

# The Book of Formation (Sefer Yetzirah)



# A Scholarly Introduction to the Origins of Jewish Speculative Tradition

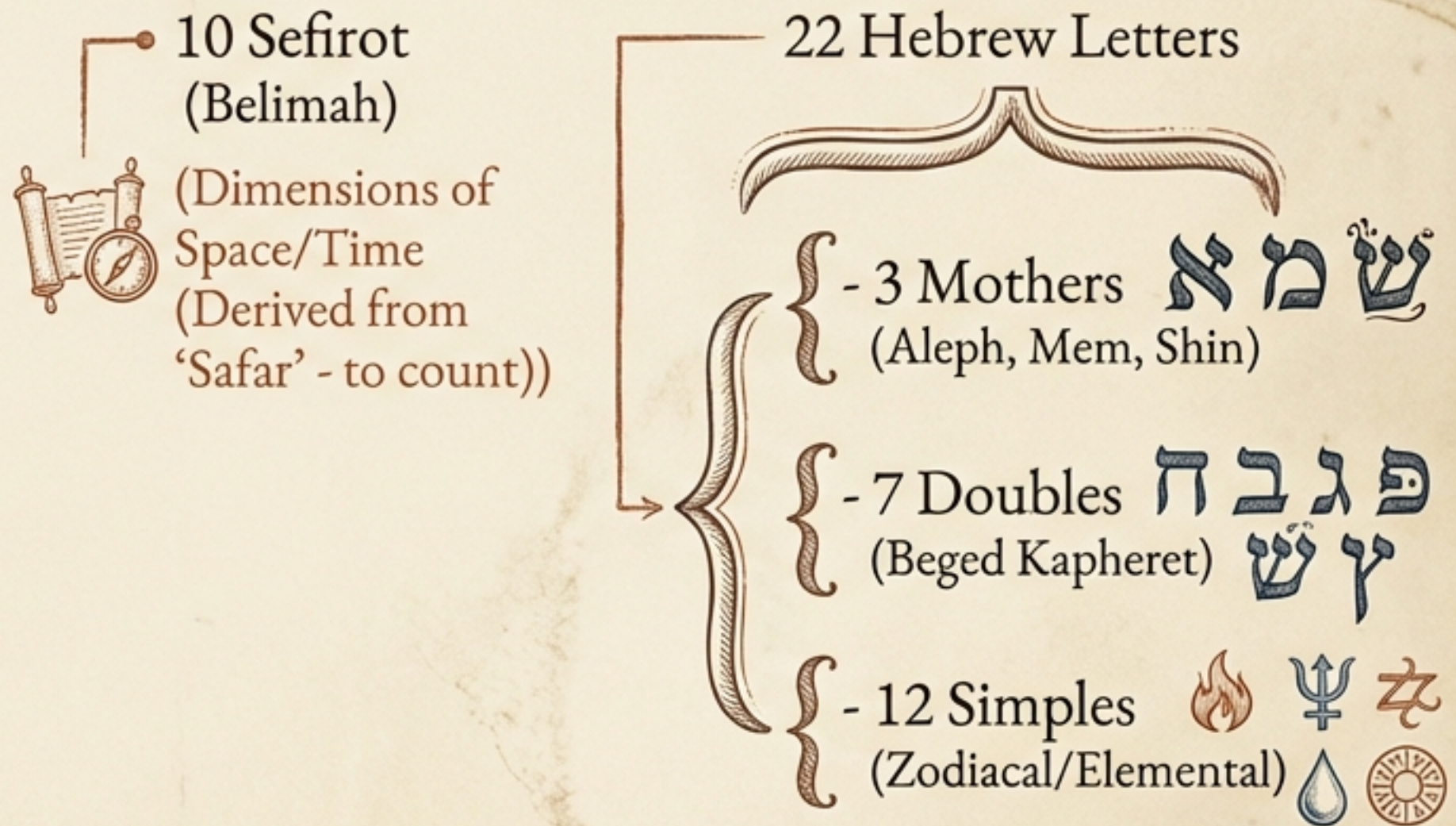
*The oldest extant Hebrew speculative treatise.*



# The Enigma in 2,000 Words

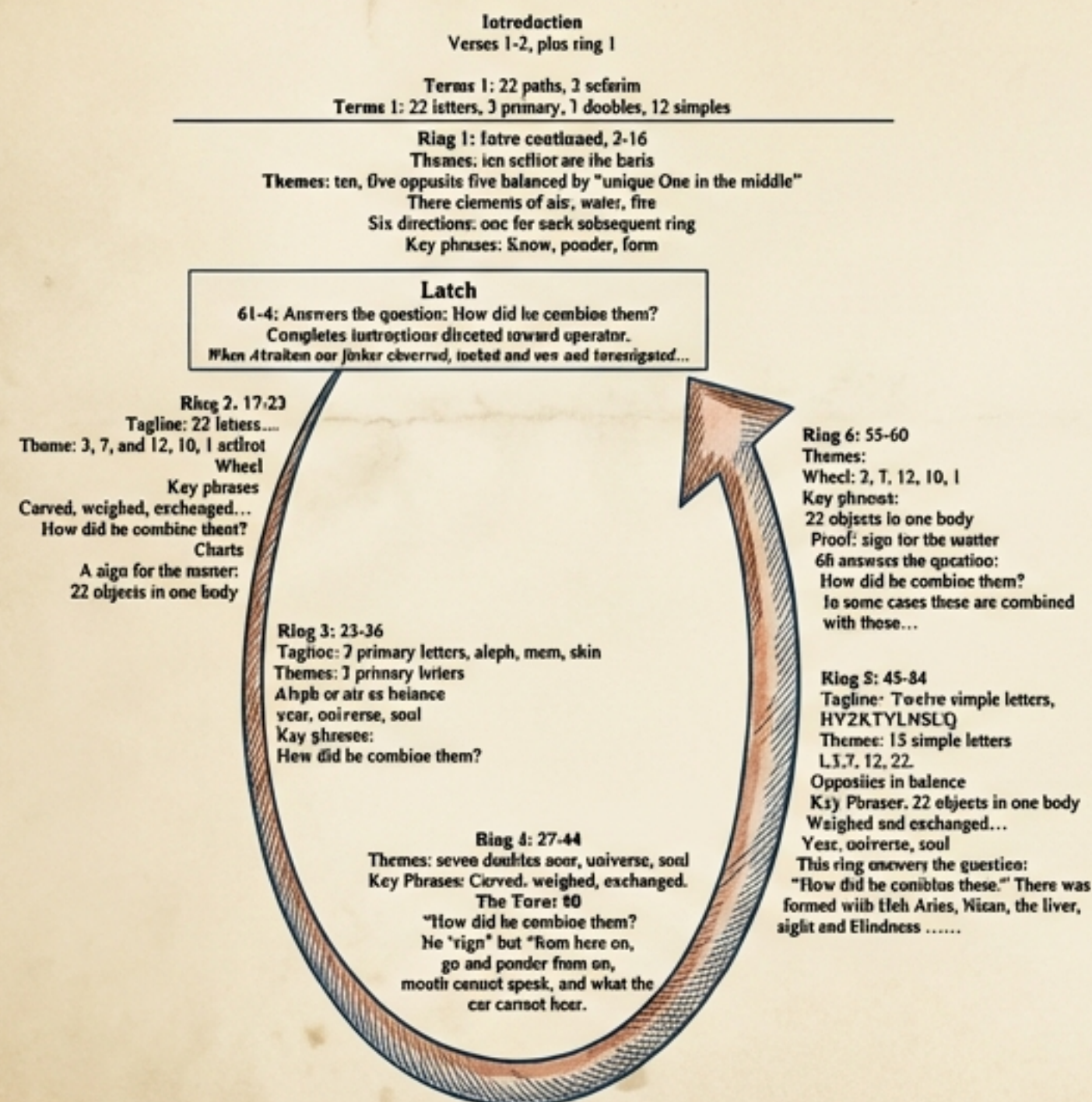
A laconic, cryptic treatise of fewer than 2,500 words. Without context or clear authorship, it posits that the cosmos is linguistic—reality is from the grammar of the divine language.

## 32 Paths of Wisdom





# Structure as Argument: The Ring Composition



Marla Segol argues the text is a "mimetic" structure—its form imitates the circular cosmos it describes.

The text oscillates between two imperatives:

1. **The Descriptive:** "How did He combine them?" (Divine Creation)
2. **The Prescriptive:** "Go and calculate" (Human Application)

**Logic:** The circular structure has no beginning or end, mirroring the Sefirot: "Their end is imbedded in their beginning and their beginning in their end."



# The Chronological Debate: When Was It Written?

2nd–6th Century:  
The Early View

7th Century:  
The New Consensus (Weiss)

9th Century:  
The Revisionist View  
(Wasserstrom)



Mishnaic Period.  
Attributed to R. Akiva. Ties  
to Talmudic linguistic style.

Syriac-Christian Context.  
Pre-Islamic. Originating  
far from Rabbinic centers.

Islamic Milieu.  
Abbasid period. Parallels  
with Islamic Kalam.



# Contextual Clues: The Problem of *Hilkhote Yetzirah*





# The Unstable Artifact: Manuscript Traditions

## The Short Version



Earliest stratum. Terse, obscure, and difficult to decipher.

## The Long Version



Contains additional commentary and transitional phrases. Clearer, but likely a later expansion.

## The Saadian Recension



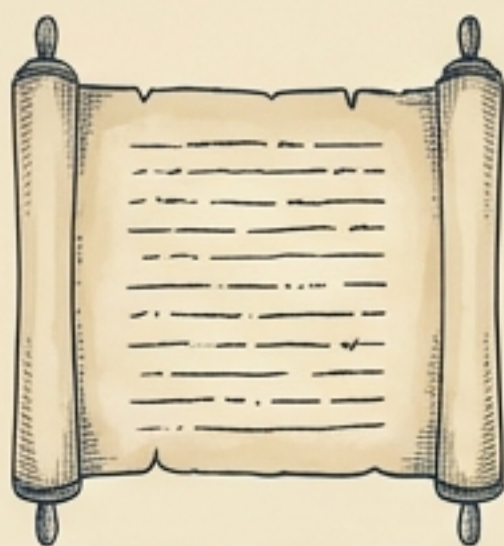
Used by Saadia Gaon (10th C.). Features a completely different arrangement of chapters and verses.



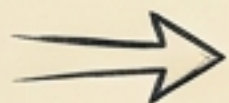
# Re-evaluating the Recensions: A Scholarly Turn

## BEFORE AND AFTER: A PARADIGM SHIFT

### The Old Consensus



Original Text

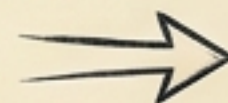


Saadian Version  
Corruption/Late Edit

### The New Insight (Avishai Bar-Asher)



Genizah Fragments



Oldest Structural Form

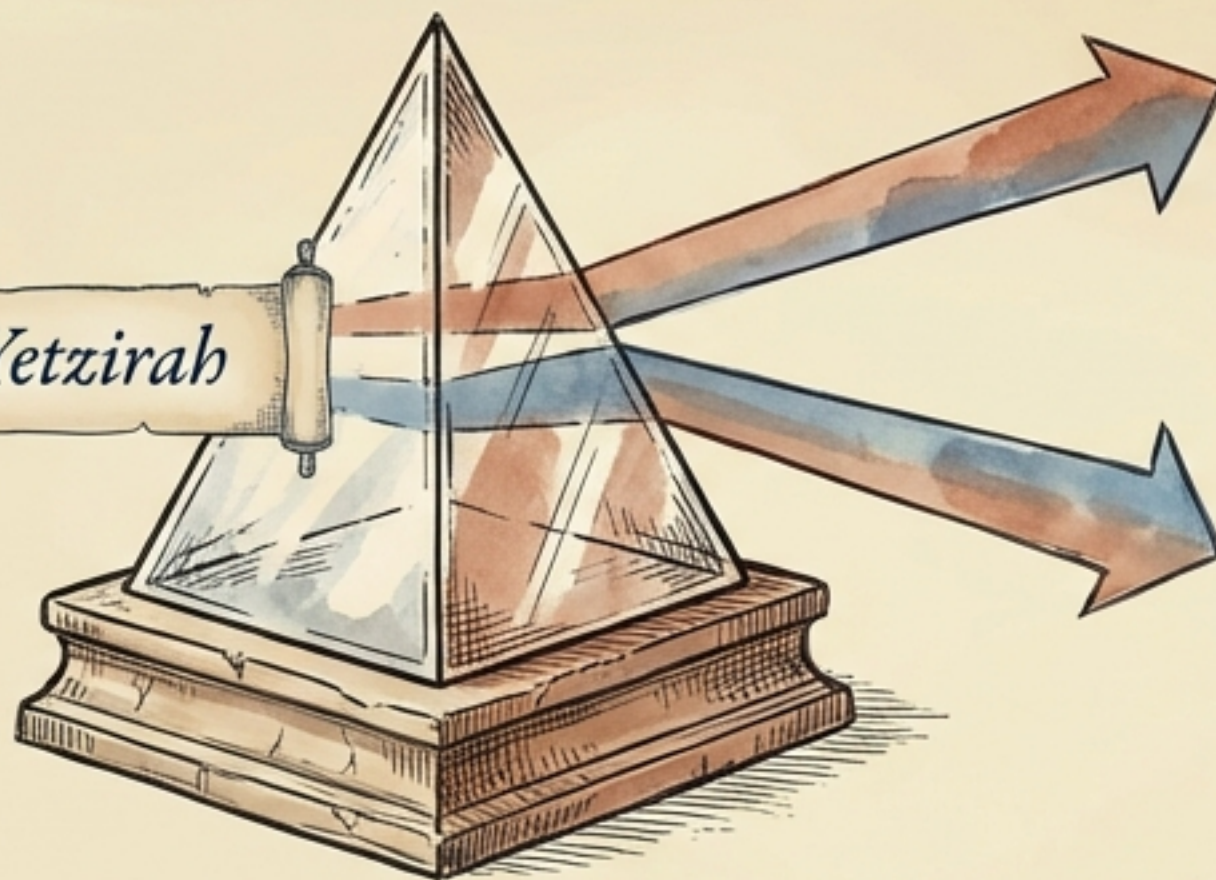
Recent Genizah research suggests the 'Saadian' version (Earliest Genizah-Attested Version) may preserve the original structure. The familiar 'Short' and 'Long' versions are likely later reorganizations.



# The Prism: The 10th-Century Divergence



*Sefer Yetzirah*



## The Philosophers (Islamic East)

Saadia Gaon & Dunash ibn Tamim

Goal: To 'tame' the text, strip it of magic, and align it with rational philosophy.

## The Mystics (Byzantium/Italy)

Shabbetai Donnolo

Goal: Empirical science and mysticism.  
The text as a guide to the universe.

"Saadya's goal... was to detach it from mythical, mystical, or magical elements."

— Haggai Ben-Shammai



# The Scientific Phase: Saadia Gaon (931 CE)



## Agenda:

Reconcile SY with "Creatio ex Nihilo" and rational philosophy.

- **Re-interpretation:**

- The Letters are not magical powers but 'agents' of creation.
- The text is a treatise on grammar and cosmology, not a spellbook.

- **Method:** Explaining away "magic" as allegory for natural processes, prioritizing logic and Islamic Kalam.



# The Empirical Mystic: Shabbetai Donnolo



Study the body to  
know the universe.

**MICROCOSM:**  
The Human Body

Study the universe  
to know **God**.

## Context:

10<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantine Italy.  
Physician and astronomer.

## Theory: "Man is a Microcosm".

- Study the body to know the universe.
- Study the universe to know God.

**Approach:** Unlike Saadia,  
Donnolo integrated the "magic"  
into a scientific understanding of  
astrology and medicine.



# From Knowledge to Power: The Magical Turn



## Context:

12th-13th Century Ashkenazi Hasidim (Eleazar of Worms).

- **The Shift:**

From philosophical understanding to '*Imitatio Dei*'—imitating God's creative act.

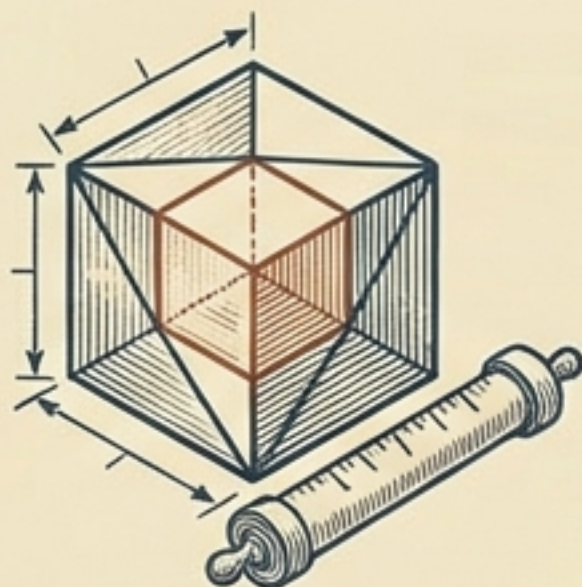
- **The Golem:**

- Commentaries provided recipes for creating artificial life.
- **Technique:** Reciting letter permutations over dust/clay.
- **Goal:** Ritual demonstration of mastery over the creative power of the Hebrew alphabet.



# The Theosophical Turn: The Birth of Kabbalah

In Sefer Yetzilah



Numbers, Counting, Physical Dimensions  
(Depth of Up, Depth of Down).



In Kabbalah (12th C.)



Divine Emanations, Aspects of  
God's Personality.

**Key Figures:** Isaac the Blind and *The Bahir*. They re-read the text through a Neoplatonic lens, turning a map of the cosmos into a map of the Godhead.



# Visualizing the Ineffable: The Diagram Tradition

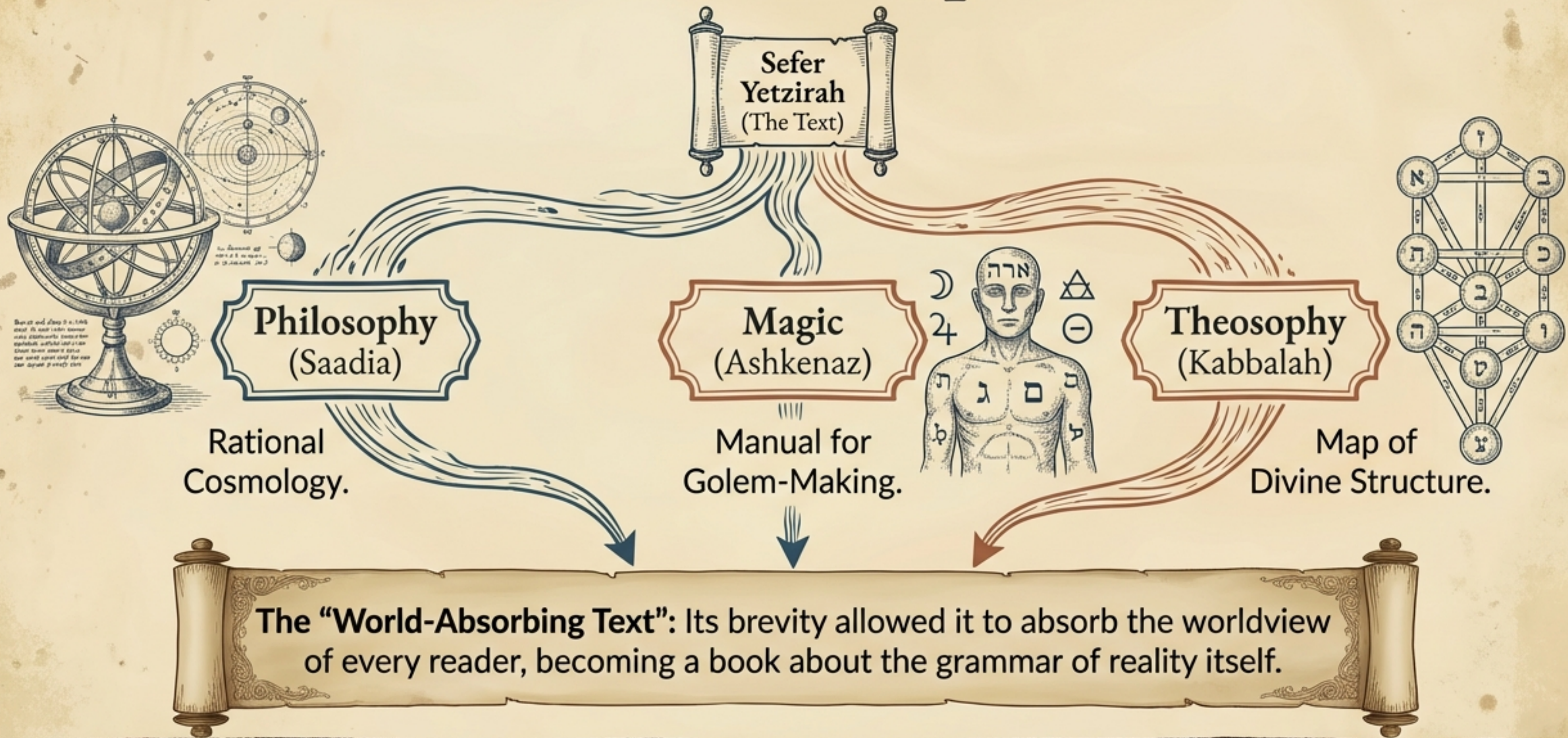


Diagrams were “technology for conveying information” the text could not hold (Segol).

- **Types:**
  - **Ilanot (Trees):** Mapping Sefirotic hierarchy.
  - **Wheels/Circles:** Mapping letter permutations and cyclical time.
- **Significance:** These images acted as emissaries for the esoteric tradition.



# The River of Interpretation





# Sources & Further Reading

- Avishai Bar-Asher: The Earliest Version of *Sefer Yesirah* (2023)
- Peter Hayman: *Sefer Yesira*: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary (2004)
- Raphael Jospe: Early Philosophical Commentaries on the *Sefer Yezirah* (1990)
- Marla Segol: Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah (2012)
- Steven M. Wasserstrom: *Sefer Yesira* and Early Islam (1994)
- Tzahi Weiss: *Sefer Yesirah and its Contexts* (2018)