

ABSTRACT

ILLUSION VERSUS REALITY IN THE STUDY OF EARLY KABBALAH:
THE *COMMENTARY ON SEFER YEŞIRAH* ATTRIBUTED TO ISAAC THE BLIND
AND ITS HISTORY IN KABBALAH AND SCHOLARSHIP

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The present article is a comprehensive treatment of the historical, textual, and conceptual reconstruction made by scholars of the origins, formation, and spread of Kabbalah, which gave rise to the meta-narrative dominating the field to this very day. Modern scholarship has largely accepted the account of Kabbalah's early history found in late kabbalistic historiography, which outlines Kabbalah's transfer from the hands of a small circle of esotericists in Languedoc to the nascent centers of Iberian Kabbalah in the first half of the thirteenth century. This account still reigns supreme, in spite of various suggestions for its improvement. This study focuses on the history of the *Commentary on Sefer Yeşirah* (hereafter: *Commentary*) attributed to Isaac 'the Blind' (as he is called in later sources), the son of R. Abraham b. David (Rabad) of Posquières, which scholarship has relied on not only to delineate Kabbalah's conceptual formation and literary crystallization at the hands of the Provençal esotericists, and to determine their exact role in these processes, but even to reconstruct opinions, conceptions, and 'sources' attributed to those esotericists.

Fielding various critical methodologies, the author marshals many proofs to overturn the foundation underlying the identification and attribution of the *Commentary*. Careful scrutiny of this enigmatic commentary and its provenance reveals its artificial, anachronistic designation as the first composition produced by the earliest kabbalists from which Kabbalah sprung up and developed. The author's thorough treatment of this crucial matter unravels the historical account woven together by scholars and shows each strand to be insufficiently supported by the historical evidence. These include: the erroneous reconstruction of the bibliographical groundwork of the 'origins' of Kabbalah; the adherence to an unproven and controvertible historiographical account that is based on nothing more than a legend that emerged in late kabbalistic circles and over a long period of time; and, Above all, I take issue with the interpretation of the ideas themselves, which was mainly based on a predisposition to find their sources in Neoplatonic concepts and modes of thinking as expressed in medieval Christian thought.

The article provides a step-by-step exposition of how a web of errors became entrenched in the scholarship on the foundational texts of kabbalistic literature. It is a cautionary tale about the severe consequences errors can have on the study of a canon, and, no less importantly, about how errors can become canonized.

The first section critically examines the scholarship on the various traditions attributed to Isaac the Blind, and especially the different attempts to present them as the vital link between Kabbalah's appearance in Provence and its transplantation to Spain. At the center of the discussion stands the *Commentary*, and contrary to the previous efforts of scholars to link this complete *commentary* to the dozens of fragmentary traditions recited and recorded in the name of R. Isaac over a long period, this section offers alternatives for dealing with the texts attributed to him over the centuries.

The second section takes a hard look at the history of the attribution of the *Commentary* to Isaac the Blind. I subject the handful of surviving manuscript witnesses to renewed

scrutiny in order to reassess the assumptions made and conclusions drawn by past scholars concerning its authorship. The reach and reception of the work are measured by the few preserved witnesses, and a new understanding of its provenance is presented. Based on the numerous findings of this examination of the composition's defective and late textual tradition, the author outlines anew the various stages of the *Commentary*'s dissemination. The section concludes with the theory that the attribution of the work to R. Isaac the Blind was late and the product of copyists.

The third section presents a complementary analysis by putting under the microscope the various (yet meager) citations from the *Commentary* and the parallels in the writings of other kabbalists, which first appeared at the end of the thirteenth century and continued for several generations. In light of these investigations, I reach new conclusions about the work's appearance and reception history, conclusions which further support reassigning it to a different historical context. They also help uncover fundamental mistakes made not only in the study of the work's origins, but in scholarly attempts to interpret its enigmatic language and ideas.

The fourth section is dedicated to critically examining the conceptual discussion surrounding the cryptic formulations in the *Commentary*, and the resulting farfetched, anachronistic attempts to reconstruct kabbalistic thought in its nascent form. Within the framework of this section, a number of fundamental concepts central to the intellectual history of Kabbalah are discussed, as their meaning was determined by scholars on the basis of, *inter alia*, the unchallenged presumption that the *Commentary* originated with Isaac the Blind and his Provençal circle. The conventional claim that the first kabbalists in Girona (described in scholarship as R. Isaac's 'disciples') drew upon and were influenced by the *Commentary* is utterly rejected here; instead, the author argues for the reverse: the anonymous author (or final editor) of the *Commentary* knew the writings of these kabbalists and even borrowed from them.

In light of the findings of the preceding four sections, the fifth section puts forward a new theory about the context in which the *Commentary* – now shown to be mistakenly attributed to Isaac the Blind – first appeared and was even composed. This is based on the first attempt of its kind to identify late strata in the composition, in which I find signs of the works likely used by the anonymous author, and through which its eclectic nature in its extant format can be better understood. The sixth section then proposes an alternative reconstruction of the realist interpretive tradition of *Sefer Yeşirah* which can be attributed, based on the testimony of the earliest kabbalists, to Isaac the Blind and his Provençal circle. According to this proposal, this interpretive tradition, which has nothing whatsoever to do with the long *Commentary* attributed to R. Isaac, concentrated on theosophical and theogonical conceptions of the Tetragrammaton, which were predicated upon the linguistic and ontological theories in *Sefer Yeşirah*.

All of the foregoing radically recasts major aspects of thirteenth-century Kabbalah and dethrones the accepted narrative about Kabbalah's emergence. In my conclusion, I suggest a reappraisal of the basic assumptions that have become deeply engrained in the historiography, textual analysis, and intellectual history of the origins and beginnings ('Ursprung und Anfänge') of Kabbalah.