

# Spherical *Sefirot* in Early Kabbalah\*

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## ■ Abstract

In the vein of important observations made by several scholars, in this article I discuss a variegated corpus of early sefirotic passages attesting to the prevalence and conventionality of spherical perceptions of the *sefirot*, already at the earliest stages of the sefirotic literature known to us. First, I show that for at least a substantial number of the earliest authors, seeing the *sefirot* as a set of concentric, hierarchical spherical divine entities was a self-evident premise. Second, I offer a tripartite division of the material, based on the different types of inner hierarchies characterizing the spherical descriptions. For each of these types I offer a relevant ideational context, related to contemporary cosmological conventions as well as to various theological notions.

## ■ Keywords

medieval kabbalah, *sefirot*, medieval cosmology, medieval astronomy, circles

## ■ Introduction

The term “kabbalah” is used in scholarship to designate an extensive and variegated range of treatises and theological notions. Nonetheless, in terms of theological content, the common denominator of this variety seems to be the belief in a stratified

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emanational divine structure, namely, the *sefirot*. Despite the great variety of sefirotic concepts, as a rule the *sefirot* have been described in scholarly literature as a multilinear, hierarchical structure of divine hypostases, usually adding up to a total of ten.<sup>1</sup> Gershom Scholem and others did observe that sefirotic texts and diagrams depict the *sefirot* also in nonlinear ways, most prominently as sets of concentric circles or spheres, and that other aspects of sefirotic theosophy are also often conveyed by means of circular or spherical structures.<sup>2</sup> These observations were mostly suggested regarding specific sefirotic authors or corpora, or when describing the inner variation characterizing sefirotic theosophy as a whole.<sup>3</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Pirkei Yesod Be-Havanat Ha-Kabbala U-Semaleha* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1980) 82 [Hebrew]; Moshe Idel, "Sefirot above the Sefirot: A Study of the Early Kabbalist's Sources," *Tarbiz* 51.2 (1982) 80–239 [Hebrew]; idem, "On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah," *Da'at* 50–52 (2003) xxxi–lviii; idem, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005) 41–75. Also see Marla Segol, *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah: The Texts, Commentaries, and Diagrams of the Sefer Yetsirah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), who refers to the linear structure as "sefirotic cosmology."

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Abrams, "Kabbalistic Paratext," *Kabbalah* 26 (2012) 7–24; idem, "Divine Multiplicity: The Presentation of Differing Sefirotic Diagrams in Kabbalistic Manuscripts," *Kabbalah* 50 (2021) 81–152, at 81–84; J. H. Chajes, "The Kabbalistic Tree," in *The Visualization of Knowledge in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period* (ed. Marcia Kupfer, Adam Cohen, and J. H. Chajes; Studies in the Visual Cultures of the Middle Ages 16; Turnhout: Brepols, 2020) 449–73 (henceforth, Chajes, "Kabbalistic Tree" [article]); Giulio Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 2005); Moshe Idel, "Some Concepts of Time and History in Kabbalah," in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi* (ed. Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Myers; Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998) 153–88, esp. 163–66.

<sup>3</sup> Among them, Gershom Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir. Ein Schriftidenkmal aus der Frühzeit der Kabbala auf Grund der kritischen Neuausgabe* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970) 110–11, 130; idem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky; trans. Allan Arkush; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987); Georges Vajda, *Le commentaire d'Ézra de Jérôme sur le cantique des cantiques. Traduction et notes* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1969) 159, 184; Charles Mopsik, *Les grands textes de la Cabale. Les rites qui font Dieu. Pratiques religieuses et efficacité théurgique dans la Cabale, des origines au milieu du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Verdier, 1993) 223; Moshe Idel, "Some Concepts of Time and History in Kabbalah," and compare Elliot R. Wolfson, "Metaphor, Dream, and the Parabolic Bridging of Difference: A Kabbalistic Aesthetic," *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Culture* 14 (2020) 82–95, and idem, *Suffering Time: Philosophical, Kabbalistic, and Hasidic Reflections on Temporality* (Boston: Brill, 2021) 88–89; Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (trans. Jonathan Chipman; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); idem, "On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah"; idem, *The Privileged Divine Feminine in Kabbalah* (Boston: de Gruyter, 2019) 23–24, 57; Oded Porat, *The Works of Iyyun: Critical Editions* (ed. idem; Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2013) [Hebrew]; idem, "Founding of the Circle": Rudiments of Esse and Linguistic Creation in "The Book of Fountain of Wisdom" and Its Related Treatises (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2019) [Hebrew]; Daniel Abrams, "Kabbalistic Paratext," *Kabbalah* 26 (2012) 7–24, esp. 8, 16; Moshe Idel, "Visualization of Colors, I: David ben Yehudah he-Hasid's Kabbalistic Diagram," *Ars Judaica; the Bar-Ilan Journal of Jewish Art* 11 (2015) 31–54. In his "On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah," Moshe Idel touched upon this issue while referring to a "theo-astral" concept of the *sefirot*. According to Idel, some kabbalists integrated astral themes into the sefirotic system, while adapting and adjusting both one to the other. The astral themes he mentions seem to include the quality of sphericity. He also mentions the term "orbs of the *sefirot*" (n. 70), remarking that it appears in 13th-cent. kabbalistic literature. See also Segol, *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah*, 70–71.

recent years, scholars are gradually coming to acknowledge the centrality of the spherical sefirotic concepts, and this seems to be related to two newly pursued scholarly perspectives: first, a focus on the visual and graphical aspect of kabbalistic manuscripts, that is, the sefirotic diagrams, many of which indeed display spherical theosophic structures;<sup>4</sup> and second, a growing skepticism regarding the long accepted binary division between the so-called kabbalah and philosophy (the latter, including astronomy, based on spherical geocentric cosmological conventions) in medieval Jewish sources.<sup>5</sup> Thus, recently J. H. Chajes argued in an important article that both graphically and conceptually, kabbalists visualized the *sefirot* in ways that depended on contemporary cosmological knowledge regarding a spherical cosmos.<sup>6</sup> Chajes focused on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century kabbalistic diagrams and on

<sup>4</sup> Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva*; the “Ilanot: Maps of God” research project led by J. H. Chajes at the University of Haifa, and see his recent article: J. H. Chajes, “Spheres, Sefirot, and the Imaginal Astronomical Discourse of Classical Kabbalah,” *HTR* 113 (2020) 230–62, to be discussed below in detail; Segol, *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah*; Abrams, “Kabbalistic Paratext”; Abrams, “Divine Multiplicity.”

<sup>5</sup> To name a few: Yosef Ben-Shlomo, “The Philosophical Elements in the Kabbalah According to Gershom Scholem,” in *Proceedings of the National Science Academy* 8:6 (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1997) 109–29 [Hebrew]; Boaz Huss, “Mysticism versus Philosophy in Kabbalistic Literature,” *Micrologus. Natura, scienze e società medievali* 9 (2001) 125–35; Idel, *Enchanted Chains*; idem, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Tanja Werthmann, “Prime Matter as Wisdom in Geronese Kabbalah: Philosophical Precedents to the Elevated Ontological Status of the Hypostatic Female,” *JR* 101 (2021) 223–58; Christina Ciucu, “Neo-Platonism and the Cabalistic Structure of the Divine Emanation,” *Caietele Echinox* 12 (2007) 184–93; Elliot R. Wolfson, “‘Via Negativa’ in Maimonides and Its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah,” *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008) 393–442; Jonathan Dauber, *Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah* (Boston: Brill, 2012); Sandra Valabregue-Perry, “Philosophy, Heresy and Kabbalah’s Counter Theology,” *HTR* 109 (2016) 233–56; Mark B. Sendor, *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind’s Commentary on Sefer Yezirah* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1995); Sarah Heller-Willensky, “Isaac ibn Latif, Philosopher or Kabbalist?,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (ed. Alexander Altmann; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 185–223; idem, “The Guide and the Gate: The Dialectical Influence of Maimonides on Isaac ibn Latif and Early Spanish Kabbalah,” in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture; Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman* (ed. Ruth Link-Salinger; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988) 266–78; Adam Afterman, “The ‘Language of Creation’ in the Early Writings of R. Joseph Gikatilla,” *Da’at* 82 (2016) 125–49. More specifically, much has been written on Maimonides and kabbalah; to name a few: Idel, “Sefirot above the Sefirot”; idem, “On Maimonides in Nahmanides and His School,” in *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis* (ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow; New York: Michael Scharf Publication Trust of the Yeshiva University Press, 2010) 131–64; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth Century Kabbalah,” in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical “Wirkungsgeschichte” in Different Cultural Contexts* (ed. Görgo K. Hasselhoff and Ottfried Fraise; Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004) 209–37; idem, “‘Via Negativa’ in Maimonides.”

<sup>6</sup> Chajes, “Spheres,” 238–51. See also idem, “Kabbalistic Tree” (article), 449–73; and Idel, “Some Concepts of Time and History in Kabbalah,” 163–66. See also Chajes’s previous “Kabbalah and the Diagrammatic Phase of the Scientific Revolution,” in *Jewish Culture in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of David B. Ruderman* (ed. Richard I. Cohen et al.; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2014) 109–23.

the writings of the sixteenth-century kabbalist Moses Cordovero, while showing that the roots of these spherical-cosmological concepts of the *sefirot* were found in some earlier sefirotic sources that Cordovero was himself critically reviewing.<sup>7</sup>

In this study, I wish to focus on the earliest sefirotic literature in order to expand and refine the existing valuable scholarly assertions and add my own perspective. In what follows, I will develop the argument regarding variegated earlier sefirotic sources, showing that, indeed, the conception of the *sefirot* as spherical entities is as early as the sefirotic literature itself, dating to the beginning of the thirteenth century at the latest. My claim is that this view of the *sefirot* was common among the earliest writers, a fact easily overlooked precisely because this concept was so self-evident and natural for the earliest writers that they saw no need to present, explain, or justify it in a straightforward manner. This is, indeed, why in the earliest texts the sphericity of the *sefirot* is often merely implied, and also why only as we draw closer to the end of the thirteenth century do we find the more elaborate and reflexive passages on the subject. Also, to be sure, this spherical concept of the *sefirot* was not exclusive and did not deter the writers from using additional sefirotic images, sometimes side by side within a single text or passage. Still, my claim is that a substantial part of the early sefirotic authors envisaged and perceived the *sefirot* primarily as spherical divine entities.

I will begin my discussion by analyzing early passages corroborating my claim. Then, I will offer a preliminary typology of the different specific types of sphericities expressed in the early sources. In accordance with Chajes's findings, we will see that cosmological conventions were indeed a central—though not the sole—factor in the formation of the earlier spherical notion of the *sefirot*. Thus, I will show that the ideational background for this early conception of the *sefirot* included additional factors, most prominently a theological and mystical medieval preoccupation with divine circular structures, alongside certain theological notions from late antique Jewish sources that exerted significant influence on the early kabbalists. In this manner, my aim will be to illustrate the centrality, scope, and inner variation characterizing the spherical concepts of the *sefirot* in early sefirotic literature.

### ■ Circle within a Circle: The Sphericity of the *Sefirot* in Thirteenth-Century Sefirotic Literature

I wish to open with Isaac of Acre, one of the most eloquent sefirotic authors regarding the sphericity of the *sefirot*, although he is not among the earliest writers to be discussed in this article. Especially in his *Me'irat Einayim*, a large commentary on Nachmanides's commentary on the Torah, dating probably to the end of the

<sup>7</sup> Compare Idel, "Visualization of Colors, I," 52–53, and Elliot R. Wolfson, "Metaphor, Dream, and the Parabolic Bridging of Difference: A Kabbalistic Aesthetic," *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Culture* 14 (2020) 91–92.

thirteenth century or the very first years of the fourteenth,<sup>8</sup> he refers to the sphericity of the *sefirot*, such as in the following passage:<sup>9</sup>

And you should know that the *Atara* [the tenth *sefirah*] was [first] to be thought of and last to be emanated [. . .] and when you count [the *sefirot*] from your right to your left you will find them to be ten, and you will see that the *Keter* [the first *sefirah*] is a house for them all and surrounds [them all]. It therefore follows that in what regards emanation, the antecedent will always be smaller [than all others] and will be surrounded by all others, and will be contained in everything. And this is like onion layers. And this is similar to the inferior Earth, which is small, and is situated in the midst of everything which has been created, for it is like a mustard [seed] in a ring,<sup>10</sup> and it is compound of all the elements and it is situated in the middle like the heart in the human body. Thus, so to speak, is the *Atara* [. . .]. Observe and see that the *Atara* is contained inside the *Tzadik* [penultimate *sefirah*] and inside of all her superior ones [namely, the other *sefirot*], and [the *Atara*] is unified into them and is surrounded by them, and so is the *Tzadik*, and so is the *Hod*, and so the *Netzah*, and so the *Gevurah* [. . .] and so the *Binah*, and so the *Hokhma*; and the *Keter* contains everything.<sup>11</sup>

In a straightforward and detailed manner, Isaac summarizes the main point I underline in this study: that thirteenth-century kabbalists perceived the *sefirot* as a spherical concentric decimal structure of a distinct inner hierarchy. Here, in Isaac's description, the top of the hierarchy is described as located in the outermost sphere, a feature which is presented as an all-encompassing metaphysical principle, and which is understood as analogous to the structure of the geocentric cosmos. The clarity and great detail of this passage are more characteristic of the relatively later sources within the early sefirotic corpus. In contradistinction, the following are good examples of earlier kabbalistic sources in which the sphericity of the *sefirot*

<sup>8</sup> Amos Goldreich, *Sefer Meirat Einayim* by R. Isaac of Acre: A Critical Edition (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1984) 99 [Hebrew].

<sup>9</sup> The text is accompanied with a diagram that was often copied and adapted over the following centuries. See Abrams, "Kabbalistic Paratext"; idem, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes; Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010); Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva*; Valabregue-Perry, "Philosophy, Heresy and Kabbalah's Counter Theology," 167–69; Chajes, "Spheres"; idem, "Kabbalistic Tree" (article). The earliest manuscript containing the diagram dates to the end of the 14th cent., Parma Palatina MS 2784; see Abrams, "Divine Multiplicity," 145. As Chajes and others pointed out, it was adapted and included in the popular Pardes Rimoni of Moses Cordovero.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the onion, see: J. H. Chajes, *The Kabbalistic Tree* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2022) 13 (henceforth, Chajes, *Kabbalistic Tree* [book]). On different earlier uses of the mustard seed image, see Daniel Abrams, *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1994) §122 [Hebrew]; Ibn Gabirol, *Keter Malkhut*, ch. 23 (*The Crown of Kingship* ["*Keter Malkhut*"] of Solomon Ibn Gabirol [critical edition of Keter Malkhut based on manuscripts and old prints with commentary; ed. Israel Levin; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2005] 271 [Hebrew]); see also Chajes, *Kabbalistic Tree* (book).

<sup>11</sup> Goldreich, *Sefer Meirat Einayim*, 188 §25, 119 §3. On Isaac's use of sefirotic images, see Chajes, *Kabbalistic Tree* (book), 24.

was mentioned or presupposed, but only apropos discussions of other issues and in less didactic detail.

I begin with the Bahir, which is commonly considered to be the earliest sefirotic treatise known to us. Passage 122 in the Bahir seems as straightforward as it gets in identifying the celestial spheres (*galgalim*) with the bahiric sefirotic notion of ten “utterances” (*ma’amarot*).<sup>12</sup> This is well known, and Scholem already discussed this a century ago, when he remarked that these were indeed the astronomical spheres that were identified with the *sefirot*, following the philosophical commentators of Sefer Yetzirah who understood the term *sefirot* as referring to the celestial spheres.<sup>13</sup> However, I would like to draw our attention to a much more minute, though telling, phrasing found in passage 102. This passage reminds us that the concept of “firmament” or heavens (*raki’a*, *shamayim*) was understood in this period as a spherical celestial entity:<sup>14</sup> “The Seventh [divine utterance, *ma’amar*] is ‘The Plains of Heaven’ [*Arvoth Shamayim*]. And why is it called ‘Heaven’? Because it is round like a head.”<sup>15</sup> What is remarkable about this description is its straightforwardness alongside its incidental, nonreflexive tone: When trying to substantiate a tradition concerning the designation of the seventh *sefirah* as related both to a “surface” (*arvoth*) and to a “heaven” (*shamayim*), the explanation links these terms to the fact that this “seventh” is of spherical form, in the likeness of a head.<sup>16</sup> In other words, seeing the notion of “heaven” as a sphere is, for this author, a self-evident presumption on the basis of which he suggests an explanation for a tradition regarding the name of one of the sefirotic entities. In this case, it seems that the only reason the sphericity of the seventh *sefirah* was mentioned to begin with was the author’s purpose of explaining a specific designation he was familiar with. Indeed, the sphericity of the heavens or *sefirot* as such, was, for him, a given,

<sup>12</sup> For more on these “utterances,” see Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, §32, 84, 94–96, 105, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*, 130. On possible diagrammatic arboreal imagery in the Bahir, see Chajes, *Kabbalistic Tree* (book), 16.

<sup>14</sup> The sphericity of the heavens was established in Aristotle’s *De caelo*, books 1–2, in which he explained why the spheres, as well as the planets, must be spherical. In the period under scrutiny, we have, for example, Sacrobosco’s popular treatise under the same name, in which three reasons for the sphericity of the cosmos were presented. Since late antiquity, this sphericity has almost never been questioned; see Edward Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs: The Medieval Cosmos, 1200–1687* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 14–15, 113–22. The order of the concentric spheres expresses hierarchies to a no lesser extent than linear hierarchies, already in Aristotle’s highly influential *De caelo* (*De caelo* 2; Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, 14). This remained a very common contention in the Middle Ages, and specifically in the first part of the 13th cent. The centrality of Aristotle’s *De caelo* in Jewish medieval thought can be gleaned from Maimonides’s discussions on the problems arising from the theory of epicycles and eccentrics.

<sup>15</sup> Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, §102. Regarding a line of influence with Eleazar of Worms’s depiction of the heavens as round and this passage from the Bahir, see Daniel Abrams, *Sexual Symbolism and Merkavah Speculation in Medieval Germany: A Study of the Sod ha-Egoz Texts* (Texts and Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism 13; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 53 n. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the head symbol, see Steffen Siegel, “Kosmos und Kopf. Die Sichtbarkeit des Weltbildes,” in *Die Welt als Bild. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Visualität von Weltbildern* (ed. Christoph Marksches and Johannes Zachhuber; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008) 113–42.

self-evident fact, itself not worthy of attention.<sup>17</sup> In this regard it is interesting that, according to *Sefer haShem* (formerly attributed to Moses de León), by the end of the thirteenth century, kabbalists associated the circular depictions of the *sefirot* primarily with the Bahir, although by this stage, it is said there, most of them in fact no longer accepted this view.<sup>18</sup>

Another example, from the middle of the thirteenth century, which allows us a glimpse at the kabbalists' spherical concept of the *sefirot*, can be found in the famous and influential treatise on the left emanation by Isaac HaCohen.<sup>19</sup> In this anthology of early traditions, Isaac depicts a demonic quasi-sefirotic structure of the "other," negative, left side of the Godhead. Having specified the various names and designations of the demonic powers linked to this side, he goes on to address, albeit very briefly, the aspect of structure of this left emanation, indicating that, "this is the order of all the configurations [*ma'arakhot*]*—a circle within a circle.*"<sup>20</sup> This comment reveals that for the writer it was self-evident that the right emanation is concentrically spherical, and he merely points to the fact that the left emanation parallels the right emanation in this respect. Moreover, it is possible to construe from this telling comment that this concentric spherical structure applies to the entire structure of the *sefirot* and not only to its parts. In what follows we will see examples of positions to which Isaac HaCohen may have been responding.

Before we proceed, however, I would like to present another early sefirotic text, probably Provençal, which conveys, again very succinctly, the notion of a spherical concentric structure of the *sefirot* as comprehensive and all-encompassing. The longer version of *Sefer HaIyyun*, of the early treatises of the anonymous Iyyun corpus, reads as follows:<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In his commentary on this passage, Scholem seemed to have missed this point, as he stated there that the explanation for the firmament's designation is incomprehensible, and it cannot be explained why the editor decided to insert this comment here; Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*, 110–11.

<sup>18</sup> Michal Oron, *Sefer ha-Shem Attributed to R. Moses de León* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010) 45 [Hebrew]. See also Abrams, "Divine Multiplicity," 120–25.

<sup>19</sup> Gershom Scholem, *The Kabbalah of R. Jacob and R. Isaac, Sons of R. Jacob Ha-Cohen* (Jerusalem: HaMadpis, 1927) 16–17, 20–23, 82–102 [Hebrew]; Ram Ben-Shalom, "Kabbalistic Circles Active in the South of France (Provence) in the Thirteenth-Century" *Tarbiz* 82 (2014) 569–605 [Hebrew]; Oded Porat, *The Writings of R. Yitzhak ben Ya'akov haCohen and R. Moshe (Zinfa) of Burgos* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2019) 9–23 [Hebrew].

<sup>20</sup> Porat, *The Writings of R. Yitzhak ben Ya'akov haCohen and R. Moshe (Zinfa) of Burgos*, 19. This phrasing recurs in Milan Ambrosiana Biblioteca MS 62, fol. 3v, and has been attributed to David ben Yehudah heHasid by Idel, "Visualization of Colors," 35. In his "On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah" (56–57), Idel mentioned Isaac in a discussion of the cosmological forms of order within kabbalistic thought and drew attention to the concept of *Ma'arakha* in the astronomical sense; see Chajes, "Spheres," 239 and n. 43. Specifically, regarding this phrasing, it should be noted that according to the notion of left emanation presented here by Isaac, indeed he seems to have perceived a dual spherical sefirotic system, and this deserves a separate discussion focused on the specific theosophical notions expressed in this treatise.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Verman, *The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 165–209; Porat, *The Writings of R. Yitzhak ben Ya'akov haCohen and R. Moshe (Zinfa) of Burgos*, 8–10.

And these are the ten actions that become revealed from the actual power [of the single first source], [and] they are ten: the first is “miraculous light,” the second is [. . .], the tenth is the divider [*pargod*]. For all of them are called crowns of honor [*kitrei kavod*], [and they are] rounded in [or: wrapped in] the appearance of a canopy.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of style and literary genre, the Iyyun writings surely pose a challenge for the reader and must be read prudently in order to parse their meaning as accurately as possible. Here, the text emphasizes that it is the ten “actions” (a sefirotic entity, related to the *Ma’amarot*) in their totality that are seen as “crowns” of the *Kavod*. What is important for us is that these ten “actions” are conceived of as nested spheres (perhaps around the inner *Kavod*) and their wrapping ability (or characteristic) is highlighted.<sup>23</sup> In general, the virtue of “wrapping” or “covering,” even more than “encircling,” is strongly associated with the notion of divine Wisdom (*Hokhma*), not only as the *sefirah Hokhma* but also as the “Ancient Wisdom” in pre-sefirotic sources, and we shall return to this important point in what follows. However, here it is not just one of the divine entities that is thus described, but rather the entire decimal structure is conceived of as ten wrapping layers around one common center that is their source.

Unlike the text we have just examined, in the following passage, attributed to Azriel of Gerona, who was active in Catalonia in the middle third of the thirteenth century, sphericity clearly characterizes only the uppermost part of the sefirotic structure:

And their position above is as follows: *Rom Ma’ala* [=the first *sefirah*, *Keter*] encircles and surrounds the *Hokhma* and the *Bina*, and they surround what is underneath them. And the *Hesed* is attracted to the *Netzah* which is on the right side, and the *Pahad* [= *Din*, *Gevurah*] is attracted to the *Hod* which is on the left side, and the *Tiferet* and the *Yesod Olam* are in the middle, and *Tzedek* [=ultimate *sefirah*] faces them.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Porat, *The Works of Iyyun*, 99 §17–21.

<sup>23</sup> For more on the image of the canopy in kabbalistic literature, see: Abrams, “Divine Multiplicity,” 94; Moshe Idel, “Wedding Canopies for the Divine Couple in R. Moshe Kordovero’s Kabbalah,” in *Avidov Lipsker Festschrift* (ed. Yigal Schwartz et al; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan, 2018) \*22–\*39; Eliezer Baumgarten and Uri Saffari, “The Wedding Canopy Is Constituted by the Being of These Sefirot”: Illustrations of the Kabbalistic Huppah and their Derivatives,” *JQR* 110 (2020) 434–57; Chajes, “Kabbalistic Tree” (article), 19. The image of a canopy made of the entirety of the *sefirot* with the *Tiferet* situated within, is depicted in a 13th-cent. commentary to the ten *sefirot* published and discussed by Daniel Abrams, “A Commentary to the Ten *Sefirot* from Early Thirteenth-Century Catalonia: Synoptic Edition, Translation, and Detailed Commentary,” *Kabbalah* 30 (2013) 7–63. See also J. H. Chajes and Eliezer Baumgarten, “Visual Kabbalah in the Italian Renaissance: *The Booklet of Kabbalistic Forms*,” *The Vatican Library Review* 1 (2022) 91–145, esp. 122–23.

<sup>24</sup> Oded Porat, *Kabbalistic Works by R. Azriel of Girona* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2019) 22, §132–35 [Hebrew]; *Sefer Ha-Peliah* (Jerusalem: Nezer Shraga Press, 1997) 150. Interestingly, Joseph Ashkenazi in his *Sefer Yetzirah* commentary remarks that some of the ten *sefirot* are spherical (*Iggulim* and *Kaddurim*), while others are like branches sprouting from the root (2, 1), but he does not specify which are which; see Joseph Ashkenazi, “Commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*,” in *Sefer*



The upper three *sefirot*, here referred to using the more familiar designations—*Keter*, *Hokhma*, *Bina*—are clearly described as three concentric spheres. The more intriguing part is what follows regarding the lower seven *sefirot*. There seems to be a certain spatial dimension to this description, most prominently regarding the ultimate *sefirah*, which is said to stand vis-à-vis the *sefirot Yesod* and *Tiferet*. Nevertheless, there is no indication that this lower part of the *sefirot* is conceived of as spherical, as sphericity is understood as a sublime attribute reserved for the upper three *sefirot* alone. In other words, sphericity here is specifically identified with the virtue of divinity and sublimity, and therefore serves to indicate an inner hierarchy within the sefirotic structure.<sup>25</sup>

This description conforms to the ancient and medieval admiration of the divine nature of the circle, an attitude that is to be found in ancient sources and to a no lesser extent in medieval astronomical literature. This is a vast topic, which could be approached from several angles and which cannot be exhausted here. Indeed, the circle was considered a divine shape in many cultures and was venerated frequently in Jewish medieval sources as well. Just a few relevant examples: in Ashkenazi literature, which exerted significant influence on sefirotic thought and *imaginaire*, the divine throne is described as spherical—a three-dimensional shape—and the various traditions regarding the *egoz* (walnut) are also based on concepts of a three-dimensional, roundish-shaped Godhead.<sup>26</sup> A closer link between the term “*sefirot*” from Sefer Yetzirah and the concept of “*sefirot*,” the planetary spheres and the shape to the circle, can be found in diagrams accompanying commentaries on Sefer Yetzirah, for example as early as in the pseudo-Saadian version, also part of medieval Ashkenazi thought,<sup>27</sup> and many more examples appear in later diagrams accompanying Sefer Yetzirah commentaries.<sup>28</sup> In addition, we find spherical images of the *sefirot*; the most famous are probably the common designations of the first and last *sefirot* as crowns (*Keter* and *Atara*).<sup>29</sup>

*Yetzirah Ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: n.p., 2004) 89 [Hebrew].

<sup>25</sup> I believe this is a similar view to the one found in a text Idel ascribed to David ben Yehudah heHasid, although he interpreted it differently. Compare Idel, “Visualization of Colors, I,” 50–51. See also Chajes, *The Kabbalistic Tree* (book), 21–22.

<sup>26</sup> Abrams, *Sexual Symbolism and Merkavah Speculation*, 32 n. 73, 35, 48–50; *The Commentaries to Ezekiel’s Chariot of R. Eleazar of Worms and R. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen* (ed. and intro. Daniel Abrams and Asi Farber-Ginat; Sources and Studies in the Literature of Jewish Mysticism 11; Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2004) [Hebrew].

<sup>27</sup> Na’ama Ben Shachar, *Commentary to Sefer Yesira Attributed to R. Saadia Gaon* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005) 313–14 [Hebrew].

<sup>28</sup> Segol, *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah*. As Chajes has shown, the basic division of the *sefirot*’s qualities in Sefer Yetzirah perfectly corresponds to the Mundus, Annus, Homo categories famously expressed in Isidor of Seville’s *De natura rerum*’s diagrams, which later on feature in the Sefer Yetzirah commentary attributed to Sa’adia Gaon (see Chajes, “Spheres”, 235 and fig. 1).

<sup>29</sup> On the *Shekhinah* as corona, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) inter alia 20, 41, 88–89.

It should be noted that the circle expressed theosophical notions also beyond the mere concept of *sefirot*: thus, for example, the concept of a spherical psychological shape, which stems from the Greek association of primordial human androgyny with round anthropomorphic shapes.<sup>30</sup> Another, more abstract expression of the circle and circularity in sefirotic thought and literature has stood at the center of Elliot Wolfson's recent investigations on the concept of time and the use of metaphors by the kabbalists.<sup>31</sup> However, alongside these various important considerations, another main point of departure when examining our texts is indeed the cosmological one. It is well known that medieval astronomical literature was extremely preoccupied with this shape and its metaphysical qualities. Thus, there are several well-known medieval scientific works titled *De sphaera*, of which John of Sacrobosco's is probably the most popular.<sup>32</sup> All these, however, are but preliminary illustrations meant to give a sense of the widespread status of the sphere and the circle as divine forms in this period, to such a degree that actual acquisition of detailed, professional astronomical knowledge would certainly not have been required in order for sefirotic writers to share this prevalent interest and reverence toward these forms as expressions of the divine aspects of the cosmos.

Going back to our main discussion, it should be stressed that reserving the quality of sphericity solely for the three upper *sefirot* had not been the standard view in thirteenth-century sefirotic sources. This can be gleaned from another interesting passage by Isaac of Acre in his *Me'irat Einayim*:

Regarding the encircling [or: circuit, *hakafa*, namely, the custom of carrying Torah scrolls seven times around the altar in the synagogue during the service of Simhat Torah], know that this hints to the encircling of the seven *sefirot* around that altar [=the ultimate *sefirah*], for all of them roll and spread about each of their seven kinds of emanation [. . .] and each and every one of them puts an essence in action, by way of turning around the will [*hefetz*] that spread in them, and [they are] rolling around in order to emanate profusion and emanation into the sea of *Hokhma* [. . .]. And because the seven *sefirot* circumscribe [*hogeim*] and encircle each other by way of the circumscribing [*mehuga*] of grace and will spreading from the limitless, this holiday is “*hag*” [one of the three pilgrimage festivals], as in “and he walks in the circuit of heaven” [Job 22:14].<sup>33</sup>

This is a sefirotic take on the liturgical custom of *hakafot* practiced during the holiday of Simchat Torah.<sup>34</sup> The seven festive circuits around the altar while carrying

<sup>30</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*; Charles Mopsik, *Sex of the Soul: The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in the Kabbalah* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2015); Isaiah Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar* (trans. David Goldstein; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 1372 n. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Wolfson, “Metaphor, Dream, and the Parabolic Bridging of Difference.”

<sup>32</sup> John of Sacrobosco (died mid-13th cent.), in his widespread and influential *De sphaera*, dedicated several chapters to demonstrating the spherical shape and motion of the elementary and ethereal spheres, as well as to the spherical shape of earth itself (Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, 333).

<sup>33</sup> Goldreich, *Sefer Meirat Einayim*, 169 §12–20.

<sup>34</sup> Paul B. Fenton, “Le symbolisme du rite de la circumambulation dans le judaïsme et dans

Torah scrolls stand for the seven lower *sefirot*, which are described as encompassing and encircling the ultimate *sefirah*, *Atara*, symbolized by the altar. Two verbs are at the crux of this discussion: *hakafa* and *hagiga*, both doubly referring to the action of encircling and to the holiday of Simchat Torah with its praxis of *hakafot*. For our purpose, we see that Isaac clearly describes the seven lower *sefirot* as concentric circles, arranged in hierarchical order. Also, here it is the encircling motion that is specifically described as the motor setting the entire structure in motion, thus bringing about abundance of divine profusion. Indeed, in this passage, in which the upper three *sefirot* are not even mentioned, the lower seven *sefirot* are clearly described in spherical terms.<sup>35</sup>

To conclude this survey of examples conveying spherical conceptions of the *sefirot*, let us look at an example from the early fourteenth century, composed by Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi in his commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*:

And therefore, do not be perplexed when scripture or any oral saying will refer [to the firmaments, identified with the *sefirot*] at times as a form of a circle, at times as a form of a human, at times as the form of the sun, at times as the form of the earth, or of mountains, or of round trees, because their *sefirot* are round; they are spherical [*kadduri*], not flat.<sup>36</sup>

What I find remarkable in this passage is not that Ashkenazi is well aware of the variety of images and designations used in the different sources for the *sefirot*. Rather, it is the common denominator he finds to be connecting all of these forms, and the justification he offers for their conspicuous variedness—that is, the round form he attributes to all of them. Note that he sees a round form not only in the case of the circle, the sun, the earth, and the mountains, but also in the scheme of the human form, most probably the head.<sup>37</sup> This can be gleaned from the fact that Ashkenazi clarifies that he is referring to “round trees,” and not to all other trees that are not round and therefore unfit to serve as illustrations for the round, to be sure, spherical, three-dimensional shape of the *sefirot* (specifically, “not a flat circle”).

Last but not least, as Giulio Busi, Marla Segol, and J. H. Chajes have discussed, we should recall that some of the earliest manuscripts displaying sefirotic diagrams in fact depict them spherically.<sup>38</sup> Thus the thirteenth-century MS Paris 763 depicts the *sefirot* as circles that surround the *Tiferet*, and MS Parma 2784, produced in 1286, includes a concentric spherical diagram that identifies the designations of the *sefirot* with the astronomical orbs.

<sup>35</sup> l'islam. Étude comparative,” *RHR* 213 (1996) 161–89; Gerald Blidstein, “From the Altar to the Stage: The Transformations of Hakafot,” in *Zekhor Davar Le-'Avdekha: Essays and Studies in Memory of Dov Rappel* (ed. Shmuel Glick; Jerusalem: Lipschitz College, 2007) 361–88 [Hebrew].

<sup>36</sup> Compare to a passage by Shem Tov ibn Gaon on this subject (*Keter Shem Tov*, MS Paris, BN 774, fol. 103b), discussed in Idel, “On Some Forms of Order in Kabbalah,” 50–51.

<sup>37</sup> Ashkenazi, “Commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*,” 42.

<sup>38</sup> I discuss the head symbol above, regarding cosmological conceptions in the Bahir.

<sup>39</sup> Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva*, 131, 133; Segol, *Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah*; Chajes, “Spheres”; idem, “Kabbalistic Tree” (article); idem, *Kabbalistic Tree* (book).

## ■ Spherical Hierarchy within the *Sefirot*

An overview of spherical descriptions of the *sefirot* in sefirotic literature from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries reveals three types of inner hierarchies. The first type, which is also the most prevalent in the literature, considers the outermost sphere as the divine source of the entire structure. The second sees the center of the concentric structure as the divine source and as the basis of the structure. This approach is evident in early Provençal texts, and most prominently in early *Hyun* writings, a corpus which is characterized by an admiration of the circle as a cosmic theological principle. This attitude seems to rely on late antique theological beliefs such as those characterizing *Sefer Yetzirah*.<sup>39</sup> The third approach can be construed as a middle path between the first two, with an interesting identification between the outermost sphere and the innermost center of the spherical structure as a whole. This approach is also evident in early Provençal texts—a main example being the *Sefer Yetzirah* commentary attributed to Isaac the Blind.<sup>40</sup>

### *A. The Divine Source is the Outermost Sphere*

As stated, the more prevalent approach assumes that within a spherical hierarchical sefirotic structure, the most divine stratum would be located in the outermost sphere, and, accordingly, the least divine part would be found in its center. In sefirotic terms, this means that the higher-most Sefira, usually *Keter* or *Hokhma*, is seen as the outermost spherical stratum, within which the lower *sefirot* are nested one inside the other, all the way until the last *sefirah* identified as the center of the sphere. This also means that *Keter* or *Hokhma* were often seen as the source not only of divine abundance but, even more so, of cosmic movement, similar to the notion of a prime mover.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, this approach surely draws on earlier rabbinic conceptions that saw God as located in the circumference of the cosmos,<sup>42</sup> but it is also clearly rooted in medieval cosmological discourse, which was geocentric and conceived of the outermost spheres as divine. Let me stress again that the scope of cosmological knowledge required to accommodate a spherical notion of the *sefirot* was very minimal and included familiarity with the general concentric structure of a geocentric cosmos, with divine spheres carrying the planets and stars and with the

<sup>39</sup> Porat, “*Founding of the Circle*,” 65–66 and throughout the book; Yehuda Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetzira* (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing, 2000); Idel, *The Privileged Divine Feminine in Kabbalah*, 23–24. More references will be offered below.

<sup>40</sup> I accept this recently contested attribution. See Judith Weiss, “The *Sefer Yetzira* Commentary Attributed to Isaac the Blind: Evidence Supporting Its Early Dating, Its Central Status among Thirteenth century Kabbalists and the Validity of Its Attribution to Isaac the Blind,” *Tarbiz* 88 (2022) 595–652. The theological complexity of this subject demands attention that exceeds the scope of the discussion here, and I intend to tackle it elsewhere.

<sup>41</sup> Such as in Moses de León’s *Shekel HaKodesh*; see Charles Mopsik, *R. Moses de Leon’s Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996) 49–50 [Hebrew].

<sup>42</sup> Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetzira*, 193–94.

divine surrounding the entire system. To be sure, I am not claiming that any specific astronomical source, or piece of astronomical information regarding the sphericity of the cosmos, “influenced” the kabbalists to conceive of the *sefirot* as spheres, but rather that the existing notion of the *sefirot* as spheres, which relies on many sources and is in itself natural for authors who believed they are situated within a spherical cosmos, was sometimes formed in ways which seem to correspond to the characteristics of the cosmological reality. Basic astronomical matter had been accessible for Jews for quite a while. In fact, Hebrew treatises on astronomy were extant even before the surge of the sefirotic literature in the thirteenth century (such as the works of Abraham ibn Ezra and Abraham bar Hiyya), so we can assume that Jewish intellectuals were aware of the basic conventions regarding the structure of the cosmos that were then prevalent. A related, important factor to bear in mind is the ongoing engagement of medieval Jewish intellectuals with astrology, which has been extensively discussed in scholarship, including its links to kabbalah and magic.<sup>43</sup> In addition, there was an unprecedented surge in Hebrew writing on cosmology in the thirteenth century itself, beginning in 1247, with several Hebrew encyclopedic treatises achieving considerable popularity. What is important in this respect is not so much the more detailed and professional astronomical knowledge that became accessible to Jews but the renewed interest in these subjects on the part of Jews, which propelled the composition, reproduction, and study of these texts. Moreover, as Nirán Garshtein recently observed, this should be seen as an expression of a general process of acceptance and interiorization of this knowledge among Jews living in the Christian West, which lent astrology the new status of “normal science.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, we know of kabbalists who were knowledgeable in astronomy,

<sup>43</sup> Reimund Leicht, *Astrologumena Judaica: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der astrologischen Literatur der Juden* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Dov Schwartz, *Studies on Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (trans. David Louvish and Batya Stein; Leiden: Brill, 2005); Ronald C. Kiener, “The Status of Astrology in the Early Kabbalah: From the *Sefer Yesirah* to the *Zohar*,” in *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe* (ed. Joseph Dan; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1987) 1–42; Haviva Pedaya, “Sabbath, Sabbatai, and the Diminution of Moon: The Holy Conjunction, Sign, and Image,” in *Myth in Judaism* (ed. Haviva Pedaya; Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 1996) 143–91 [Hebrew]; Moshe Idel, *Middot: On the Emergence of Kabbalistic Theosophies* (Brooklyn: KTAV Publishing House, 2021) xxviii–xxix and n. 35, and see additional references there.

<sup>44</sup> Kiener, “The Status of Astrology”; Y. Tzvi Langermann, “Science in the Jewish Communities of the Iberian Peninsula: An Interim Report,” in idem, *The Jews and the Sciences in the Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) 1–54. Dov Schwartz, *Astral Magica in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) [Hebrew]; Bernard R. Goldstein, “Astronomy among Jews in the Middle Ages,” in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (ed. Gad Freudenthal; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 136–46; Shlomo Sela, “Chapter 17 of Hešbon Mahalakhot ha-Kokhavim by Abraham Bar Hiyya—The First Hebrew Catalog of Constellations, Fixed Stars and Lunar Mansions: Critical Edition, English Translation and Commentary,” *Suhayl* 15 (2016–17) 231–96; Ofer Elior, *A Spirit of Grace Passed Before My Face: Jews, Science and Reading 1210–1896* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute; 2016) [Hebrew]; Nirán Garshtein, “Astronomy and Astrology in the Hebrew Encyclopedias of the Thirteenth Century” (PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, 2021) 8–10, 308–9 [Hebrew].

not only the aforementioned Joseph Ashkenazi, but also Joseph ibn Waqar, active in Toledo, and, later on, Samuel Ibn Motot (or Matut).<sup>45</sup> Given all this, it should come as no surprise that by the early fourteenth century, the Zoharic Ra'aya Mehemna and Tikkunei Zohar align the seven lower *sefirot* with the planets in ways reminiscent of that which we find in Ben Sheshet's treatises, to be discussed below.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, it is well known that medieval Latin manuscripts abound with *rota* diagrams conveying cosmological information while illustrating the actual spherical geocentric structure of the cosmos.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, this can also be related to a change occurring in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, when, as part of the efforts to conceptualize the relations between material nature and God, we see vicissitudes in cosmological diagrams with the outermost sphere becoming identified with the holy spirit.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, in medieval Jewish sources such as Abraham ibn Ezra and Solomon ibn Gabirol, one finds the notion of a tenth sphere identified as the *prime mover*.<sup>49</sup> As far as sefirotic literature is concerned, it is also possible that the notion of an orb (*galgal*) on which "all is engraved," mentioned in the Sefer Yetzirah commentary attributed to Isaac the Blind, should be understood as the tenth sphere, or *Aplanus*, familiar to us from twelfth-century literature.<sup>50</sup>

In this case, however, all these cosmological conventions should be examined alongside additional traditions. I am mainly referring to the description of *Hokhma*, which, already in biblical literature, is defined as an all-encompassing parchment. Following Ps 104:2, such a parchment, or divine cloth made of divine light, was identified in rabbinic literature as a primordial firmament, and, in sefirotic literature, as a primordial cosmological sphere.<sup>51</sup> The combination of this ancient image of

<sup>45</sup> On ibn Waqar, see: Paul B. Fenton, *Joseph b. Abraham Ibn Waqar: Principles of the Qabbalah* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2004); idem, "Joseph Ibn Waqar and His Attempt to Reconcile Kabbalah and Philosophy," *Judaica Petropolitana* 3 (2015) 80–98.

<sup>46</sup> Kiener, "The Status of Astrology," 38\*–42\*.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Evans, "The Geometry of the Mind: Scientific Diagrams and Medieval Thought," *Architectural Association Quarterly* 12:4 (1980) 32–55, esp. 42–44; Barbara Obrist, "The Idea of a Spherical Universe and Its Visualization in the Earlier Middle Ages (Seventh–Twelfth Centuries)," in *The Visualization of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (ed. Marcia Kupfer, Adam S. Cohen, and J. H. Chajes; Turnhout: Brepols, 2020) 229–58; Chajes, "Spheres."

<sup>48</sup> Barbara Obrist, "Wind Diagrams and Medieval Cosmology," *Speculum* 72 (1997) 33–84.

<sup>49</sup> Adena Tanenbaum, "Nine Spheres or Ten?: A Medieval Gloss on Moses Ibn Ezra's 'Be-Shem El Asher Amar,'" *JJS* 47 (1996) 294–310; Barbara Obrist, "Les modèles cosmologiques à huit, neuf et dix sphères célestes concentriques au XIIe siècle," in *De l'homme, de la nature et du monde. Mélanges d'histoire des sciences médiévales offerts à Danielle Jacquart* (ed. Nicolas Weill-Parot et al.; Paris: Librairie Droz, 2019) 121–52.

<sup>50</sup> Sendor, *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah*, 46–49. Interestingly, this note is attributed to "our teacher," although scholars diverge as to the identity of this teacher.

<sup>51</sup> See also Sir 24:5, 8, as well as Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 191. On the *Hokhma* as an encompassing and enveloping entity, see Haviva Pedaya, "The Journeys of 'Hokmah' in the History of Jewish Mysticism," The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, YouTube, 13 February 2019, <https://youtu.be/5MHScMj1Zrw> [Hebrew]; eadem, "Journey to the Roots of Kabbalah," *Haaretz*, 27 March, 2 April, 10 April, 24 April, and 16 May 2018, <https://www.haaretz>.

the *Hokhma* with the medieval sefirotic notion of the *Hokhma* as the first *sefirah* seems to have brought about an image identifying the *Hokhma* as the sefirotic source with the image of the all-encompassing divine parchment as a primordial sphere in the cosmological sense.

A prominent, early cosmological-sefirotic author was Jacob ben-Sheshet of Gerona, active in the first third of the thirteenth century. Ben-Sheshet's writings, in particular his *Sha'ar HaShamayim*, are a rich source of information for our discussion.<sup>52</sup> I will nevertheless open with a quote that appears in another famous treatise he wrote, the *Meshiv Devarim Nekhohim*, as it succinctly encapsulates my basic contention. In this treatise, which ben-Sheshet writes against Samuel ibn Tibbon's radical stand on Maimonides's philosophy, he states as part of his argument: "The entity which is emanated first, by which all things were created, is the one which surrounds everything."<sup>53</sup> In a nutshell, this is the gist of the cosmological-spherical approach, and it is important for us to see how it fits perfectly with scientific and philosophical sefirotic discourse, of which ben-Sheshet is one of the most prominent protagonists. According to him, whatever antecedes, whether ontologically, chronologically, or theologically, will always be that which surrounds and encompasses what is inferior in relation to it.<sup>54</sup> In the same way, the prime mover is the outermost source of cosmic motion, and it encompasses everything below, such that the outermost *sefirot* are identified as the most sublime divine sources of motion and profusion.

Although in later sefirotic literature the first *sefirah* is often identified as the *Keter*, this is not always the case in the earlier literature, specifically in Provençal writings, where the *Hokhma* is often clearly designated as the first emanated force. This point is of importance for our discussion, in light of the ancient image of the *Hokhma* as an outermost wrapping parchment that was combined with prevalent cosmological hierarchical principles, as mentioned earlier. Thus, the sefirotic notion of the *Hokhma* as the first, most sublime, *sefirah* was formed, and it came to be seen as the outermost sphere in the spherical concentric structure of the *sefirot*. In

co.il/misc/writers/WRITER-1.2199522 [Hebrew].

<sup>52</sup> Georges Vajda, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Age* (Paris: Mouton, 1962) 56–75. According to Nehora Gabbai, ben-Sheshet conceived of the *sefirot* as analogous to the heavenly spheres; see Nehora Gabbai, "Sefer Sha'ar ha-Shamayim by R. Jacob ben Sheshet Gerondi" (MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1989) 13 [Hebrew].

<sup>53</sup> Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhohim* (ed. Georges Vajda; Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1968) 122, cited in Avishai Bar-Asher, "Illusion versus Reality in the Study of Early Kabbalah: The *Commentary on Sefer Yesirah* Attributed to Isaac the Blind and Its History in Kabbalah and Scholarship," *Tarbiz* 86 (2019) 269–384, see 349 n. 349 [Hebrew].

<sup>54</sup> See the commentary on the ten *sefirot* listed in Gershom Scholem, "Index of Commentaries on the Ten Sefirot," *Kiryat Sefer* 10 (1934) 498–515, see 501 #22 [Hebrew]. Idel, "Sefirot above the Sefirot," 260, attributes this commentary to 14th-cent. Italy: "Indeed the first cause, for its eternity, encircles and is not encircled" (courtesy of the Commentaries to the Ten *Sefirot* project, directed by Tzahi Weiss, Open University of Israel).

this vein, an example from the earlier literature is cited by Azriel of Gerona in the name of the Provençal Isaac the Blind:

Thus, we learn that the Blessed one wrapped himself, which means that he received splendor from the abundance of the glare of the *Hokhma*, which is glazed in its utterance, and through that abundance a light sparkled, from which issuance [*hazmana*] of the flowing [*hamshakha*] of the *Hokhma* which encircles everything. And thus it is said, “your faithfulness is all around you.” [Ps 89:7] This is how the Hasid Rabbi explained, and that was his wording.<sup>55</sup>

The *Hokhma* here is perceived as a parchment or cloth in which one can wrap oneself, specifically, *encircle* oneself, as God himself has done. However, it is important to note that the meaning of this action of covering oneself is that divine profusion or light flows from this covering, namely, from the *Hokhma*, into the one covered and encircled within the *Hokhma*. In other words, the *Hokhma*, the first sefirotic entity to have been emanated, is seen as a wrapping and covering parchment or surface, which is revealed and activated as an emanating power once it is spread open, encircling and encompassing everything included within it, and in this way conferring the profusion from the outer parchment, or surface, to the powers or entities within.

In Geronese sefirotic sources—contemporary and slightly later to Isaac the Blind—we see the same basic notion of the outermost *sefirah* as an encircling covering of the entire divine construct, only this time the *sefirah* is not the *Hokhma* but the *Keter*.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, it seems that in the earlier literature, the notion of the *Keter* was not dominant, and the more prominent theosophic status as the first emanated entity was reserved for the *Hokhma*, through the well-established and familiar motif of “Ancient Wisdom.”<sup>57</sup>

Thus, in Geronese literature of this period, we do see a shift in the attribution of this notion to the *Hokhma* that now relates it to the *Keter*. In his treatise on the rationale of the commandments, Ezra of Gerona offers a sefirotic take on the rabbinic tradition depicting God as wearing phylacteries (b. Ber. 6a), in which the latter are described as the circle of the crown, which encircles the four biblical passages (*parashot*) written on the inside parchment of the phylacteries that stand for the main

<sup>55</sup> MS Jerusalem, The National Library 8°91, 57a, cited in Isaiah Tishby, “The Kabbalists R. Ezra and R. Azriel, and Their Place in Gironese Kabbalah,” in *Studies in Kabbalah and Its Branches: Researches and Sources* (vol. 1; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982) 4 [Hebrew].

<sup>56</sup> To be sure, this does not mean that the description of the *Hokhma* as an outermost wrap of the divine structure disappears altogether in later literature. For example, in the commentary on the ten *sefirot* (Scholem, “Index of Commentaries,” 501 #17): “And the Tallit alludes that the *Hokhma* encircles all, as a cluster which includes and confers everything, and this is why we wrap ourselves and aim for the Tallit to be in the example of what is above [. . .] as is written ‘Who covers *yourself* with light as *with* a garment’ [Ps. 104:2]”.

<sup>57</sup> Regarding the “ancient *Hokhma*” motif in Kabbalah and in general, see Ronit Meroz, “Between Sefer Yezirah and Wisdom Literature: Three Binitarian Approaches in Sefer Yezirah,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6.18 (2007) 101–42.



sefirotic entities: *Hokhma*, *Bina*, *Hesed*, and *Din*.<sup>58</sup> Here we clearly see that Ezra envisaged the *Keter* in a manner very similar to the way the *Hokhma* was described in the Provençal literature, namely, as a source that encircles everything. In a like vein, in the commentary attributed to Azriel of Gerona on the liturgical passage of *Kedushah*, we read that *Keter* is an encircling, outermost, circular (or spherical) exalted divine emanation, whose designation expresses both this form as well as the encompassing virtue of the crown.<sup>59</sup> These phrasings regarding the *Keter* recur quite often in this and in later generations,<sup>60</sup> for example, in *Sha'arei Orah* by the Castilian kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla.<sup>61</sup> In his *Sha'arei Tzedek*, Gikatilla describes the *Binah* as “one who goes around in circuits [*soheret*],” as in “circuitously [*sehor sehor*].”<sup>62</sup> Moshe Idel attributed a circular diagram conveying a similar perception to David ben Judah heHasid, which should also be taken into account here.<sup>63</sup>

Thus far we have seen that in early sefirotic literature, both Provençal and Geronese, a prevalent theological convention envisaged the *sefirot* as a concentric spherical structure, in which the source, the first emanated *sefirah*, on which the entire structure stands and from which it feeds, is the outermost circumference of this structure. In Provençal texts this is attributed to the *Hokhma*, perceived as the first *sefirah* and combined with earlier images of the *Hokhma* as an all-encompassing cosmic parchment, with roots already in biblical *imaginaire*. In Geronese literature this is more commonly attributed to the *Keter*, perceived in these sources as the first *sefirah*, and related mainly to the visual and linguistic meanings of this term—as a circle that surrounds the head and endows the entire structure with its meaning and essence.

Apart from these rationales, there is clearly a cosmological basis for this spherical conception, namely, the accepted scientific convention according to which the outer orbs are the source of motion for the entire cosmos. Specifically, we know that the belief in the empyrean heaven, although solely grounded on biblical and theological premises, was widely accepted among theologians writing on cosmology in the twelfth century, and more so in the thirteenth.<sup>64</sup> The empyrean was often identified as the firmament of Genesis and was discussed from the twelfth century onwards

<sup>58</sup> Chaim Dov Chavel, *Kitvei ha-Ramban* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1964) 525 [Hebrew].

<sup>59</sup> Porat, *Kabbalistic Works*, 135 §1–2.

<sup>60</sup> Examples are found in numerous commentaries on the ten *sefirot*, although these are very difficult to date, as in the following examples: “And it is the real unified one, first of all first, includes everything and encircles everything around” (Scholem, “Index of Commentaries,” 499 #4, #6); “The first Sefirah is called Crown, it is closed and enclosed, for it is encircled on all sides and it encircles all other Sefirot like the Crown” (Scholem, “Index of Commentaries,” 501 #17). (Courtesy of the Commentaries on the Ten *Sefirot* project, Open University of Israel, directed by Tzahi Weiss.)

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah* (ed. Yosef Ben-Shlomo; vol. 2; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1981) 124 [Hebrew].

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Gikatilla, *Sefer Sha'arei Tzedek* (ed. Yeruham Becker; Jerusalem: n.p., 2018) 24 [Hebrew].

<sup>63</sup> Idel, “Visualization of Colors, I.”

<sup>64</sup> On possible links between the concept of the empyrean and certain sefirotic notions expressed in later kabbalistic diagrams, see Chajes, “Spheres,” 248; idem, “Kabbalistic Tree” (article).

by such authors as Anselm of Laon, the Lombard, and Hugh of St. Victor. In the thirteenth century, the empyrean was believed to be the dwelling place of God and the righteous. Among the other spheres, it was seen as a body of the thinnest consistency projecting the purest type of light, made of fire or transparent ether. The empyrean was described as a fixed sphere, with its unique light unable to penetrate beyond the eighth sphere. Given that the *Keter* was conceived as the source of divine abundance, the scholastic debate over whether the empyrean could be seen as influencing the earth is also relevant here. Duns Scotus, for example, asserted that the light of the empyrean could only reach the lower spheres; another view was that it controls the influence exerted by all the other spheres. Despite the diversity of opinions regarding this sphere, it is important to underline that the basic belief in this sphere was a cosmological convention accepted by all the authors in the thirteenth century, and that it was described in all instances as the most immense and powerful among the spheres.<sup>65</sup> The sefirotic sources we have discussed seem to indicate that this cosmological convention was held by early kabbalists and found its expression in very early sefirotic conceptions.<sup>66</sup>

### *B. The Source is the Innermost Sphere*

Identification of the center, or the focal point of being, with the divine, is a fundamental motif widely studied by scholars of religion and need not be repeated here. This goes for Jewish sources as well, and we know that holiness and divinity are identified with the center of spatial or architectural concepts such as the tabernacle and its contents, the land of Israel and Jerusalem, and more. A central textual example for this is the influential *Sefer Yetzirah*, which clearly describes God as identical with the cosmic center, and, according to Yehudah Liebes, some well-known rabbinic passages should also be read in this vein.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, in early sefirotic sources, the *Iyyun* writings, which focused on the circle as a divine form and paradigm, considered its center as the source, basis, and most divine part, most probably drawing from the *Sefer Yetzirah* and various Neoplatonic notions.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, 371–88.

<sup>66</sup> See a specific example in Moses de León's *Shekel HaKodesh* (Mopsik, *R. Moses de León's Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 7–8). In the case of de León, Jeremy Brown and Avishai Bar-Asher pointed at processes of transition from cosmological conceptions regarding the cosmos to sefirotic, gendered ones, specifically regarding the three-worlds framework (Jeremy Brown and Avishai Bar-Asher, "The Enduring Female: Differentiating Moses de León's Early Androgynology," *JSQ* 28 (2021) 29–30.

<sup>67</sup> Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira*, 194–99.

<sup>68</sup> To be sure, this does not mean that the scientific and specifically cosmological aspect is absent from these treatises. See, for instance, Porat, "Founding of the Circle," 326–27. Porat sees this theological paradigm as fundamental for understanding the very nature of this corpus (*ibid.*, 113–55). Also, interestingly, these treatises did consider the outer circumference of the circle as divine too, but mainly by virtue of its dependence on the center (*ibid.*, 333, 342–43). Regarding the circumference, see *ibid.*, 117. An important observation Porat makes is that, although the central point appears as prior to the circumference, the latter is nevertheless essential for establishing the inner binary dynamics characteristic of these writings, as the point of beginning or departure is established

Within many early sefirotic texts, the theological conceptualization of a circle or sphere is as a perfect geometric concept that expresses two theological ideals: first, complete equilibrium and inner balance of any inner forces or diversity, mainly regarding their distance from the source; and second, the notion of a center point, which stands in equal distance from each and every part of the overall structure. These ideals clearly characterize the *Iyyun* writings, as Oded Porat has thoroughly shown in his studies, and it is apt to illustrate this in an extract from Ma'ayan HaHokhma, one of the early and constitutive *Iyyun* sefirotic treatises: "And everything is in a circle, and the circle we have extracted from the *Aleph*, and *Aleph* from *Yod*, and the *Yod* is the Fountain."<sup>69</sup> In this phrasing, very typical of *Iyyun* writings, the circle is considered to be an all-encompassing cosmic form or construct, whose basis and source is its center point, namely, the *Yod*, the smallest letter, which is very commonly depicted as a point, thus conveying that the circumference is dependent on the center point. Another passage from the *Iyyun* Corpus, this time from the treatise *Sod Yediat HaMetziut*, reads as follows:

[. . .] the body of the ancient air which is motionless and is adhered to God's presence [. . .] and in [the air's] midst He exists—the ancient agent, and we refer to him as "existent" because he hides in that ancient air, which is inside the forces emanated from him, for [the forces] wrap themselves one inside the other, and they roll in their movements and become a sort of a house around themselves. The ancient air, and each and every one of the forces mentioned, have a coming and going and ascent and descent, and they are seven.<sup>70</sup>

Depicted here is a process in which the seven "forces" (namely, *sefirot*) come to be, by means of revolving around the middle point of the "Ancient Air," where the Ancient Agent is situated, hiding. It is noteworthy that, albeit an "agent," this entity does not seem to be the one activating or pursuing the described process. Rather, the forces are described as emanating from this agent or central point, and they are all perceived as wrappings of sorts, one underneath the other, encompassing this center. It seems, also, that the virtue of being hidden in the center is strongly linked to the theological status of this agent, or, in other words, that as a source so divine and central for the entire structure, it is fitting that it would be covered, internal, and unrevealed. In this way, too, the author perceives and expresses the superiority of the source over what issues from it. The forces are seen as dynamic entities, wrapping themselves and continuously revolving, thus creating, out of this motion, a surrounding or encasing described as a house. Last, this structure of concentric wrappings allows, in some manner, an inner motion of the different

in reference to the final cessation of this metaphysical motion, much like the axis of a wheel (*ibid.*, 119). This is relevant to what will be discussed in the next section, namely, the spherical perceptions expressing various interrelations between the middle and the circumference in terms of hierarchy.

<sup>69</sup> Porat, *The Works of Iyyun*, 61 §17.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 51 §229–40.

strata or forces, and all are able to ascend and descend between the ranks of this structure.<sup>71</sup>

C. “Middle and encircling”: *The Source Is Both the Outer- and Innermost Sphere*

We also find a third attitude, one that is a combination of the other two—namely, that the divine source is both the innermost center of the sphere and its outermost circumference. Or, in a milder version, that the center and circumference are somehow essentially linked and are, therefore, seen in some way as sharing a common essence. A unique and fascinating articulation of this idea is found in the Sefer Yetzirah commentary attributed to Isaac the Blind, but here I will point to another early example of this notion, from Ma’ayan HaHokhma, in which the *Yod* as the circle’s center is discussed and is very explicitly described as both the middle point and its circumference:

And these two sources from which the flowings which flow, they are one thing which comes from the ancient darkness and refer to form and creation [ . . . ] which is in the likeness of [the *Yod*, namely,] the one that was upright and became bent. And she is intermediate [or: centermost], and encircling, and is situated on the head, and suckles the power of them all, and is counted among them all, and all are drawn out and come forth out of her.<sup>72</sup>

The subject of this passage is the *Hokhma*, as can be gleaned from its description as the source of everything and as expressed through the motif of the *Yod*, which became bent.<sup>73</sup> It is described at one and the same time as the innermost center as well as the circumference encircling the entire spherical structure. Here, a third intriguing attribute is added, namely, that this focal point is also situated on the “head,” and this is connected to its most fundamental designation as the source of divine profusion for the entire sefirotic construct.<sup>74</sup> The description of the *Yod* as a

<sup>71</sup> See the anonymous commentary on Sefer Yetzirah that Scholem published as an integral part of Isaac of Acre’s commentary that precedes it; Gershom Scholem, “Isaac of Acre’s Commentary on the First Chapter of Sefer Yetzirah,” *Kiryat Sefer* 31 (1956) 379–96, esp. 388 [Hebrew]. Recently, Avishai Bar-Asher showed that this attribution was in fact erroneous (“Illusion versus Reality,” 299–301). Taking all this into account, it is interesting that the notion of an exterior parchment, identified as the *Hokhma*, a fundamental image describing the divine source in the outermost sphere, is in fact very prevalent in the *Iyyun* writings. For one of many examples, see Porat, *The Works of Iyyun*, 100 §51.

<sup>72</sup> Porat, *The Works of Iyyun*, 75 §44.

<sup>73</sup> This description of the *Yod* appears also in the Sefer Yetzirah commentary attributed to Isaac the Blind; see Gershom Scholem, “Isaac the Blind’s Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah,” in *Gershom Scholem, Provençal Kabbalah: The Circle of RaBad and His Son Isaac the Blind* (ed. Rivka Shatz; Jerusalem: n.p. 1963) 2 §40 [Hebrew]. This is based on BT Menahot 29b; see more on the sources and parallels of this motif in Sendor, *The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah*, 28 n. 71.

<sup>74</sup> See n. 37. This notion is based upon the well-known phrasing of Sefer Yetzirah regarding the end of the *sefirot* that is stuck to their beginning. There are central affinities between this depiction and what is found on this subject in the Sefer Yetzirah commentary attributed to Isaac the Blind, and I will only mention them here very briefly: first, the emphasis that this entity, although seen as

center point that is in fact a minuscule inner closed form, a shape derived from that of the bent *Yod*, as a sort of a minuscule semicircle, is also of relevance to our subject.

Finally, this attitude, tying together in various ways the circumference and center, is also expressed, for example, in a diagram Busi and Abrams published and discussed, which is found in most of the manuscripts of the Ma'arekhet HaElohut.<sup>75</sup> This is an interesting circular, though not concentric, diagram, in which the outer circle is designated as *Keter*, yet in the lower part of the circle, tending to the left as is symbolically appropriate, there appears the *sefirah Malkhut*. Although this diagram does not show any cosmological contents or inclinations apart from the identification of the outer circle as the divine source, nevertheless it accepts the strong affinity between the inner and outer by positing both of them within the upper and lower parts of the surrounding sphere.

### ■ A Few Methodological Remarks

The main assertion of this article, and of the textual evidence corroborating it, touches upon several interesting issues of far-reaching implications for our understanding of sefirotic theology as such. Naturally, an in-depth discussion of all these issues would exceed the scope of this article and deserves separate attention. Nevertheless, I will offer my initial thoughts.

First, as we are tackling a formal, possibly visual, aspect of the concept of *sefirot*, one might wonder whether the different descriptions and images of the *sefirot* offered by the kabbalists should merely be understood as literary ways of representing abstract metaphysical realities, or whether they should be taken at face value as the actual way in which the kabbalists conceived and even visualized the *sefirot*. This line of thought touches upon hermeneutical questions, such as the function of language and metaphor in sefirotic texts or the meaning of modern readings in medieval texts, thoroughly discussed in scholarship.<sup>76</sup> I will only remark that this should be tackled, and with much prudence, regarding each author and text individually and not for “kabbalah,” as it were, as a whole. Moreover, although to us these two options seem opposite and even contradictory, in fact a wide spectrum of interrelated options extends between these two hermeneutic poles.

Second, given that spherical *sefirot* are not only described in the early sefirotic texts but are also depicted in diagrams, a corollary question that arises is whether the spherical shapes should be understood as circular—two-dimensional concepts

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the source of the *sefirot*, is not separate from them and is therefore counted as one of them; second, the description of the *Yod* as a center point based on the shape of the *Yod*.

<sup>75</sup> Abrams, “Divine Multiplicity,” 116; Busi, *Qabbalah Visiva*, 345.

<sup>76</sup> See Daniel Abrams, “New Study Tools from the Kabbalists of Today: Toward an Appreciation of the History and Role of Collectanea, Paraphrases and Graphic Representations in Kabbalistic Literature,” *Journal des Études de la Cabale* 1 (1997); Wolfson, “Beneath the Wings”; idem, “Metaphor, Dream, and the Parabolic Bridging of Difference”; Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); and Chajes, “Kabbalistic Tree” (article), 18, who uses the helpful term “iconotext.”

deprived of any spatial dimension—or as actual spheres, that is, three-dimensional, spatial globes. A close look at the texts I discussed here shows that most of them could hypothetically accommodate both options and, strictly speaking, it is therefore up to the reader to decide. Here, too, I believe we should suspend any decisive judgment, as the equivocation more often than not characterizes the text itself. Moreover, this mainly has to do with a larger question: To what extent did different kabbalists conceive of the *sefirot* as actual entities as opposed to abstract concepts? These are extremely delicate and complex issues, for which clear, unequivocal resolutions cannot be offered.<sup>77</sup> That said, it should be stressed that the fact that a diagram of the *sefirot* is naturally two-dimensional does not imply that its object should be suspected to be nonspatial as well. The truth of the matter is that medieval manuscripts abound with two-dimensional planetary diagrams, and no one would suspect that the represented objects, namely, the planetary cosmos itself, is nonspatial.<sup>78</sup> I specifically chose this example to demonstrate my point in light of the centrality of astronomical convention in the formation of the spherical concept of *sefirot*, and I considered, together with the other images discussed above and by others, all of them of to be of spatial nature. I don't see much reason to understand the possibly multivalent textual descriptions and the (naturally) nonspatial diagrams as referring to nonspatial theosophic concepts. Indeed, the real question here is again the one I articulated earlier—whether the *sefirot* were conceived as actual theosophical entities or as more abstract concepts. In the case of the former, it seems to me much more plausible that the *sefirot* were indeed perceived and described by the kabbalists as three dimensional, spherical globes.

Last but not least is the possible link between the Hebrew term *sefirot*, occurring for the first time in *Sefer Yetzirah*, and the word “sphere,” of Greek origin but widely used in Latin and Western European medieval vernaculars.<sup>79</sup> Although I think this phonetic affinity must have played some part in the formation of the concept of *sefirot* as spherical entities, I don't see it as a direct cause, but rather, as another factor that reinforced an existing concept of the *sefirot* as spherical cosmological entities of sorts, as they were already understood to be in the earlier, non-sefirotic commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah*.<sup>80</sup>

## ■ Conclusion

The theological concept of *sefirot* is commonly considered to be the defining tenet of sefirotic lore. Therefore, an accurate depiction of the way the structure and inner hierarchy of the *sefirot* were perceived by the early kabbalists is crucial

<sup>77</sup> Wolfson, “Metaphor, Dream, and the Parabolic Bridging of Difference,” 85, 88–89, 91.

<sup>78</sup> See Abrams, “Kabbalistic Paratext”; Daniel Abrams, “The Only Sefirotic Diagram of the Zohar Manuscript Witnesses and Its Absence in Print,” *Daat* 87 (2019) vii–xx.

<sup>79</sup> Idel, “Visualization of Colors, I”; idem, *Middot*, 39–40; Chajes, “Kabbalistic Tree” (article); idem, “Spheres,” 252–53.

<sup>80</sup> For an analysis of the three-dimensional spatial concept of *sefirot* in *Sefer Yetzirah* itself, see Chajes, *Kabbalistic Tree* (book), 13–16.

for understanding this theological phenomenon as such. In the vein of important observations made by several scholars and most prominently by Chajes in his recent work, in this article I have presented and discussed a large and variegated corpus of early sefirotic passages attesting to the prevalence and conventionality of spherical perceptions of the *sefirot*, starting from the earliest stages of the sefirotic literature known to us. Closely reading early sefirotic passages, I have stressed that seeing the *sefirot* as a set of concentric, hierarchical spherical divine entities, was, at least for a substantial part of the earliest authors, natural and self-evident. Moreover, I have observed that the earlier the texts, the less overt and detailed the spherical descriptions of the *sefirot* are, while the relatively later texts (to be sure, still within the thirteenth century), tend to be more declarative, detailed, and self-conscious regarding this subject. The reason for this seems to be that the sphericity of the *sefirot* was for the earlier writers much more axiomatic and self-evident than it had become later on, when other options regarding the nature and structure of the *sefirot* were already on the table.

The sources I have discussed show great diversity in details. In order to tackle this variety, I have suggested discerning between sources reliant on cosmological conventions, therefore characterized by the belief that the exterior sphere is the most divine part of the hierarchy, those characterized by the belief that the divine source of the entire system lies in its center, and an interesting third path, apparent in some early sefirotic texts, among them the Sefer Yetzirah commentary attributed to Isaac the Blind, which connects the center with the circumference in various ways, and regards this compound as the divine source as a whole. In addition to the cosmological considerations, one should take into account that the circle was universally perceived as a perfect divine and mystical form, and indeed it serves as a central metaphysical category in early sefirotic literature. To be sure, I do not claim that the *sefirot* were initially conceived as spherical entities due to any “influence” of specific contemporary astronomical knowledge. Rather, I suggest that since the *sefirot* were initially conceived as spherical divine entities, we see that the concept expresses some very basic cosmological conventions, and mainly placing the source of the hierarchy in the outermost sphere.

This preliminary survey offered in this article cannot and does not come near to exhausting the different facets of the issue under scrutiny as well as the various intricate questions it raises regarding the concept of *sefirot* per se and regarding the ways we, as scholars, read and interpret these texts. Much more should, and hopefully will, be written on these subjects in the coming years. However, given the scope of the early material I have discussed, it seems that the spherical structures of the *sefirot* were prevalent among the earliest sefirotic authors, and, moreover, that we should take into account the possibility that the spherical concepts of the *sefirot* could have, at least in part, predated their linear descriptions.