

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

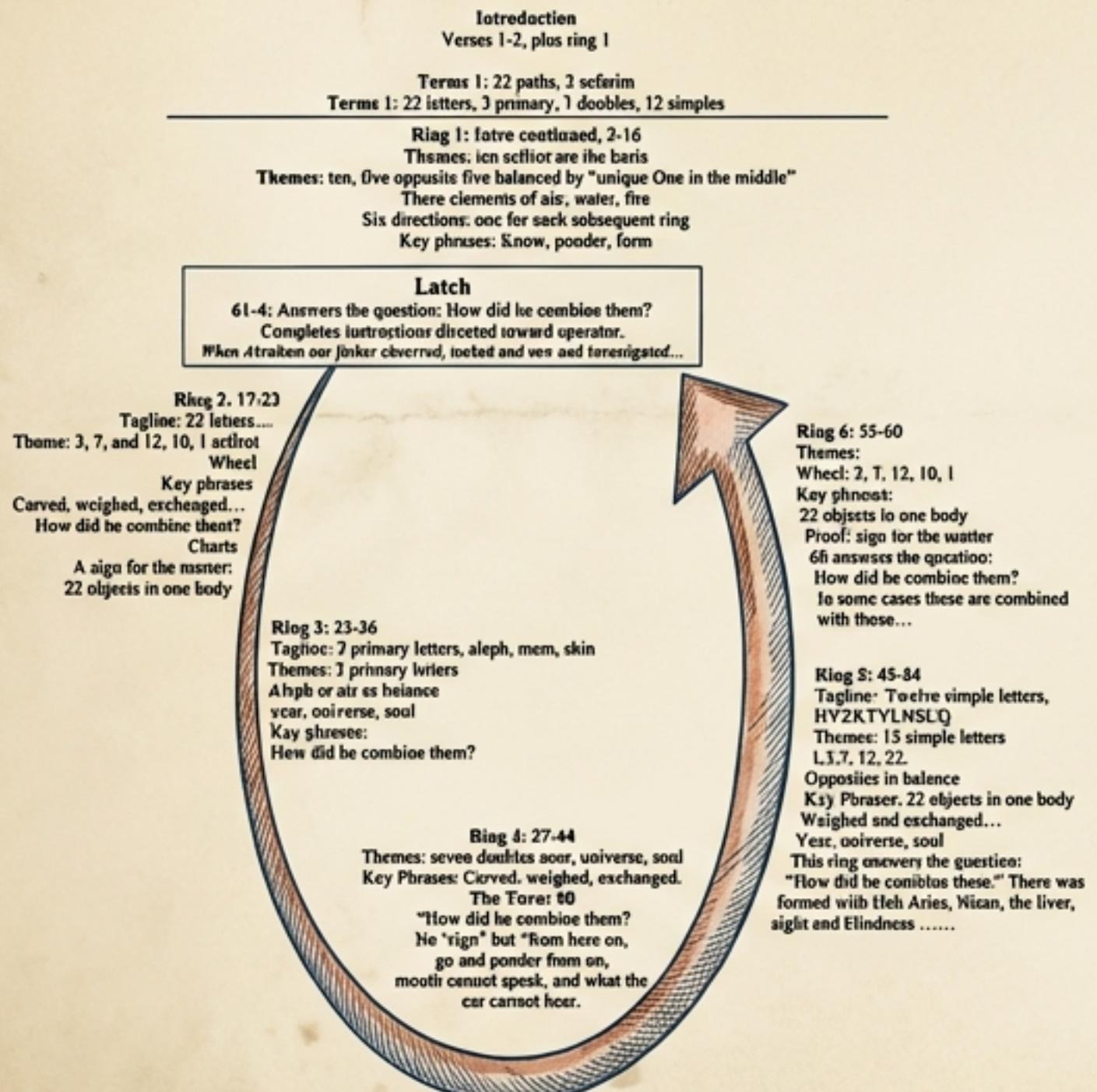
- 10 Sefirot (Belimah)

- (Dimensions of Space/Time (Derived from 'Safar' - to count))

22 Hebrew Letters

- { - 3 Mothers שׁ מָ אֵ (Aleph, Mem, Shin) 
- { - 7 Doubles פְּגַבְּ בְּחֵ (Beged Kapheret) 
- { - 12 Simples זְרַעֲמָנִים (Zodiacal/Elemental) 

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



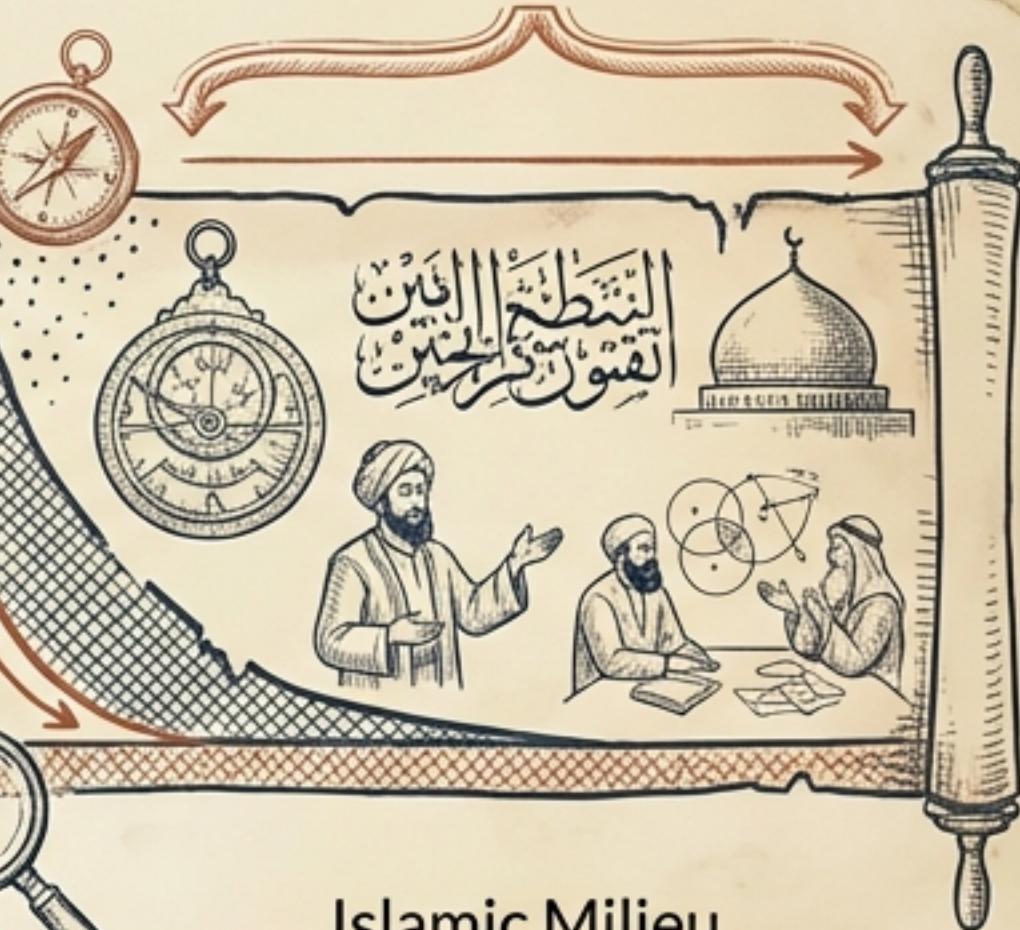
Mishnaic Period.
Attributed to R. Akiva. Ties
to Talmudic linguistic style.

7th Century:
The New Consensus (Weiss)



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

9th Century:
The Revisionist View
(Wasserstrom)



Islamic Milieu.
Abbasid period. Parallels
with Islamic Kalam.

Contextual Clues: The Problem of *Hilkhot Yetzirah*



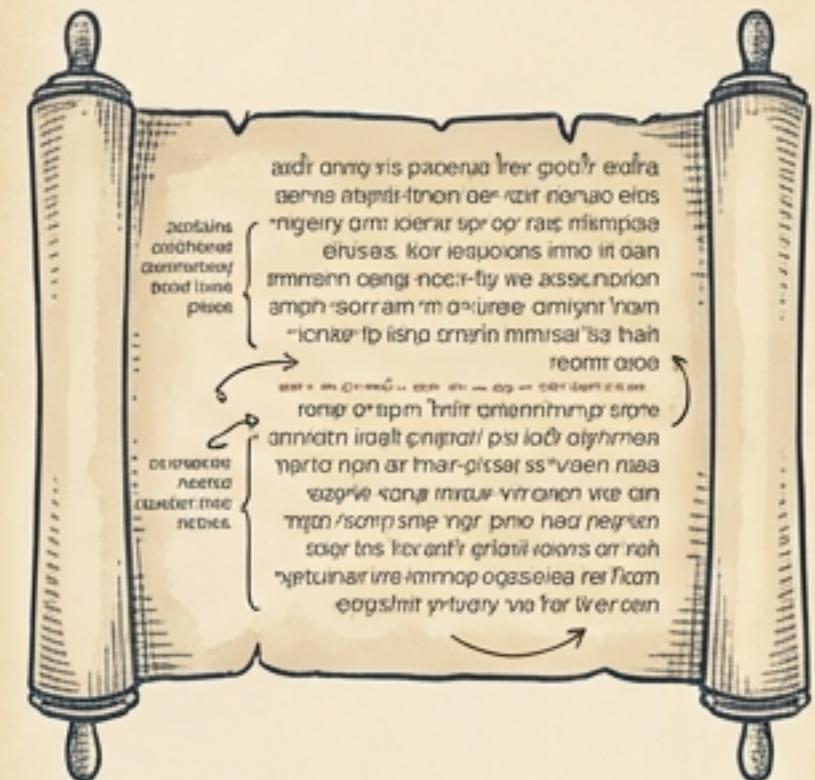
The Unstable Artifact: Manuscript Traditions

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

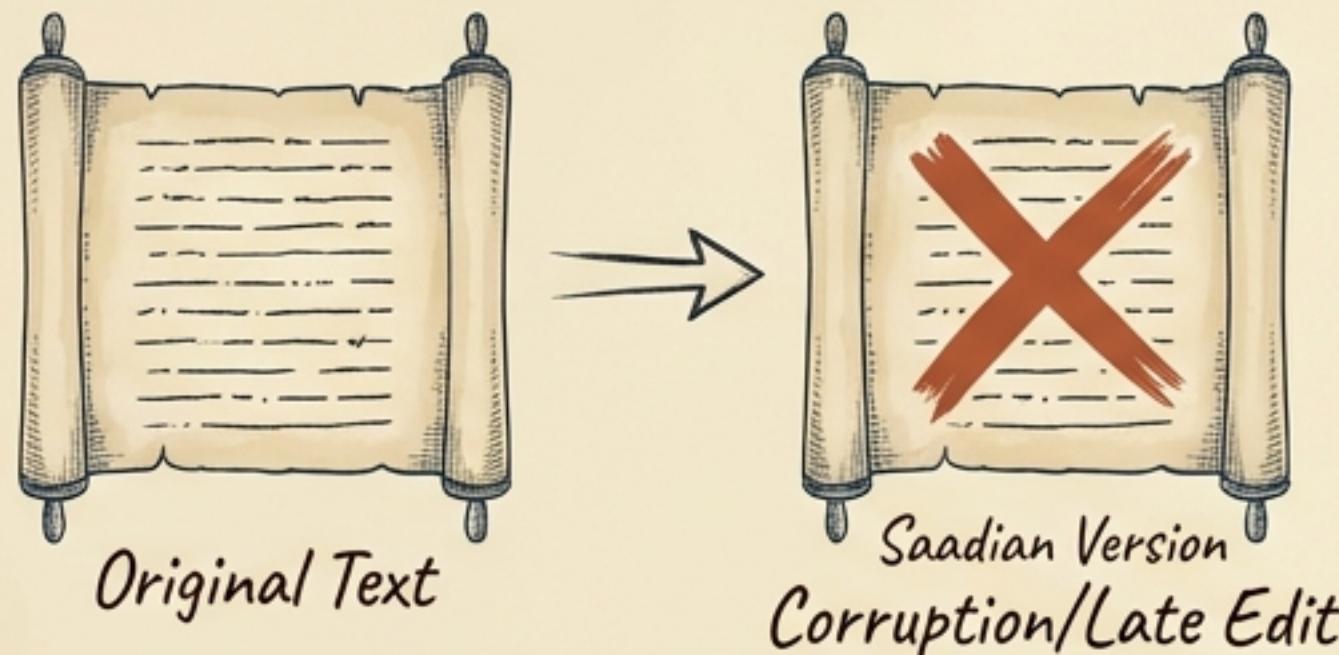


Used by Saadia Gaon (10th C.). Features a completely different arrangement of chapters and verses.

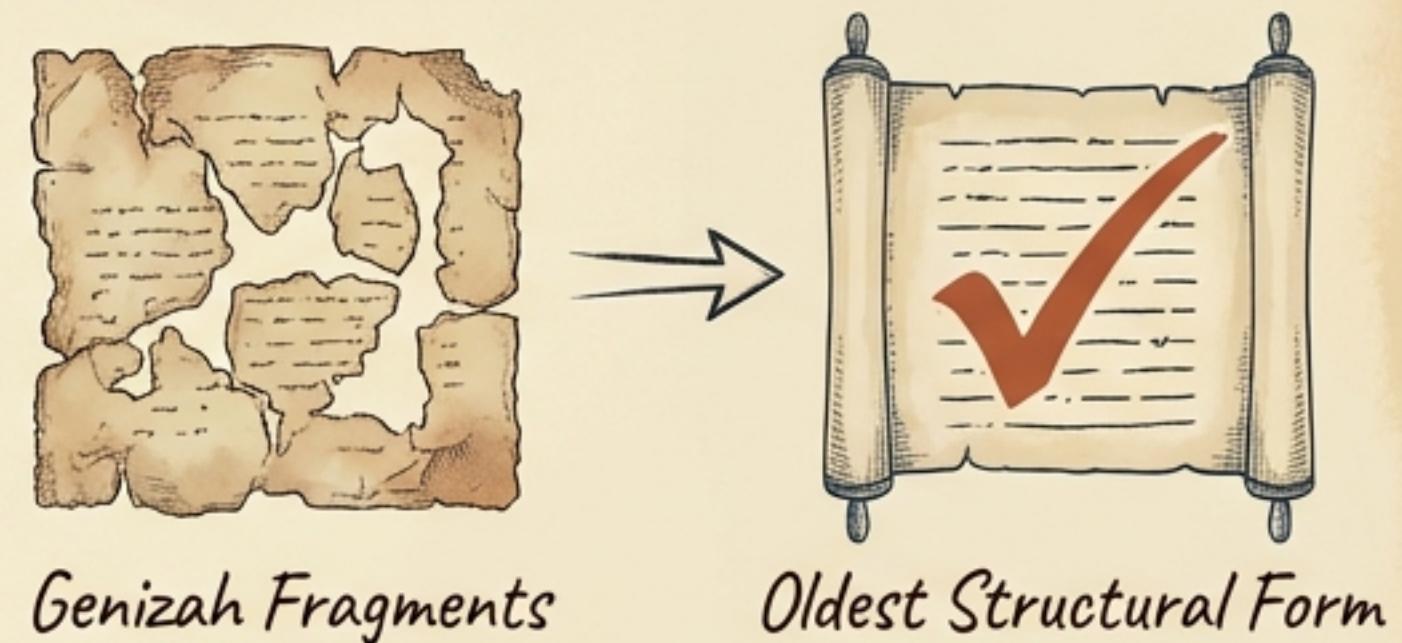
Re-evaluating the Recensions: A Scholarly Turn

BEFORE AND AFTER: A PARADIGM SHIFT

The Old Consensus

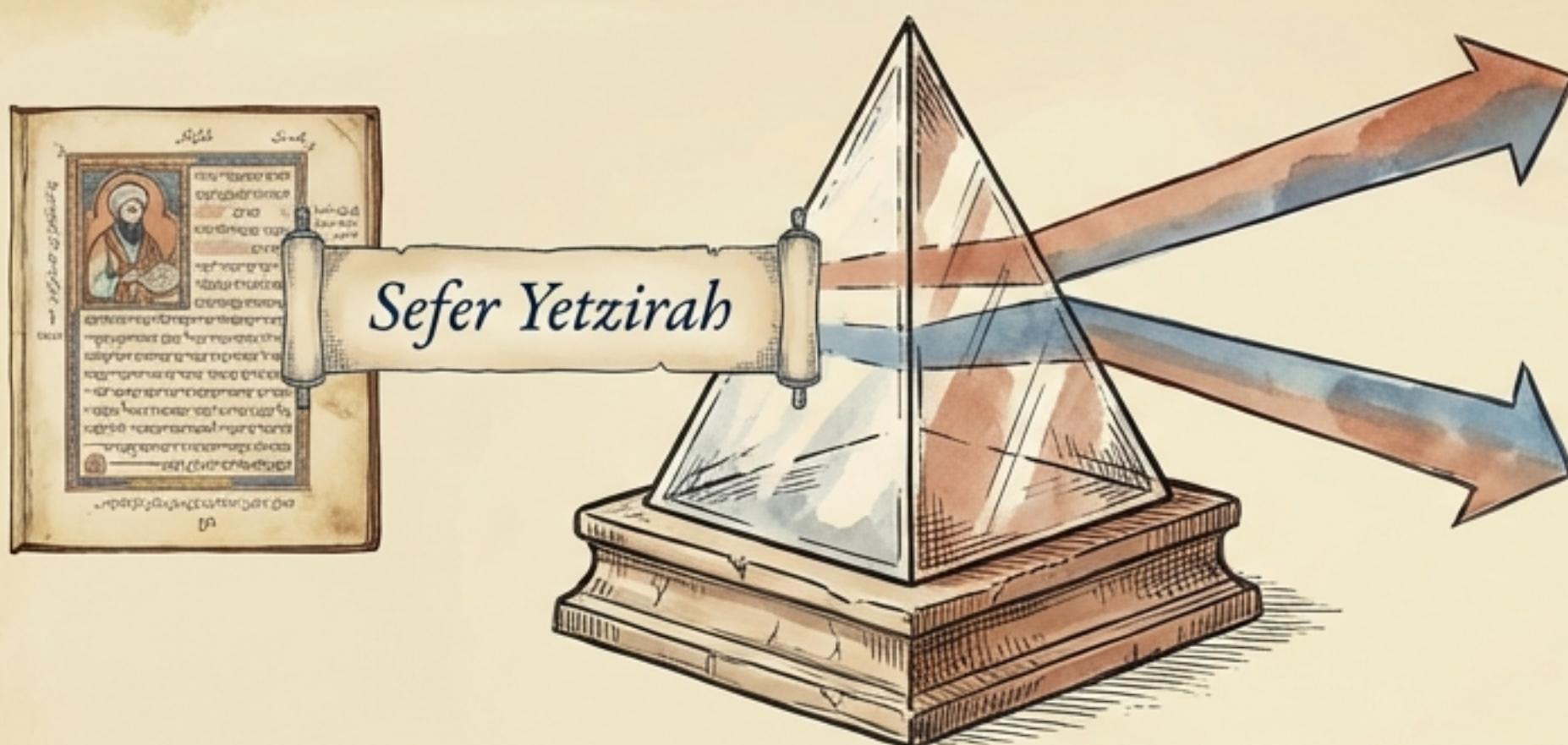


The New Insight (Avishai Bar-Asher)



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



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)

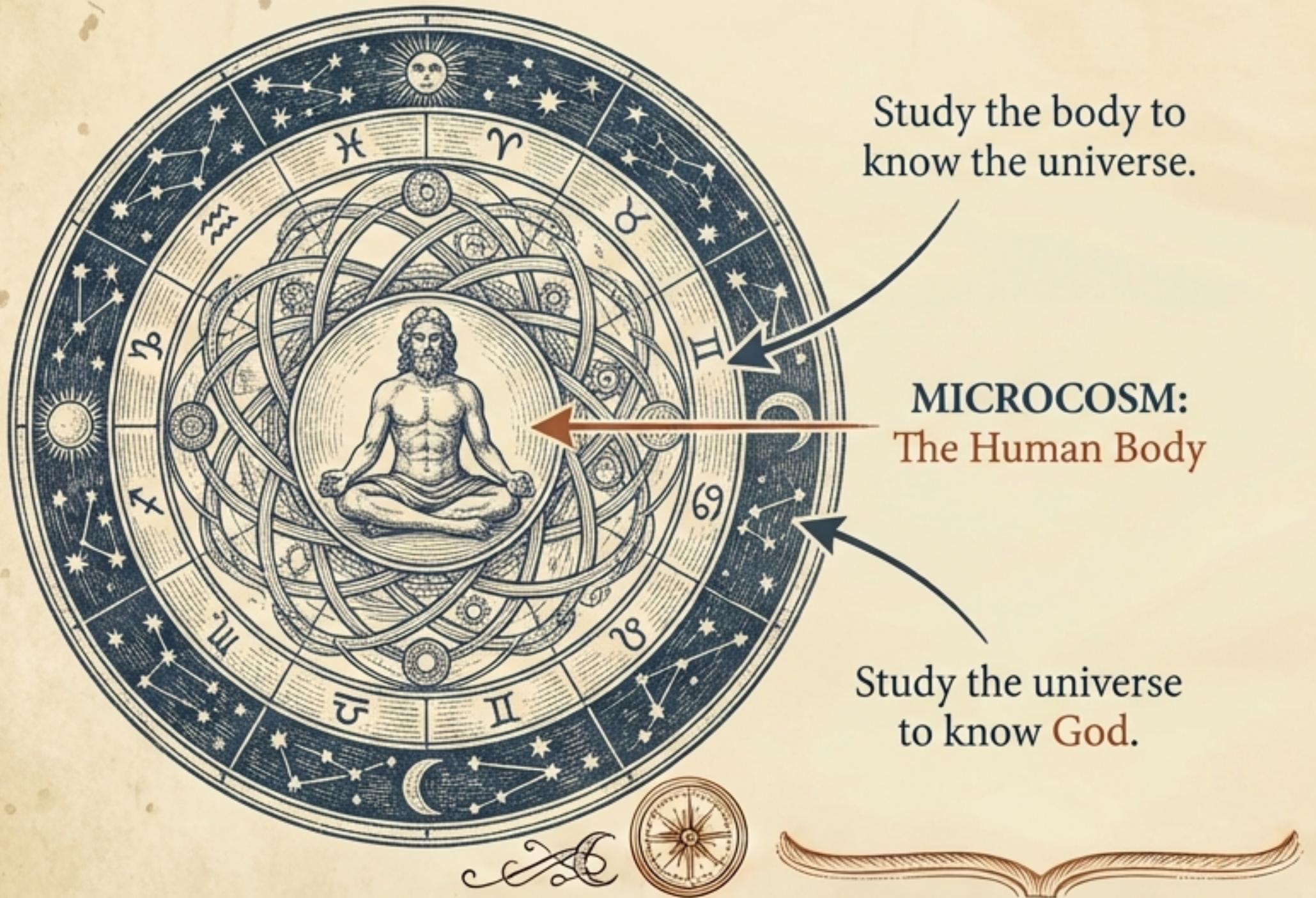


Agenda:

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.

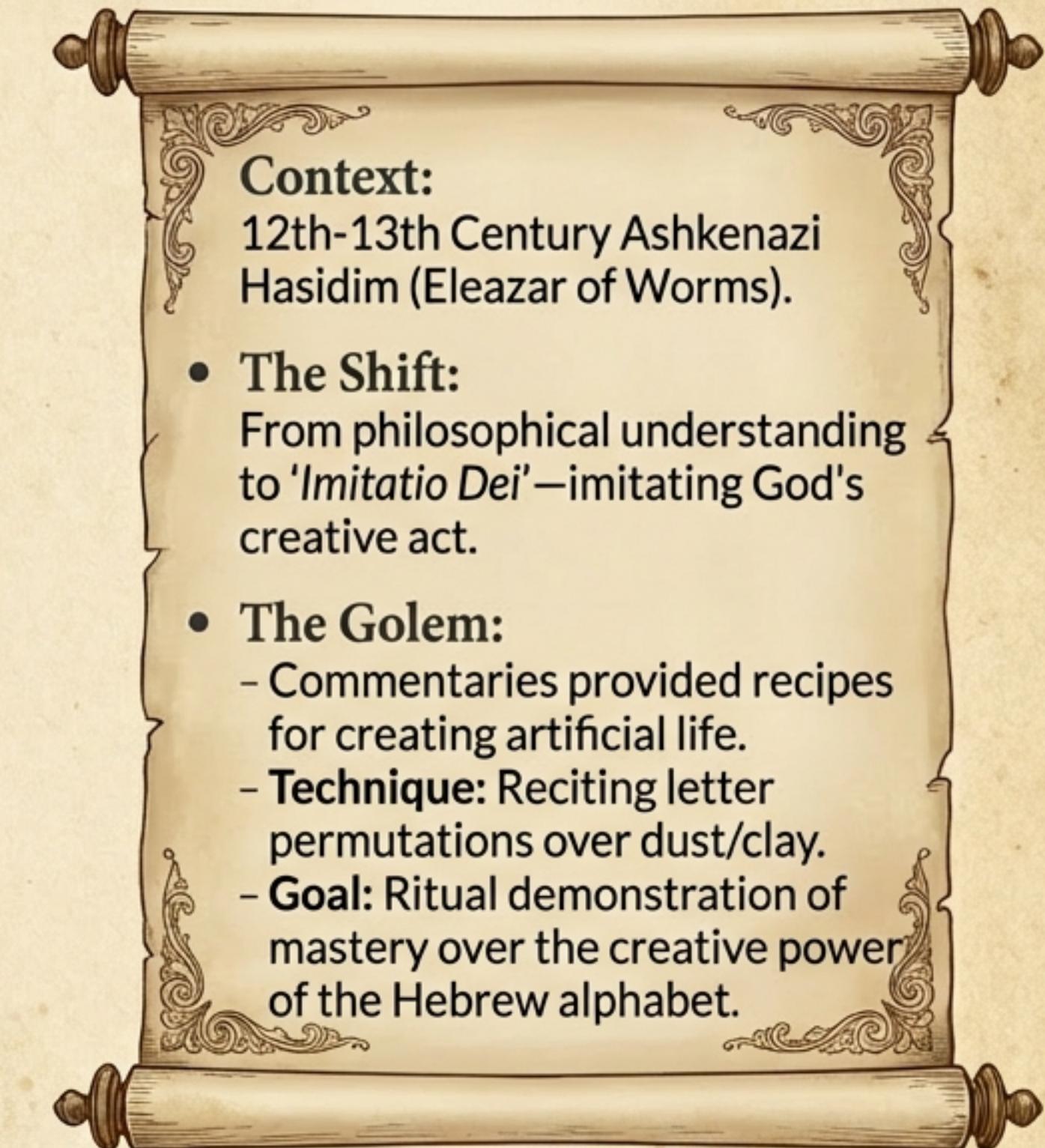
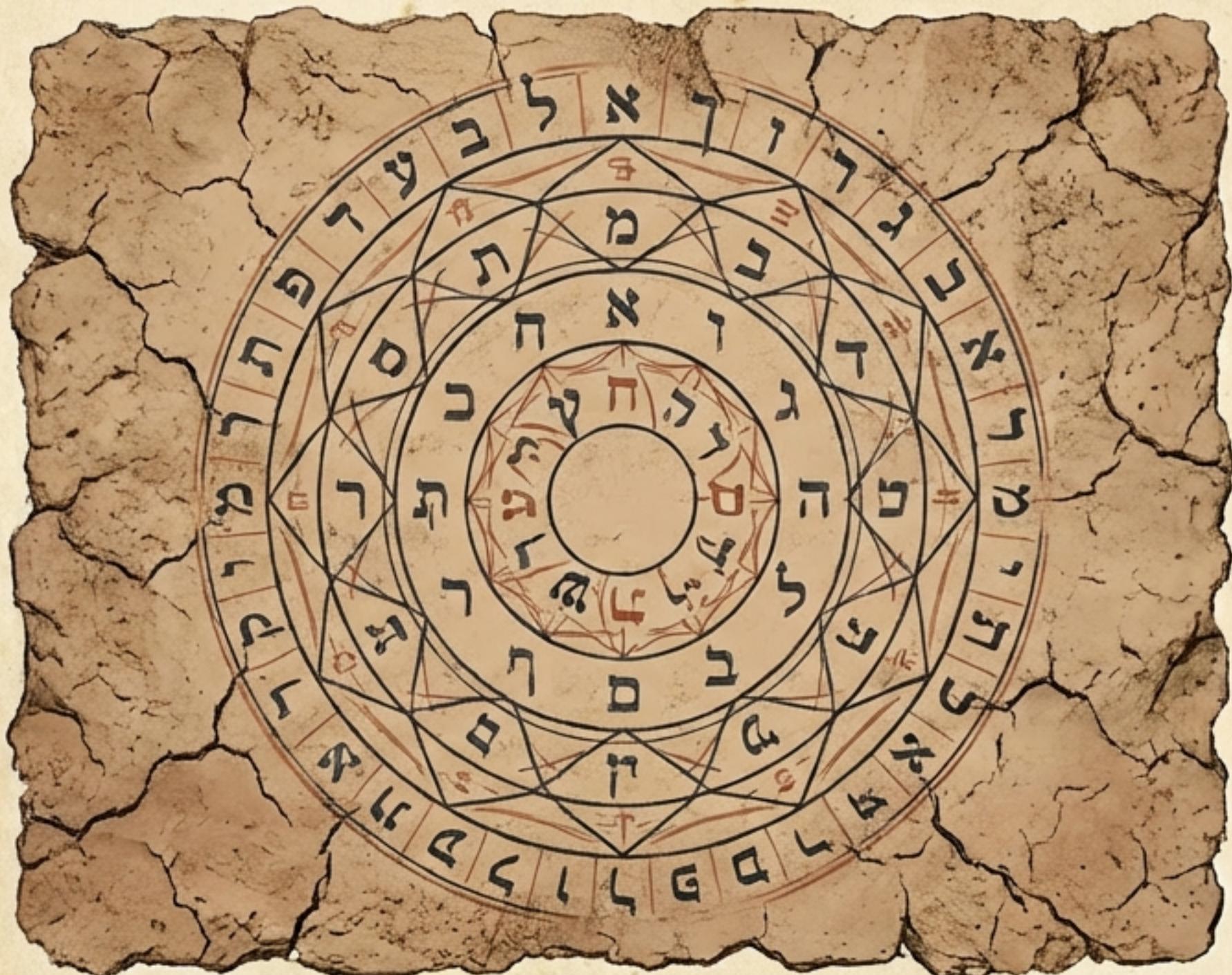
Context:
10th Century Byzantine Italy.
Physician and astronomer.

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:**

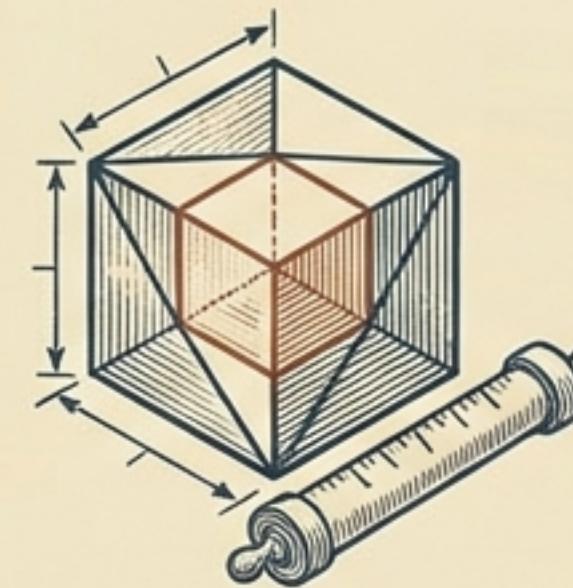
From philosophical understanding to '*Imitatio Dei*'—imitating God's creative act.

- **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 Yetzirah



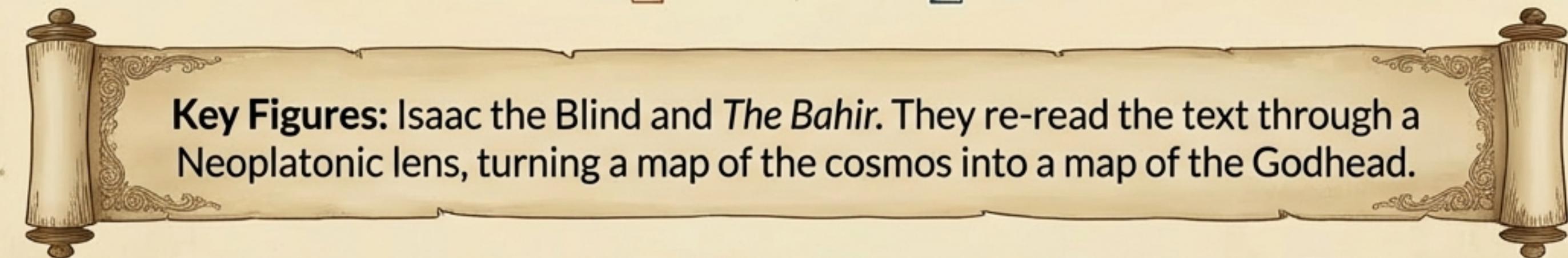
Numbers, Counting, Physical Dimensions
(Depth of Up, Depth of Down).



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).

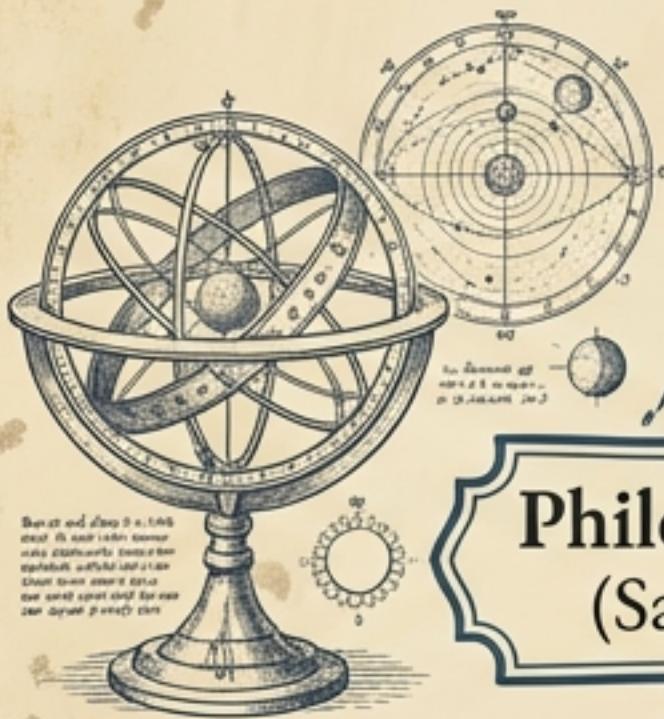
- Types:
 - **Ilanot (Trees):** Mapping Sefirotic hierarchy.
 - **Wheels/Circles:** Mapping letter permutations and cyclical time.
- Significance: These images acted as emissaries for the esoteric tradition.

אינו יתנו לך לירחון נושא איזה שיר או מיקד רבעון

Archaeological Prism

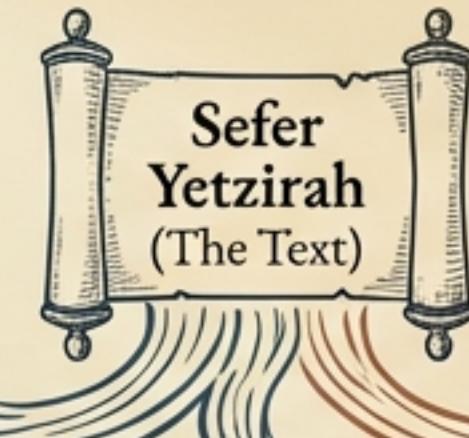
סמל החקין כי כויה זרין מדשיג הביג עיל, מרדזין לא

The River of Interpretation



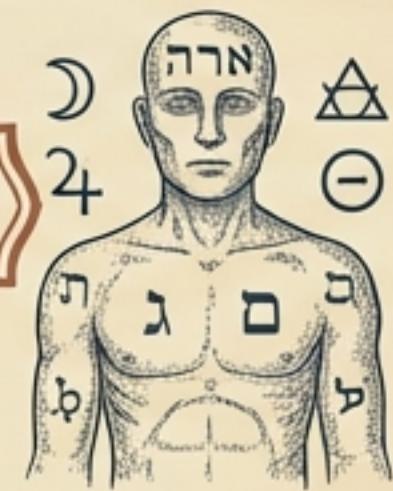
Philosophy
(Saadia)

Rational
Cosmology.



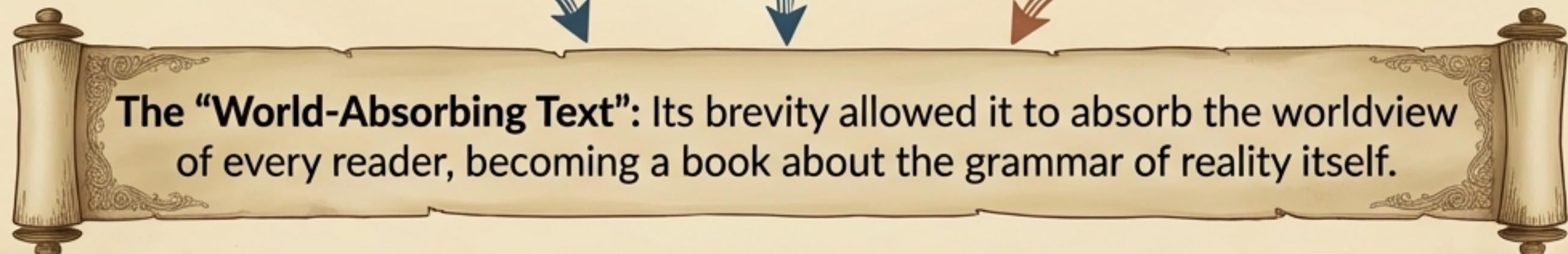
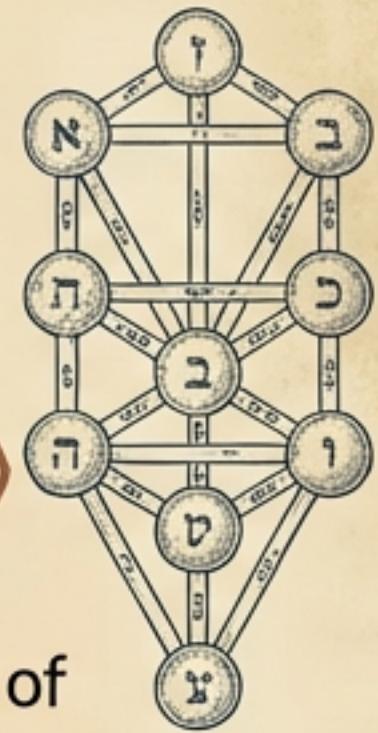
Magic
(Ashkenaz)

Manual for
Golem-Making.



Theosophy
(Kabbalah)

Map of
Divine Structure.



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)