

Sepher Ha-Bahir
Book of
ENLIGHTENMENT

Translated by

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PREFACE

With the increase of interest in esoteric Judaism the name of the Kabala is now much better known in western circles. The Kabala has mainly been known to non-Jews through the works and reputations of philosophers and occultists, both of whom have sought in it authority for their own views.

Christian kabalists have in the past tried to use it to prove the pre-eminence of Christianity instead of seeing it for what it is, the peculiarly Jewish view of what has come to be known as the perennial philosophy. Whether in fact it is based on a cosmological picture that is older than Judaism remains in considerable doubt, suffice it that when the serious student begins to see its origins he comes to the book called Zohar, written down in the thirteenth century.

Professor G.Scholem in his voluminous works on the kabala has drawn particular attention to the works which preceded this book and in particular the Sepher Ha-Bahir. It seemed to us (the translators) that there was need for a version of popular interest. We therefore took as our aim to write, not a scholarly work, for such was not within our competence, but something which would be of interest to the general reader who has heard of the Kabala and the Zohar, who has also become aware of the various schools, sects and movements, all of whom have examined particular strands in the tapestry of the Great Work.

In our endeavours it became apparent to us that there is a wealth of information relating to the long period preceding the production of the Bahir that remains untranslated. If this were to be undertaken the modern reader might become more conscious of that powerful stream which has fed and nourished Classical, Christian and Muslim civilisations.

No culture lives in a vacuum, it is the product of the knowledge and work of its ancestors, and while the structures and establishments keep the form alive and well, there is need of speculation within this frame lest it should die.

In modern times professor G. Scholem stands head and shoulders above others in the field, for it is almost entirely due to his efforts that the subject of the Kabala has become comparatively respectable in both modern Jewish and academic circles. We therefore refer the reader of this work whose interest is sparked by the nature of the Bahir to the corpus of this most eminent scholar.

We must acknowledge the help and advice we have received from many people but are at pains to point out that any errors in the work are our own. Thanks are due to Mr. L.Cousins who provided the impetus, Mr. Alexander who cleared up a difficulty, and to Mr. B.J.Bayley for enabling us to simplify the technical patterns and drawings. Keith Critchlow's work on geodesics enabled us to draw some of the more difficult views of the geometry. This is by no means a complete list of those who helped us in this work, and to all those who are aware of their contribution we give our sincere thanks and appreciation.

London 1976

INTRODUCTION

To most English speaking readers the source book from which they can learn the oldest view of the Kabala is the “Zohar”, written, it is generally agreed, by Moses-de-Leon in the thirteenth century. This book is a collection of essays, commentaries and explanations of the Bible. Sometimes obscure, sometimes naive, sometimes approaching poetical genius, it is a vast work, which shows the reader an even vaster panorama of mediaeval Jewish thought, ideas and feelings. It has been likened to a fire, producing clouds of coloured smoke, which as the wind blows, clears to show the clear light of the fire itself, only to be obscured a moment later by the clouds of allegorical smoke.

Pre-dating this work by at least a lifetime is the Sepher-Ha-Bahir. This work is generally agreed to contain material from earlier periods particularly the Babylonian era. The methods used to explain subjects vary, sometimes a quote will be used, sometimes a parable. The editors at other times use the shape of the Hebrew letters or their numerical value or even the vowel pointing (vowels in Hebrew are indicated by marks above or below the consonants). Only the consonants are written. In the oldest texts the separate words are run together one after another without space between them, and thus without the vowels or separation the reading of ancient texts presents great difficulty, and the names of the vowels and the meanings of these names are used to illustrate the writers point.

Amongst the main literary sources of the work are the Sepher –Yetzira and the Rabba-Raziel. In our view much of the framework of the Bahir is common to both works and we are of the opinion that the diagrammatic structure, which we have illustrated, is helpful in the understanding of the cosmological view of the time.

In the centuries before the advent of the Sepher Ha-Bahir there were two main strands, which may be understood, as the cosmological or theosophical (Maase-Bereshit) and mystical or meditative (Maase-Mercava). Plainly the first will echo the views and opinions of the current scientific thought, but the second will contain more

that is traditional, for it is the nature of such work to be accreted from the proven experience of those who have practiced the methods in the past.

From the fact that the Bahir uses vowel pointing, which did not reach a commonly understood form, until the tenth and eleventh centuries and other evidences from the language used, and the literary sources drawn upon, scholars have adduced a date, which places the Bahir in the years after the eleventh century. Its editors ascribe the work to Rabbi Nechuniah Ben Chana (first century A.D.) but it was a common practice in the period to father the work on to some writer or authority in the past.

It is fairly clearly established that the Bahir first comes to light in the area of France known as Provance. This area was at this time an extremely fertile area, this is probably due to the fact that many strands of influence with their cross-fertilising caused a flowering of the arts, literature, music and philosophy. It is well known that this was one of the areas from which the Troubadours sprang, it is also the period of the Courts-of-Love, and indeed that phenomena of the mystical and romantic – the “Tarot”, first appears in this area.

The unknown editor of the Bahir, if he was a man of his time, would have been aware of the ferment of ideas that contact with the Arab civilisation and the new translations of the Greek and Latin classics, had caused, and from the work it is evident that he was at great pains to give authority to his work by quoting wherever possible from the Bible. Indeed the editor of this work edges very close to heresy at times but because of the ambiguity displayed (most carefully in places) the accusation could not be made without much argument.

A further point to be noted is that the educative process of the time was nearer to the present day oriental. Firstly all the classics are learned by heart then the student is catechised to fix it in his memory and he is then expected to dispute with his fellows taking a particular theses to defend, and it is expected of him that all these arguments will be backed from the text books or in the case of religious students, Holy-Writ, or from those of great religious authority.

It follows therefore, that a work such as the Bahir would draw heavily from these type of sources, and this is the case, at least a fifth of the first part of the book draws on quotations from rabbinical, traditional and Biblical sources. (A translation and explanatory introduction of the Sepher Yetzira are included later in this work).

The book claims, indirectly, to be an exposition on the oral tradition. The question whether, once put to paper, it remains oral, is answered implicitly by saying that the written teaching requires the teaching by word of mouth to resolve its difficulties. It is true that once written down such works become the basis for further speculation.

One can divide religious practices under three main headings: prayer, meditative methods and conduct. The forms of the first and last of these can be committed to writing. Meditative and other methods of self or spiritual development require great care and an experienced teacher in these matters should, bearing in mind the variable nature of individual psychology, have experienced, or observed, all the difficulties likely to be met by the student. The guide lines need to be very flexible for if they were rigidly codified they might prove a positive hindrance to the person seeking the highest within himself.

One of these methods was that of the “Descent into the Chariot” or Work of the Chariot (Maase Mercavah). The name of the method derives from the book of Ezekiel, the “Chariot Rider” having performed the obligatory practices and prayers goes, “in between the wheels under the cherubs.....and the Glory of the Lord stands over the house.....and the court”. The student seats himself in the chariot and enters into the lowest heaven, he then begins to divest himself of all that belongs to this world and prepares to enter the world to come. He remembers the instructions, “you saw there no manner of likeness only a voice” and, going down through the courtyard of the holy temple, the outer courts, the inner court and in, beyond the veil, to the Holy of Holies, he “goes down to the end of his thought” and keeping “the tongue (of the mind) from speaking and the heart from pondering” he returns “to his place and puts the Creator of form back on His throne”. The Bahir lays stress upon the fact that the messengers and servants of the Lord do not belong in “the world to come”. Paragraph 14 refers, in particular, “so that no one may grow to say I was before the world”. We understand from the text that the Chariot-Rider must not accept any image or being as having authority in the “World to come” which can only be reached when the descended is “By his side” and that this condition of being is “The foundation of the Universe” and is referred to in the opening paragraph of the work. To the reader who may have acquaintance with eastern systems of meditation

the above may strike a familiar chord, but indeed such methods are by no means confined to the Orient.

In Judaism the cosmological imperatives of necessity derive from Genesis, Chapter one. It is called “Maase Bereshit” or the work on the beginnings of things. The Sepher-ha-Bahir reflects the view of the mediaeval philosopher to some extent, but its editors were constrained to work within the framework of religious Judaism. If we survey the work as a whole certain matters become evident, first and foremost is the insistence on the Oneness of God, after this come the notion of considering all things as being triple in nature, that is to say all actions are mediated. Then the editor covers the notion that the seven days of creation are the prototype of all processes, he then goes on to show that the triplicity and the seven-folded-ness combine in the oneness under the image of the ten Sephirot. With the explanations of twelve-folded-ness the writer then includes this in the Unity to show that the 22 letters are still within the oneness (3 plus 7 plus 12 are equal to 22).

The editor makes a distinction between different levels of creation, and seems to take his authority from Isaiah, “I have called you, I have created you, I have fashioned you, I have made you”. This view can be seen as (1) the level of the Logos, (2) the level of the creator of substance, (3) the level of the fashioner of the substantial, and the level of the manipulator of the fashioned substance. In this work there occurs, what seems to be the seed of the word which the later Cabbalists used for the level of the creative Word or Logos, and they derive the word “Atzilut” from the quotation “I was by his side (Etzlo)”. We may sum up these levels as the level of the creative will of God, the level of the distinction between things, or separation, the level of formulation and the level of action

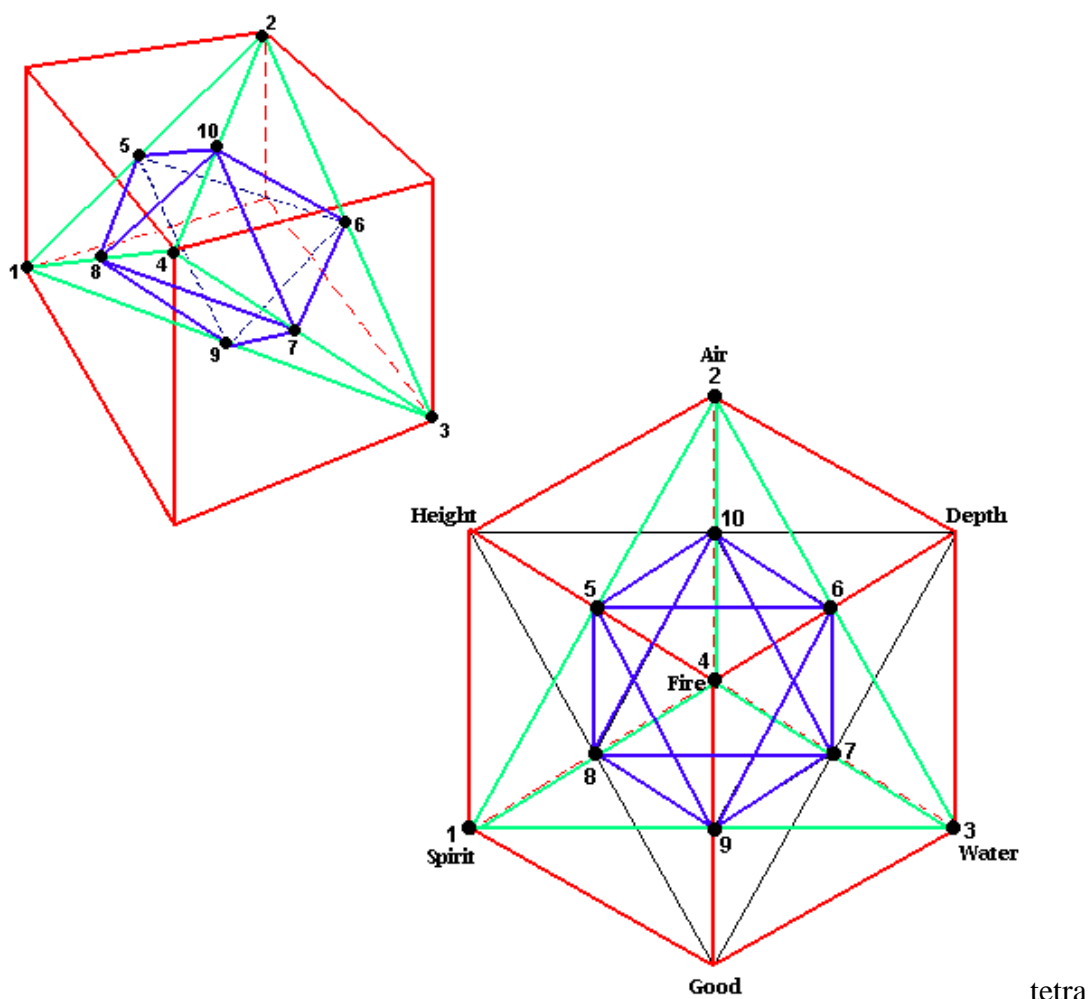
The names of the parts of the decade are taken, in the main, from Isaiah chapter 11 verse 2 and from the blessing of David the King upon his son Solomon 1 Chronicle: 29 verse 11, and from the statement that the just man is the foundation of the world. The name “Sephirah” comes from Ezekiel Chapter 10 verse 1. ‘The likeness of a sapphire’ but as Hebrew is a language which is based on a three letter consonantal root, it lends itself to poetry by virtue of inherent double meanings. The text itself makes much use of this characteristic particularly in discussion of the meanings of the letters and the vowel indicators or pointing (the reader may not be

able to follow some of these matters but where it is possible we have tried to indicate where the editors have used the punning relationships). In the case of the word Sephirah the general idea of number, relation, story, counting, telling a story, is inherent in this title.

The names are, in the order used in the Bahir, (This order is different in later Cabbalistic works) 1. The Crown or Aleph. 2. Wisdom. 3. Understanding. 4. Mercy or righteousness (Counsel). 5. Judgement (Might). 6. Peace and Truth (Knowledge). 7. Fear of the Lord or Foundation. 8. Eternity 9. Glory. 10. Goodness or Kingdom. In the text the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th sephirot are given a dual numeration and the purpose of this appears to be to unite the triplicity and the seven-folded-ness in the decade. The sephirot are arranged in triads; the first three are termed crowns, the second three are given as Michael, Gabriel and the King of Truth. The third triad is given as dual, being both Eternity, Glory and Righteousness, and Goodness. The decade is further divided into the column of Water, which is Wisdom, Mercy and Eternity and the Archangel Michael rules over it, and the column of fire, which is given as that of Understanding, Judgement and Glory and the Archangel Gabriel rules over it. The third column of mediation is that which includes the Crown, Truth and Peace, Righteousness, and goodness. The ninth and eighth sephirot are related to the twelve wells and seventy palms in the story of the temptation of Israel. They are likened to the 12 tribes and the 70 elders who went down into Egypt (Egypt is always used as a parable of the souls willing descent into slavery). These two are therefore more concerned with the temptations of the world and the Bahir uses this story to show this situation. It gives them as the field of Satan who is described as being unwilling to change, being used to evil and not willing to leave his field of activity, rather as a man is unwilling to give up useless habits. The parables of these two Sephirot are to the name of Hadar, which has the meanings of Glory and Citrus, and Tamar which has the meaning of a date-palm and who was the Mother of Peretz and Zerach which are here used to indicate a relationship to the Sun and the Moon. The dual nature of these sephirot is stressed because they seem to belong both to this world and to the next. Hence the names are Hod/Hadar and Netzach/Netzachim. That is Glory/Reverberating Glory and Victory/Eternity.

We can say that a Sefirah is a principle, it is not a vehicle, neither is it a level of creation or an organisation, it is an attribute of the one God, and we can further say that a Sefirah is not separate or distinct from the Unity but that one Sefirah does differ from another. By examining the physical relationships that descriptions of height, depth, east, west, north and south, indicate, we have drawn up a model which in the light of its applicability to the parameters of both the Bahir and the Sepher Yetzirah, seems to be useful in the understanding of the relationships that are described in these works. We do not claim that it is the model which the editors used for we have no evidence of a diagrammatic or pictorial form which might lend authority to it. We therefore consider it as a useful hypothesis.

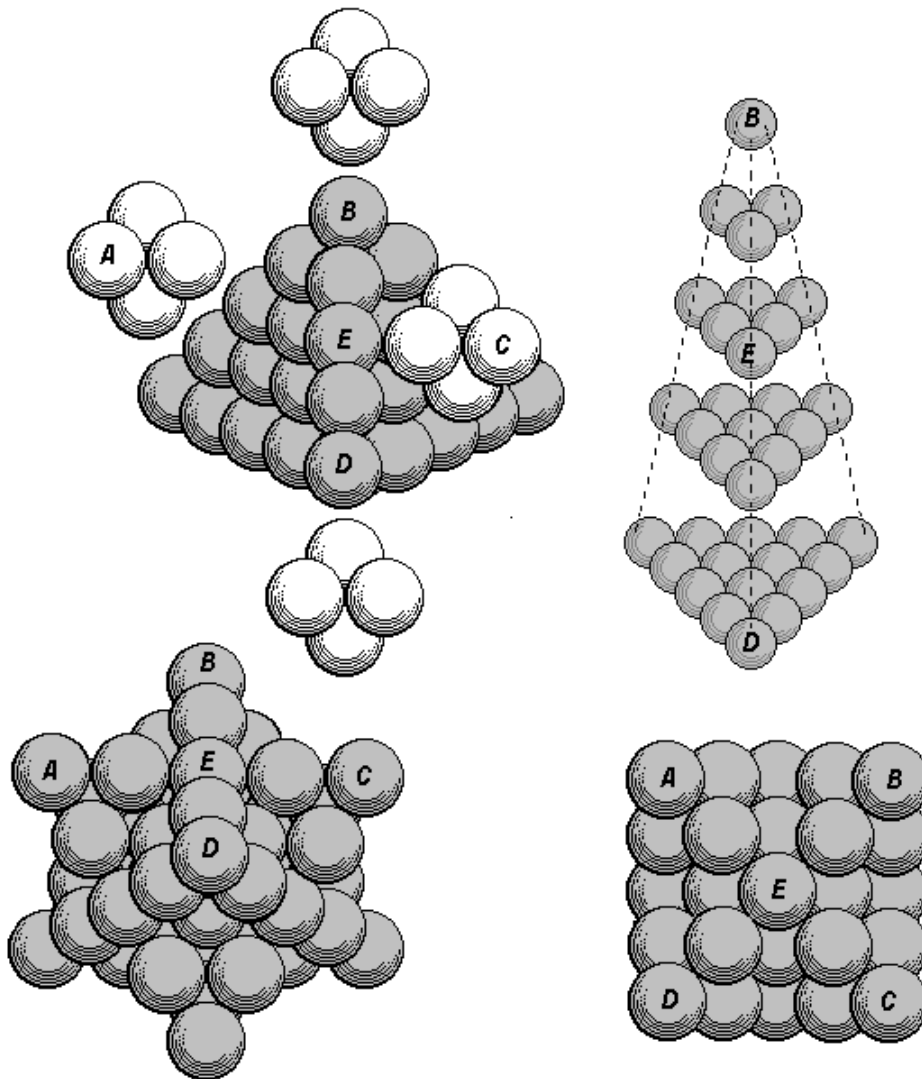
The model is a cube. A cube contains two intersecting tetrahedral. The



hedral intersect at six points, each tetrahedral therefore has upon it ten points, four of these points coincide with the corners of the cube. The remaining six points are at the centre of the faces of the cube. The remaining six points are at the centre of the faces

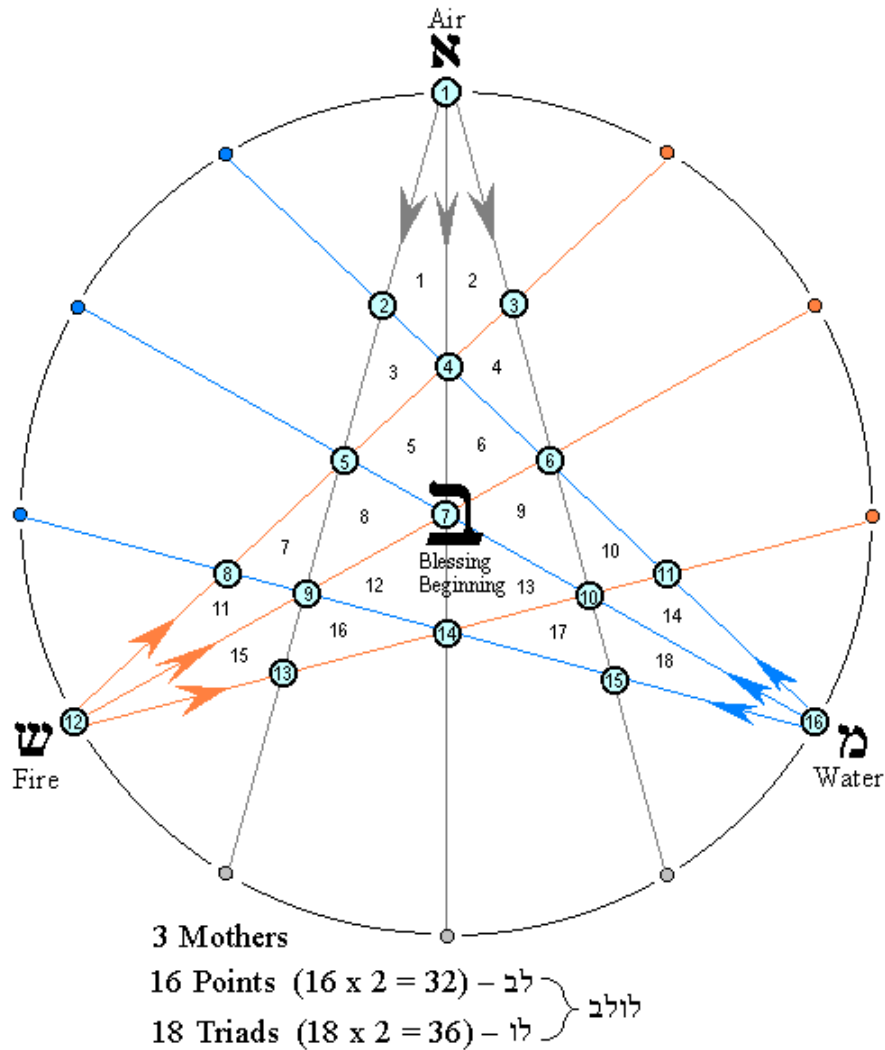
of the cube. If the points at the centre of the faces of the cube are joined, an octahedron is formed having twelve edges each of which may be defined as N. height N. depth N. east, East height etc; as the text states. From this it follows that the faces of the cube may be defined as height, depth, north, south, east, west. The edges of the cube may be then defined as N. east S. east, S. west, N. west and the positions, relatively, of the last four Sephirot located.

A model can be constructed using table-tennis balls, building the pyramidal



Tetrahedron from a base of fifteen balls arranged as in a billiard frame, that is five to a triangular side, the next layer will contain ten balls, and then layers of six, three and one ball complete the first tetrahedron. To complete the whole cubic structure a further set of four groups of three plus one ball will need to be fixed to each foot of the first tetrahedron. This structure will give both a star shape having seven levels

and a cubic structure the surface of which will contain 50 balls (The letter Nun equals 50 in numerical value). Each tetrahedron contains six edges (Vav) the number of spheres along these edges adds up to 22 and the number of visible spheres in this tetrahedron is thirty-one and the total of all spheres in this tetrahedron is 35, which with their completion are equal to the numbers 32 and 36 (Lu-Lav)



Further light can be thrown on the mnemonic Zayin the three letters are numerically seven and ten and fifty, all of which can be seen in this model. The Zayin is also the male and the Nun the female (from the initial letters of the names for male and female). The Zayin is also used to indicate the parts of a man and it also stands for the seven days of creation. The sum of the numerical values of the letters add up to

thirteen ($\tau = 7$, $\nu = 10$, $\iota = 50 = 67 = 13$) and this word has therefore the same value as Unity (Achad).

From the foregoing it can be seen that the writers of the works used the letters in mnemonic, numerical, punning and similar senses to make a point or to throw light on an argument which they wished to make. Even the actual shape of letters is used on occasion. The basic picture which is used by the editor of the Bahir can be summed as follows: firstly the Unity of the All, the arising from this triplicity, the analogue of which is Air and Water and Fire, then the seven days of creation, the analogue of which is the parts of man, then the decade, the analogue of which is the ten commandments, then follows the twelve for which the model is the twelve tribes and this is further expanded in the sections on the seventy two. The editor of the Bahir uses every means at his disposal to illuminate the possibilities of the Biblical text.

Large sections of the work are given over to the seventy-two. In order to see the picture shown we must refer to those sections where the clothing of Aaron the high priest is described and in particular the plate on his forehead on which is inscribed the four letter name of God, the stones on the shoulder, two cubes having a total of twelve faces and the breast plate which holds twelve cubes each having a total of six faces thus seventy two. Firstly the four-letter name is described as having three pronunciations or vowel pointings. If we then take the total of the possible spellings using the same letters and their possible vocalization we can derive 72 names of God, each of these is assigned to a face of the stones on the breastplate. The 12 faces of the shoulder stones are assigned to the twelve tribes “in the order of their generation” and a mystical name is given to each.

NAME OF TRIBE	MOTHER'S MEANING Genesis chap. 29, 30	MYSTICAL MEANING	POSSIBLE SIGN	FATHER'S MEANING Genesis chap. 49
1. Reuben	He has seen my son	Goes forth.	Aries	Beginning, unstable.
2. Simon	The Lord heard me.	Consumes, eats.	Taurus	Anger.
3. Levi	Will be joined.	Name, handle, blood	Gemini	Wrath.
4. Judah	I will praise.	Flood and float.	Cancer	Lions whelp.
5. Dan	God has judged me.	Edge of void.	Libra	He will judge Israel.
6. Naphtali	Blessed, rich.	My height escape.	Capricorn	A goodly tree of words.
7. Gad	Fortunate.	Pride, awake, God.	Scorpio	A troop he shall overcome.
8. Asher	I am happy.	Enclosure, Father.	Sagittarius	He shall be fat and eat good food.
9. Issachar	My hire.	Desire of food.	Virgo	A hired servant.
10. Zebulon	A good dowry.	I will see visions.	Leo	Dweller on the border of the sea.
11. Joseph	The Lord add to me.	Being. (Chance).	Aquarius	Fruitful bough.
12. Benjamin	Son of the right hand	Seeing.	Pisces	A wolf, he shall divide the spoil.

In the paragraph where the mystic names of the tribes are given, difficulty arises, the names are supposed to be six letters in length but in the lists given, the length of each name varies and most but not all, have the endings 'ron' or 'on'. We have extracted these endings and the conjunction Vav and also the names of God

“Eheye” and “Yah”, it is then possible to find 72 letters which, if taken in order, can be arranged as 12 six letter names, the letters of which can be made to yield the mystical meaning given in the above lists. To ascertain how the letters may be split between the two stones we considered the two lists given in the book of Genesis, the first being the order in which the births occurred. This we have termed Mothers Meaning. The third is the order in Genesis chapter 49 and this we have termed Fathers meaning. Comparing these two lists we find the following facts: -

Order of birth	Mother	Order of Blessing	Birth order
1. Reuben	Leah	Reuben	1
2. Simon	“	Simon	2
3. Levi	“	Levi	3
4. Judah	“	Judah	4
5. Dan	Bilhah	Zebulon	10
6. Naphtali	“	Issachar	9
7. Gad	Zilpah	Dan	5
8. Asher	“	Gad	7
9. Issachar	Leah	Asher	8
10. Zebulon	“	Naphtali	6
11. Joseph	Rachel	Joseph	11
12. Benjamin	“	Benjamin	12

If we place the six that disagree on a circular diagram, we obtain the following picture and as this matter has particular reference to the Sepher Yetzirah the Reader is referred to in the introduction on this work. If assume that the signs of the Zodiac are relevant to the above structure, a possible meaning can be adduced. The six tribes that

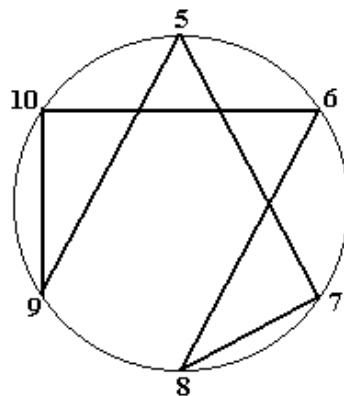


Diagram "S"

agree are night signs, the six that disagree are known as the day signs. Points 9, 5, and 7, are positive signs and points 10, 6, and 8, are negative signs. That is to say, the relationship of male to female is indicated by these six, each triplet of which consists of a cardinal, fixed and mutable sign, whose order is in the position triplet Cardinal and Mutable mediated by fixed sign and in the negative or female triplet Cardinal and Fixed mediated by the Mutable. The points where the positive and negative triplets switch over are also mediated by Fixed and Mutable signs. We have therefore split the names the six that agree to the one stone and the remaining six to the other. This seems to agree with a tradition that left and right side are under the sun and the moon. "Thine is the silver thine is the gold".

We append below the complete list of names, according to the order of birth, the mystical meaning and Fathers meaning. And we place them on the stones as follows: -

'A' on the left according to the order derived from diagram "C" Introduction to Sepher Yetzirah and 'B' on the right in the order of diagram "S".

The names inscribed on the faces of the stones of the breastplate are taken from the three verses of Exodus 42 verses 19, 20, and 21. According to the description in par. 79, analysing these we obtain a three-letter name on each face and when we add to this one of the four letter names of God we find that there is a seven-letter name on each face. There is therefore on each stone a 42-letter name of God. The stones are further split into groups of 36 by combining the letters on opposite faces. This then gives three levels for each stone and these are then considered as under the ruler-ship of "Tali" and "Galgal" and "Lev" which are looked on as

Universal, Cyclical and bodily ruler-ships. (They can also be considered as the decimates of the astrological signs).

Assembling all the foregoing data we obtain a cosmological picture which is known as the Maase Bereshit. This picture is not dogmatic and is susceptible of change according to the current wisdom for it is a matter of record that so long as they did not contradict the scriptures great latitude was allowed to the metaphysicians of Judaism and at a later date, much of what is in this work taken as truth was modified, as indeed this view was a modification of previous views.

The work can be looked on as a summary of the religious, metaphysical scientific and medical view of mediaeval Judaism, within the context of a strongly mystical but open society, and may reflect a much wider movement which was sparked into life by the cross fertilisation of Arabic, Christian and Classical culture. It is certain that the work was one of the most influential in the formulation of what can be called classical Kabbalistic theory for later works can be shown to owe a great deal to the methods and structures first noted in the Sepher-ha-Bahir. Indeed the title of the work can be translated as the "Book of Enlightenment" and we have therefore used this as our English title.