

A Headlong Stumble down the Paths of Wisdom

Or

A very brief introduction to the Sefer Yetzirah

By

V.W.Fra Barry M Wiggins VII°

A paper delivered to Mersey College – 12
Province of Western Counties and North Wales
Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia

19th November 2004

I will start with a quote:

*“He who attempts to penetrate into the rose garden of the philosophers without the key resembles a man who would walk without feet.”*¹

My paper this evening is entitled A Headlong Stumble down the Paths of Wisdom for very good reason. I have in preparing this paper attempted to absorb all that I can on the subject in order to obtain a key to the garden and have at times found my journey akin to tripping headfirst down a flight of stairs whilst reading the sign saying mind the step.

The Paths of Wisdom I refer to are those of the Sefer Yetzirah or Book of Formation which has been described as being *“an exquisite gem of Occult Science and (is) the oldest of the works of rabbinic philosophy still extant.”*² It is one of *“three important books of the Zohar or Splendour”*² and a translation by Dr William Wynn Westcott *“should be in every library”*².

So what exactly is this “Gem of Occult Science” and when was it written ...

I will attempt to answer the what shortly and will deal with the when now ...

According to Westcott and many other scholars the Sefer Yetzirah was authored sometime between 100 BC and 600 AD, other sources have it between 900 and 1100 AD. The consensus is a date somewhere in the second century AD however these dates are based on quotations referring to the Book of Formation found in other works positively dated in these time periods. A very eminent young Rabbi from New York; Aryeh Kaplan, in an extensive translation and interpretation published after his death in 1983 provides a very convincing argument that authorship lies with none other than Abraham on the basis that some of the scriptures refer to him using techniques described within it and many other early works such as the Zohar and Razi'el attribute it to him directly. If Talmudic timelines are to be believed that places it's origin before 1800 BC.

What is not in any doubt however is that it predates every other Kabbalistic text in existence.

If the exact date of authorship remains a mystery the what becomes even more of a minefield dependant on the specific translation and version consulted and the interpretation placed upon it.

For example the work itself is actually very short varying in length between 1300 and 2500 words dependant on whether you are reading a translation based on the short, long, Gra or Saadia versions. Speculation has it that the original could have been as short as only 240 words.

The subject of these very few words actually contains profound and informative instructional material on the very act of creation itself.

The depth of material in the entire text is simply immense and time does not allow me to do more than précis some of the more important points.

The words are traditionally grouped into six chapters.

The first chapter deals with the Lord of all hosts writing his name using an defined specific permutation of the 32 mysterious paths of wisdom being the Seraphim of numbers, letters and sounds of which ten are the Kabbalistic Sephiroth and the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

We are taught that the Lord created the ten Sephiroth first and as result brought into existence number.

Using these ten Sephiroth in combinations he then created the Air in order that the twenty two sounds or letters can be uttered and with which element Water, Earth and Fire are formed.

The letters are then grouped into the three mothers (Alef, Mem and Shin), the seven doubles (Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh, Resh and Tau) and twelve simples (the remaining letters). Three of the simple letters are then selected namely Yod, Heh and Vau with which, by introduction of basic factor analysis, six different permutations of the three letters are used to create the dimensions of the Universe namely height, depth and the cardinal points we know as East, West, South and North. Possibly why we use the name Yod Heh Vau Heh to represent the name we know him by.

We are also invited to imagine that the ten Sephiroth are arranged in a specific pattern and connected with lines each of which represents the 22 letters. This pattern forms what we all know as the Kabbalistic tree of life. The thirty paths relate to the acts of the Lord saying, creating, seeing and making. If you count up how often God's name occurs in the first Chapter of the book of Genesis you will understand how this correlation fits, for example "God said" occurs 10 times, relating to the Sephiroth, "God made" appears three times relating to the mothers, "God Saw" appears seven times and the remaining twelve times God does something relates to the simples.

It is also not a coincidence that there are 22 Major Arcanca in a standard Tarot deck each of which corresponds in turn to a different Hebrew letter. There is more to this subject than at first meets the eye.

Chapter two teaches how each of the letters is pronounced using five different parts of the mouth compressing and shaping the vibrating air. The correct pronunciation and vibration of each letter is an important tool used in many occult traditions to summon forth protective spirits and angelic forces to assist in the work. The works of Israel Regardie are one such example. We are then introduced to more factor analysis and arrive at the number 231 being the number of lines needed to join 22 points equally spaced around the edge of a circle. These 231 lines or gates connect each of two letters and so we are led to understand that there are therefore 462 two letter permutations available using 22 letters allowing for reversal.

Not surprisingly considering the interconnectedness of all things one of the Hebrew words for path is Nativ which, if you use gematria, also equates to a numeric value of 462.

The remaining four chapters deal with each of the letter groups and the permutations possible. These chapters describe how the correct pronunciation of the permutations by the creator allowed him to define the structure of all things in nature, the human consciousness and the workings of the universe. In essence it describes a method of bringing into existence the microcosm and more specifically by extrapolation a way of fathoming and pronouncing the true name of God, a subject we have all come across in our Masonic careers.

As you can probably gather this very short work contains a vast wealth of Kabbalistic knowledge and concepts which I have most certainly only scratched the surface of in my researches.

In a nutshell I have found that if you want to remain mystified and on your own as to what this Gem of Occult science is all about then you should stick with Westcott's translation alone. If you want some guidance along the way and be quite frankly astounded by how much depth and breadth this small piece can offer you really should obtain a volume such as Kaplan's.

And finally a thought from the pen of the late Douglas Adams ³:

“There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable.”

“There is another theory which states that this has already happened.”

Acknowledgements

1
Atalanta Fugiens
Michael Maier
1618

2
Clavicula Rosicruciana III
William Robert Woodman
1886

3
The Restaurant at the End of the Universe
Douglas Adams
1980

Further Reading

Sepher Yetzirah, Third Edition
William Wynn Westcott
1887 World Wide Web

Notes on editions of Sefer Yetzirah in English

Don Karr
1991 World Wide Web

Foucault's Pendulum
Umberto Eco
2001 Vintage Random House

Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Creation in theory and practice Revised Edition
Aryeh Kaplan
1997 Weiser