, the *Sefer ha-Bahir* will transform the term into the theosophical vocabulary that defines classical Kabbalah. But the cosmological Sefirot of the *Sefer Yetzirah* are something different: numbers, dimensions, structural axes prior to and apart from any material content. The text is interested in how reality is constructed before it is interested in what reality means.

The dating question is the longest-running unresolved problem in the text's scholarly literature. Manuscripts circulate from the ninth century onward; Saadia Gaon's Arabic commentary in 931 CE establishes a firm *terminus ante quem*. The internal evidence, Mishnaic Hebrew with elements that may be older, philosophical idiom that resembles Hellenistic-period speculation, cosmological concerns that overlap with the Sepher Yetzirah-adjacent fragments at Qumran without exact correspondence, admits proposed dates ranging from the second century CE through the early Islamic period. Aryeh Kaplan's 1990 annotated translation accepts an earlier date and reads the text through

the later Kabbalistic and Hasidic commentary tradition. Peter Hayman's 2004 critical edition, the contemporary scholarly reference, places the received text in the seventh-to-ninth century in Mesopotamia or the eastern Mediterranean and distinguishes three recensions (Saadyan, Short, Long) that descend from a common archetype itself already in flux by the early tenth century. The honest position: the text in the form we have is not earlier than the early Islamic period; some of its material is plausibly older; how much older cannot be determined from the evidence we have.

What the *Sefer Yetzirah* proposes, in language that would be philosophical if it were not deliberately gnomic, is that the cosmos is constructed by a finite set of operations on a finite set of elements. The ten *Sefirot Belimah* are described as numbers but also as dimensions: there are five pairs that the text enumerates explicitly, beginning and end, good and evil, above and below, east and west, north and south. The doubling structure suggests that the Sefirot are *polarities*, axes along which differentiation occurs, rather than individuated entities. Each polarity defines a dimensional plane along which created reality extends. The first chapter is among the

most rigorous attempts in any mystical tradition to specify the architecture of dimensionality itself.

The twenty-two letters operate as the agents of differentiation within the dimensional structure the Sefirot establish. The text divides the letters into three groups: three "mothers" (*imot*), alef, mem, shin, corresponding to the primary cosmic elements (air, water, fire) and to the head, belly, and chest of the body; seven "doubles" (*kefulot*), letters with hard and soft pronunciation in classical Hebrew, corresponding to the seven planets, the seven days of the week, and the seven gates of the body; and twelve "simples" (*peshutot*) corresponding to the twelve constellations of the zodiac, the twelve months, and the twelve major bodily organs. The text repeatedly insists that these correspondences are not analogical but ontological: the same structural principle organizes the cosmos at every scale, and the letters are the operative principles by which the organization happens.

The technical concept the tradition would later draw from this material is *tzeruf*, the combinatorial permutation of the letters. Each letter combined with each other letter generates a different cosmological function; the systematic rotation

through all combinations yields, in the text's account, the complete structure of the created order. Two centuries after the Saadyan recension, the thirteenth-century ecstatic Kabbalist **Abraham Abulafia** would develop *tzeruf* into a contemplative practice, the systematic rotation of letter combinations as a meditative technique aimed at the experiential dissolution of ordinary thought. The *Sefer Yetzirah* itself is neutral on whether its content is intended for contemplative practice; the early commentary tradition splits along this axis, with the Saadyan reading philosophical-cosmological and the Long Recension commentaries (Eleazar of Worms, the Hasidei Ashkenaz) reading the text mystically as a manual for the practitioner who would recapitulate creation.

The text's pseudepigraphic ascription to the patriarch Abraham is integral to how it presents itself rather than incidental. The closing sections refer to Abraham's binding of the letters and his contemplation of the cosmic structure they reveal, suggesting that the text understands itself as transmitting wisdom Abraham himself received and recorded. Whether this is a literary device, a tradition the text's editors believed sincerely, or something more complex

(a deliberate claim of apostolic continuity comparable to the pseudonymous authorship of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus or the much later Zohar) is part of the text's interpretive challenge. The ascription places the *Sefer Yetzirah* within an ancient contemplative-cosmological tradition the text claims existed before rabbinic Judaism formalized itself; the historical question of whether such a tradition is recoverable from the text remains genuinely open.

The *Sefer Yetzirah*'s relationship to the broader currents of late-antique speculative cosmology is one of the more discussed questions in the modern scholarship. The text's combinatorial mathematics resembles Pythagorean number speculation; its three-mothers / seven-doubles / twelve-simples structure resembles Hellenistic astrological systems; its account of the cosmos as generated by primary elements paired with letters resembles Egyptian and Greek operative-letter traditions that surface in the magical papyri and in the early Hermetic literature. None of these resemblances proves direct influence; the structural similarities are real enough that they must be taken seriously, while the contextual differences are substantial enough that simple borrowing models do not fit. Gershom Scholem's treatment in *Origins*

of the Kabbalah reads the *Sefer Yetzirah* as standing within the broader Mediterranean late-antique speculative milieu while representing a distinctively Jewish appropriation of its conceptual vocabulary.

What the *Sefer Yetzirah* contributes to the subsequent Jewish mystical tradition is twofold: a vocabulary (Sefirot, the operative letters, the threefold division of the alphabet) and a cosmological orientation (creation as combinatorial, structural, mathematical). The vocabulary becomes the substrate for everything that follows. Every text in the Kabbalistic tradition assumes the *Sefer Yetzirah* as background, even where the assumption is not made explicit; the term Sefirot in the Bahir, the Zohar, and the Lurianic literature is intelligible only because the *Sefer Yetzirah* first introduced it. The cosmological orientation, creation as the result of operations on finite elements, feeds into the combinatorial mysticism of Abulafia, the systematic theosophy of the Zohar, and ultimately into the Lurianic account of how a contracted divine produces the cosmos through structured emanation. The text is short. Its consequences are enormous.

For the reader approaching the *Sefer Yetzirah* for the first time, the honest counsel is not to expect immediate intelligibility. The text is gnomic by construction: it states its propositions and moves on without explanation, and the absence of explanation is itself part of how the text understands what it is doing. Sustained reading rewards what hurried reading cannot reach. Read the first chapter several times before moving to the second. Read the Westcott translation alongside the Hebrew where possible, even Hebrew of which the reader has only elementary knowledge will reward the practice, since the text's argument is embedded in features of the original (the letter-permutation structure, the rhythm of the Mishnaic prose, the deliberate ambiguities of *belimah* and *sefirot*) that no translation fully carries. The contemporary scholarly reference for serious study is Hayman's 2004 critical edition; the accessible practitioner reading is Kaplan's 1990 annotated translation. The Hekhal edition, presenting the public-domain Westcott translation alongside the Hebrew, is intended as the open reading text, sufficient for orientation, complemented rather than replaced by the modern scholarly editions.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* generated commentary across every subsequent stratum of Jewish thought. Saadia Gaon's tenth-century Arabic commentary reads it philosophically, treating the Sefirot as cosmological principles in conversation with kalam and Neoplatonist sources. The Long Recension commentaries preserve a different reception: Eleazar of Worms (early 13th c., Hasidei Ashkenaz) and the anonymous *Commentary of the Pseudo-Saadia* read the text mystically, as a manual for the contemplative reconstruction of the cosmos through letter-permutation.

The standard modern critical edition is **A. Peter Hayman**, *Sefer Yetsira: Edition, Translation, and Text-Critical Commentary* (Mohr Siebeck, 2004), which establishes the three recensions (Saadyan, Short, Long) with parallel translation and remains under copyright. **Aryeh Kaplan**'s 1990 annotated translation (Samuel Weiser) reads the text through later Kabbalistic and Hasidic commentary; under copyright. The Hekhal edition presents the public-domain Westcott 1887 English translation alongside the Hebrew text, with status flagged.

Editions and translations

- Hayman, A. Peter, ed. *Sefer Yetsira: Edition, Translation, and Text-Critical Commentary*. Mohr Siebeck, 2004.
- Kaplan, Aryeh, trans. *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*. Samuel Weiser, 1990.

- Westcott, William Wynn, trans. *Sepher Yetzirah*. 1887. Public domain.
- Scholem, Gershom. *Origins of the Kabbalah*. Princeton UP, 1987 (Ch. 1 on the text's place in the Kabbalistic prehistory).

IF YOU FINISHED THIS, READ NEXT

JEWISH · LATE 12TH C.

Sefer ha-Bahir

The Yetzirah's cosmological Sefirot become the theosophical attributes of the divine. The Bahir is the foundational reinterpretation that gates the whole later Kabbalistic tradition.

→

CHRISTIAN · C. 500 CE

The Mystical Theology

A parallel apophatic move from a different tradition. The Yetzirah negates by counting; Dionysius negates by stripping. Both arrive at the same prior condition.

→

ISLAMIC · EARLY 12TH C.

Mishkat al-Anwar

Letter-and-light cosmologies read together. Ghazali's hierarchy of lights and the Yetzirah's letters of formation as complementary cosmological grammars.

Colophon

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