

A. PETER HAYMAN

Sefer Yeşira

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Mohr Siebeck

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A. Peter Hayman

Sefer Yeşira

Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

This edition of the text of Sefer Yešira has been a long time coming. I first conceived the idea of doing it in the early 1980s when I was reading the text with my students in a course on Jewish Mysticism at the University of Edinburgh. The fundamental research for the book was carried out in 1985 in a visit to the Microfilm Institute of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, funded by a grant from the British Academy. My initial intention was to produce an edition, translation and both a text-critical commentary and a commentary on the content. In the event it turned out that this was too ambitious a project to be accomplished within one book and, in any case, competing priorities, especially from the pressures of university administration, preventing me from producing more than a series of one-off papers and articles on Sefer Yešira. I now plan a series of three books: first, this edition, second, a collected edition of my papers on Sefer Yešira, and third, a commentary on the content of the text. This book, therefore, is concerned solely with the text – with the manuscripts, the recensions, the individual readings within the paragraphs. Issues of introduction, date, place of origin, and what the text might mean, will be reserved for the later books, though I have already dealt with many of these in my published papers. Of course, no rigid dividing line can be drawn between these different approaches to a text and, inevitably, I will stray into discussion of the content from time to time, but I wish to stress that this is not my primary purpose in this book.

In 2003 the University of Edinburgh allowed me a complete sabbatical year with relief from all teaching and administrative duties – partly funded by a grant from the British Arts and Humanities Research Board. This gave me, at last, the freedom to concentrate on producing the edition of the text. I am very grateful to both for giving me this opportunity. My thanks are also due to those who, over the years, have kept urging me to produce the book, especially Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan. I am grateful for the help of Stefan Reif and Philip Alexander in obtaining the AHRB grant. But my deepest thanks are due to Ithamar Gruenwald of the University of Tel Aviv for the many hours we have spent discussing Sefer Yešira in his visits to Edinburgh and mine to Jerusalem. I build upon the foundation he laid in his “Preliminary Critical Edition of Sefer Yezira” and his 1973 *REJ* article, “Some Critical Notes on the First Part of Sefer Yezira.”

Finally, my thanks are due to the various libraries who have given me permission to publish the manuscripts used in this edition and supplied me with the microfilms and photographs of the manuscripts: the Syndics of Cambridge University Library,

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Leiden University Library, the Bodleian Library, the British Library, the Library of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Vatican Library, the Bibliotheca Palatina di Parma, the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, and the Microfilm Institute of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. Above all am I grateful to three generations of Librarians of New College Library (University of Edinburgh) – John Howard, Murray Simpson and Eileen Dickson, for the unstinting help they have given me in obtaining the research materials I needed to complete this project.

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Abbreviations

BJRL	Bulletin of the John Rylands Library
EJ	Encyclopaedia Judaica
IOS	Israel Oriental Studies
JA	Jewish Art
JHP	Journal of the History of Philosophy
JNUL	Jewish National and University Library
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JJS	Journal of Jewish Studies
JPSA	Jewish Publication Society of America
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSS	Journal of Semitic Studies
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
MGWJ	Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums
REJ	Revue des Études Juives
RHR	Revue d'Histoire des Religions
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

Introduction

1. The fluid state of the text of Sefer Yešira

Right from the beginning of the emergence of Sefer Yešira¹ into the light of day in the early tenth century it was recognized that its text had not been transmitted without errors. Saadya Gaon, the earliest commentator whose text has been preserved,² states at the end of his introduction to SY: “we think (it best) to write down each paragraph from it (i.e. SY) completely, then we will explain it because it is not a book which is widely available and not many people have preserved it from suffering changes or alterations.”³ Writing not much later than Saadya in 955/6 C.E., Dunash ben Tamim says: “mais nous avons déjà dit qu’il pouvait y avoir dans ce livre des passages altérés que le patriarche Abraham [n’a jamais énoncés], [provenant] des commentaires en hébreu, auxquels des gens ignorants ont ajouté postérieurement un autre commentaire et la vérité se perdait entretemps.”⁴ The most comprehensive of the early commentaries, written by Judah ben Barzillai frequently quotes different versions of the text and discusses variant readings of which he was aware. Like Dunash he attributes the corruption of the text (almost

¹ Henceforth SY.

² Written in 931 C.E. See below for more detailed discussion of the early commentaries on SY.

³ M. Lambert, *Commentaire sur le Séfer Yesira ou livre de la creation par le Gaon Saadya de Fayyoun*, 1891, p. 13, trans. p. 29, J.D. Kafach, *ספר יצירה השלם עם תרגום ופירוש רבנו סעדיה*, גאון, 1972, p. 34. Lambert and Kafach’s translations of Saadya’s Arabic differ at this point. Lambert has: “nous croyons bon de transcrire chaque paragraphe intégralement et ensuite nous l’expliquerons, car ce livre n’est pas un livre répandu et en outre grande nombre de gens ne le comprennent pas; (nous ferons ainsi) afin qu’il n’y entre pas d’altération ou d’erreur ...” Kafach translates: *ראיתי לקבוע ממנו הלכה הלכה בשלמותו, ואחר כך אתרגמנה, מפני שאינו ספר המצוי יקף עליה* (preserved it/ understood it) implies that the text has not been preserved in a good state, but in order to make his translation work Lambert has to supply in brackets “nous ferons ainsi” to provide an antecedent for the conjunction *לילא* (so that not), which is clearly intended to link together the two clauses rather than commence a separate statement. Kafach’s translation is, therefore, preferable. The two Hebrew versions, printed in Haberman, “אבנים לחקר ספר יצירה” *Sinai* 20 (1946/7), p. 241, are not a great help at this point.

⁴ G. Vajda, *Le Commentaire sur le Livre de la Création de Dūnāš ben Tāmīn de Kairouan (Xe siècle): Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée par Paul B. Fenton*, 2002, p. 129; Hebrew text, p. 241 and M. Grossberg, *Sefer Yezirah ascribed to the Patriarch Abraham with commentary by Dunash Ben Tamim*, 1902, p. 65. See also the notes to § 45 for further discussion of this passage in Dunash’s commentary.

certainly correctly) to the incorporation into it of marginal notes and commentary material.⁵ By implication Saadya locates this added material in the second half of the work (his chapters 5–8) when he remarks that there is little new in them and he does not intend to devote much effort to expounding them.⁶ Dunash explicitly attributes to the work of commentators the material, mostly in the latter part of SY, which details the precise connections between each letter of the alphabet, element, and part of the human body.

These observations by the early commentators are fully vindicated when we come to compare the large number of manuscripts of SY that have been preserved since the Middle Ages. If we just take a word count of the three manuscripts which serve as the base texts for this edition we can see the extent of the problem. Ms A (Vatican Library (Cat. Assemani) 299(8), fols. 66a–71b) has 2737 words, Ms K (Parma 2784.14, De Rossi 1390, fols. 36b–38b) has 1883 words, while Ms C (Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter K21/56 + Glass 32/5 + Glass 12/813) has 2066 words. Some manuscripts have far fewer words than Ms K – as few as 1300, while others range anywhere between this low figure and the full range of material seen in Ms A. See the Table of the Attestations of the Paragraphs of SY in Appendix I.

From the tenth century on, then, it has been recognized that SY existed in a number of recensions (נוסחאות) – some form of standard text, a longer version which contained commentary material, and a version which completely rearranged the material and which was attributed to Saadya Gaon.⁷ Since the nineteenth century it has become conventional to refer to these versions as the Short, the Long and the Saadyan Recensions. The complex textual state in which SY has been handed down is implicitly recognized in the first printed edition (Mantua 1562) in which the Short Recension is printed as the main text (with commentaries) and the Long Recension as an appendix. The fundamental work on delineating the recensions of SY and working out which of them lay before the early commentators was achieved by A. Epstein in his articles in *MGWJ* (= Epstein 1893). However, his fundamental conclusions that the Saadyan Recension is no older than Saadya himself and that the Long Recension is really only a copy of the text which is embedded in Shabbetai Donnolo's commentary⁸ have been invalidated by manuscript discoveries of which Epstein was unaware at the time. As we shall see, it is more likely that the recensions predate any of the known commentaries on SY.

⁵ See I. Weinstock, *לברור הנוסח של ספר יצירה*, *Temirin I*, ed. I. Weinstock (1972), p. 12, for the relevant passages. There is a similar collection in Haberman 1946/7: 241.

⁶ Kafach 1972: 127, Lambert 1891: 89.

⁷ For the relevant passages in Dunash and Judah ben Barzillai's commentaries see A. Epstein, "Pseudo-Saadja's und Elasar Rokeach's Commentare zum Jezira-Buche: Die Recension Saadja's," *MGWJ* 37 (1893), p. 120, and his "Studien zum Jezira-Buche und seinem Erklären," *MGWJ* 37 (1893), p. 459. However, see also Vajda-Fenton 2002: 150–157 for the problematic textual basis of the reference by Dunash to Saadya's commentary.

⁸ Epstein 1893: 460.

2. Why a new edition of *Sefer Yeşira*?

Prior to 1971 no proper critical edition of the text of SY was available. Professor Ithamar Gruenwald's "Preliminary Critical Edition of *Sefer Yezira*"⁹ represents an enormous leap forward in the study of this text. For the first time we have an edition of the text based on a representative sample of the best manuscripts prior to the first printed editions.¹⁰ As his base text Gruenwald presents a diplomatic (and almost entirely faultless) reproduction of the most important (and one of the two earliest) manuscripts – Vatican 299 (Ms A in my edition). Below it he presents two textual apparatuses – one combines the readings of the Long Recension and the Saadyan Recension,¹¹ the other presents the readings of the Short Recension manuscripts. Occasionally, he finds it impossible to present the Short Recension readings as variants from a basis represented by Ms A and prints the Long and Short Recensions in parallel columns. Finally, he adds a series of short notes and observations on the readings.

Why do I feel the need to provide a new and different edition of SY? Firstly, because we now have nearly all of a major textual witness, only part of which was available to Gruenwald¹² – the tenth century Genizah Scroll of the Saadyan Recension.¹³ Secondly, because it seems to me preferable to present the Long and Saadyan Recensions separately with their own textual apparatuses.¹⁴ Thirdly, since SY appears simultaneously in the tenth century in three separate recensions, then that is how the evidence should be laid out with diplomatic reproductions of the earliest manuscript of each recension as the main text and presented in parallel columns. Fourthly, including all manuscript variants produces an apparatus which is very difficult to read and in which it is hard to identify real or major variants in the

⁹ *Israeli Oriental Studies* I (1971), 132–177.

¹⁰ Lazarus Goldschmidt's edition, *Das Buch der Schöpfung* (Frankfurt 1894), is not based on a first-hand study of manuscripts but on the printed editions and commentaries. Gershom Scholem's judgement on this book is damning: "The so-called 'critically edited text' in the edition and translation of Lazarus Goldschmidt . . . is patched together in a completely arbitrary manner and devoid of scientific value" – *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton 1990), p. 25, n.34. However, Goldschmidt's action of comparing the three main recensions (plus the Lurianic re-edition of SY) produced a number of valuable insights into the state of the text and these will be referred to later in the textual notes.

¹¹ Implicitly this accepts A. Epstein's view (1893:267) that the Saadyan Recension is really only a reshaping of the Long Recension and hence that there are really only two basic recensions of SY.

¹² In the edition of Habermann 1946/7.

¹³ In the excellent edition by Nehemiah Allony: "ספר יצירה נוסח רס"ג בצורת מגילה מגניזת" *קהיר*, *Temirin* II (1981), 9–29.

¹⁴ Nicolas Séd's review of Gruenwald's edition – "Le Sēfer Yešīrā: l'édition critique, le texte primitif, la grammaire et la métaphysique", *REJ* 132 (1973), p. 518, similarly suggests the need to keep the recensions separate: "Le résultat obtenu par I. Gruenwald nous semble confirmer que seule l'édition parallèles trois recensions pourra apporter une réponse complète."

morass of clear scribal errors and orthographical variants.¹⁵ Finally and inevitably, there are some errors in Gruenwald's collations. It is difficult to exclude all errors in collation and I would not claim to have done so myself, but between Gruenwald's edition of Ms A, Nehemiah Allony's of the Genizah Scroll (Ms C in this edition) and my edition of Parma 2784.14 (Ms K) readers should certainly have available reliable editions of the basic texts for the study of SY. In setting out all three together I hope that my edition makes it easier for scholars to work with these basic texts rather than continuing to use the defective printed editions, as many have continued to do even after Gruenwald's work was published.¹⁶

Gruenwald describes his edition as "preliminary." I am not sure that, given the state of the manuscripts, an edition of this text could be anything other than "preliminary." The manuscript tradition of SY is too varied and inconstant for anything like a definitive edition to be produced. Most manuscripts which contain SY either precede or follow it with a commentary or commentaries, but others embed the text within a commentary.¹⁷ Often it is hard to discern where the text ends and commentary begins. For example, the weakly attested §§ 62–63 might be better regarded as commentary to § 48 than as part of the text. As the notes to the text of § 63 show this is where some manuscripts place part of this material, while one manuscript places § 63:3–4 in the margin alongside § 48. As we shall see one explanation for the origin of the Long Recension is that it arose from commentary on the Short Recension. Apart from the difficulty of fixing the borderline between text and commentary, a glance at the Table of the Order of the Paragraphs in Appendix II will demonstrate the freedom some scribes felt to re-arrange the text before them – almost to create a new text.

At about the same time that Gruenwald published his "Preliminary Edition" Israel Weinstock made a very different attempt to show what an edition of SY might look like.¹⁸ He presents a sample edition of chapter 1 (i.e. §§ 1–16) using different type-faces to distinguish what he identifies as the four layers discernible now in the text. The four layers are:

¹⁵ Reading SY in Gruenwald's edition with an honours class at the University of Edinburgh brought this point home forcibly to me.

¹⁶ The latest example of this unfortunate practice is Yehuda Liebes' large-scale study of SY, *תורת היצירה של ספר יצירה* (English title: *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsira*), 2000. Liebes incorporates into his book a photographic reprint of the Mantua edition of the Long Recension of SY. He has many valuable insights into the interpretation of SY but he has not, however, made any significant contribution to the history of its textual development. He does use Gruenwald's edition from time to time, noting on occasion the variations between the recensions, though only very rarely mentioning specific manuscripts. But many of his observations are undermined by failure to take on board the problems of the textual attestation of the material he is discussing.

¹⁷ British Library Or. 6577 (Cat. Margol. 736.5) – not included in our apparatus, is a good example of this. Fols. 40a–43b contain a Short Recension text, then fols. 43b–52a have a second version but embedded within a commentary.

¹⁸ Weinstock 1972.

- (1) The original text which is short, poetic, rhythmical and cryptic, with a 3/4 metre. Weinstock dates it to the Tannaitic period, possibly even towards the end of the Second Temple.
- (2) A series of clarifications added in the talmudic period to make explicit things which the original author had intended to keep secret. For example, the creator of this layer added about one hundred lines to chapter one in order to clarify what the *sefirot* are.
- (3) Weinstock's third layer is basically the Long Recension – a systematic series of additions in the form of a commentary, laid out like Rashi's commentaries. The style is said to be similar to that of the Gaonic midrashim. Weinstock dates this layer to the eighth or ninth centuries.
- (4) The final layer consists of a series of headings and appended notes of various dates produced not long before SY emerges into the light of day in the early tenth century.

Weinstock considers whether to produce three separate apparatuses for the three recensions or whether to combine all three into a single text and apparatus. In the end he chose to provide a single text with a critical apparatus which divides the variants between the three recensions, though he grants that a fuller edition, serving a different purpose than his should include the three versions separately. His choice reflects his principal aim – to reconstruct the original text of SY before it separated out into the different recensions. As I have done, Weinstock introduces only a selection of variants, leaving out errors and orthographical variants.

I find Weinstock's apparatus difficult to use, much like Gruenwald's, but my main criticism is directed at the criteria which he developed to distinguish the four layers in the text. They leave him in the constant danger of arguing in a circle: the "source" layer is rhythmical and poetic, so mere dull prose must belong to a later layer. The "source" comes from the Tannaitic or even the end of the Second Temple period, so anything that reflects the style and language of other periods must be relegated to a later period and cannot belong to the "original text." And so on. A preferable procedure is to start with the text-critical evidence we have and to present it in as objective a fashion as possible. We can then ask what material is attested in all three recensions, what in two or just one? What appears in the supplementary readings in a few manuscripts or only a single manuscript? If the material that is not attested by all manuscripts begins to reveal common characteristics or language, can we identify where it came from, on the supposition that it was added to an earlier core text? On the other hand, could we explain its absence on the supposition that it was cut out by later editors/copyists who objected to the presence of potentially dangerous, subversive or obsolete ideas? The essential thing is to start with objective facts – what is, or is not attested in the manuscripts. On this solid basis it may then be possible to make conjectures as to how a work like SY could have evolved in the time before we have actual evidence of its existence (i.e. the

early tenth century). This would involve projecting backwards to before this time lines of development clearly discernible in the transmission of the text after the tenth century. If this procedure points, for example, to an earlier form of the text which was “rhythmical and poetic”, then we are on firmer (though still somewhat shaky) ground when we apply such criteria in the absence of text-critical evidence. As we shall see, there are a striking number of cases where proceeding in this manner does bring us to the same conclusions as Weinstock on the layering of the text of SY (though not on the dating of the layers).¹⁹

3. *The “original text” of SY or “the earliest recoverable text”?*

What, however, we can never do is to get back to the “original text”, Weinstock’s “source” (מקור). The scribal practices of medieval Jewish copyists are the major reason why the search for an “original text” is almost bound to be frustrated. As Malachi Beit-Arié points out, the lack of centralised political and religious institutions in medieval Jewry meant that no control could be exercised over individual copying of texts:

“Encouraged by authors to correct their works, and aware of the unavoidable corruption imposed by the unconscious mechanics of copying, copyists in particular did not view copying as mechanical reproduction, but instead as a critical editorial operation involving emendation, diagnostic conjecture, collation of different exemplars and even incorporating external, relevant material and the copyist’s own opinion.

Consequently, many Hebrew manuscripts present texts not only corrupted by the accumulation of unsupervised involuntary copying errors, but also distorted by editorial or even redactoral reconstruction, contamination by different models and versions, and deliberate integration of pertinent texts.”²⁰

Another factor which Beit-Arié also regards as potentially fatal for the effort to reconstruct the “original text” is the way in which authors continued to update and expand their works with the result that manuscripts copied at different stages of the evolution of a text would be in circulation at the same time and inevitably then

¹⁹ Séd 1973: 518–522 subjects Weinstock’s edition to devastating criticism. Most of the points he makes are valid but Weinstock’s work is not entirely worthless; some pearls can be rescued from the mire.

²⁰ *Hebrew Manuscripts of East and West: Towards a Comparative Codicology* (London, 1993), p. 83. Beit-Arié finesses these observations in his paper on “The Palaeographical Identification of Hebrew Manuscripts” (1986/87: 14) when he makes a distinction between the attitude to the text being copied of the professional scribe working for hire and that of the individual author copying a text for his own use: “While the first scribe [the professional] is more vulnerable to unconscious mistakes conditioned by the copied text and the mechanism of copying, the second one [the individual owner/scholar] may feel free to change the copied text consciously by amending and editing what might seem to him corrupted passages, sentences or words, collating other versions or completing missing or abbreviated parts relying on memory and the authority of his scholarship.”

would cross-fertilize. All these features that Beit-Arié identifies can easily be seen in the manuscript tradition of SY. Beit-Arié draws the following lesson for text-editors from the above observations: “many principles and practices of classical text criticism, such as establishing the genetic relationships between manuscripts, the stemmatic classification of versions and restoring the original text, are not applicable to Hebrew manuscripts” ... (*ibid.*). None of these will be attempted in this edition. I prefer to use the term “earliest recoverable text” rather than the “original text” of Sefer Yešira. The “earliest recoverable text” is the one which can be ascertained from the manuscript information we have available, using the standard techniques of textual criticism. As my notes to the text will show this usually amounts to identifying the textual material which all the three recensions have in common – the lowest common denominator. However, this can only take us back to a stage just before the emergence of the earliest manuscripts we possess – say, the second half of the ninth century C.E. Undoubtedly, the processes described by Beit-Arié will have been at work long before this, making the “original text” irrecoverable. In my reconstruction in Appendix Three of the earliest recoverable text of SY I have attempted by means of square brackets to identify those parts which I suspect were added in the process of transmission but for which there is little or no text-critical evidence to back up my judgements. Some of this bracketed material could well have its origin in the kind of muddle that Beit-Arié sees arising from authors’ own continuous updating of their work. The main text of the Appendix outside the brackets is based on textual evidence. The reasons for the judgements I make are provided in the commentary.

The state in which we find the text of SY is not, of course, unique for Jewish works from the first millennium C.E. Take, for example, the text of Pirke Aboth. What a text-critical nightmare is revealed when we dig below the level of editions like that of Herford (1962) which seem almost designed to keep their readership ignorant of the real situation. PA like SY exists in three separate recensions in which both the text and the order of the material varies. At the level of the individual manuscripts there is even more variation. One can make comments on the history and development of this text and the rabbinic values which it reveals but the search for the “original” PA is doomed to failure. There never was one – just an ever-growing collection of rabbinic sayings attached to the end of the Mishnah in order to encourage people to study it. The closest parallel to the phenomena which greet the scholar when studying texts like PA and SY is actually the three Synoptic Gospels, for there we have a large mass of sayings which reveal a bewildering mixture of both order and disorder while yet quite clearly having a common origin. I am very much inclined to agree with my, sadly now-deceased colleague, John O’Neill that “Matthew, Mark, and Luke as we have them are the end product of three lines of scribal tradition. They are not the work of three authors who looked across at unified sources and made hundreds of changes on each page at their authorial will” (O’Neill 1991: 500). Somewhat closer to home, it is instructive to compare the state

of the text of SY with that of the Hekhalot texts since it is generally transmitted in exactly the same Hebrew manuscripts. Here the most revealing comparison is between the medieval European Hekhalot manuscripts and the oriental, Genizah fragments, as Joseph Dan says: “less than half of the twenty-three Genizah fragments conform even in part to the *Synopse* structure,²¹ and less than half of these contain substantial fragments of the same structure.”²² Klaus Hermann’s study of the famous Hekhalot manuscript, New York 8128, came to the same conclusions as Dan over the freedom medieval scribes felt to supplement and even reshape the traditions they were transmitting.²³ Finally, in this attempt to set the state of the textual tradition of SY in its wider context of the transmission of Jewish literature as a whole, let us mention the earliest Hebrew and Arabic Jewish anti-Christian polemical texts. Once again, we meet the ubiquitous “three versions.” To cite first Daniel Lasker: “It may be concluded, therefore, that there was a body of anti-Christian polemic in Judaeo-Arabic that was compiled in at least three versions: Schlosberg’s *Qiṣṣa*,²⁴ the Arabic *Vorlage* of the *Nesṭor* manuscripts,²⁵ and the Genizah fragments. What the original form of that anti-Christian polemic was cannot now be determined.”²⁶ In the same volume Sarah Stroumsa deals with the *Qiṣṣa Mujādalat al-Uṣquf* of which the *Sefer Nesṭor* is a Hebrew version and comments: “And yet an attempt to collate the Arabic fragments with Schlosberg’s edition, or with each other, turns out to be a frustrating task: although they clearly belong to the same work, they hardly ever correspond from beginning to end. Each of the fragments contains more or less the same paragraphs but the vocabulary may vary considerably, as may also the order of the paragraphs.”²⁷ An editor of SY can sympathize with Stroumsa’s frustration. So the situation we observe in the manuscripts of SY is by no means unique and, hence, we need to consider now how other editors of such texts have dealt with the problems posed for us by the transmitters of these traditions.

²¹ Dan is here referring to Peter Schäfer’s *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (1981); see below.

²² “The Ancient Hekhalot Texts in the Middle Ages: Tradition, Source, Inspiration”, *BJRL* 75.3 (1993), 93–94, and 1998: 257.

²³ “Re-written Mystical Texts: the Transmission of the Heikhalot Literature in the Middle Ages”, *BJRL* 75.3 (1993).

²⁴ Leon Schlosberg, *Qiṣṣa Mujādalat al-Uṣquf* (Vienna, 1880).

²⁵ Abraham Berliner, *Sefer Nesṭor Ha-Komer* (Altona, 1875).

²⁶ Daniel J. Lasker, “*Qiṣṣa Mujādalat al-Uṣquf* and *Nesṭor Ha-Komer*: The earliest Arabic and Hebrew Jewish anti-Christian polemics”, in *Genizah research after ninety years: The case of Judaeo-Arabic*, ed. Joshua Blau and Stefan C. Reif (Cambridge, 1992), 114.

²⁷ Sara Stroumsa, “*Qiṣṣa Mujādalat al-Uṣquf*: A case study in polemical literature”, in *Genizah research after ninety years, 155–159*.

4. Editing Jewish texts from the first millennium C.E.

Given this situation which confronts scholars working on the medieval manuscripts, the question of how to edit Hebrew texts from Late Antiquity and the early medieval period has been widely debated in recent years.²⁸ Peter Schäfer has more or less proclaimed the death of the so-called “critical edition” but has also challenged the notion of regarding Jewish texts of this period as “texts”, i.e. as works consciously shaped by authors which can be studied by techniques applicable to modern literary works (Schäfer 1988).²⁹ He has argued that this concept of the text ignores the reality of the textual evidence we have for nearly all Jewish texts from this period. Most of them are attested in medieval manuscripts mainly from Europe and they contain a bewildering variety of text types. How can we know that these texts were not put into their present shape by the scribes of these medieval manuscripts? – much the same question as arises from Beit-Arié’s observations quoted earlier. Schäfer’s approach to textual criticism was enshrined first in his ground-breaking *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (1981) and now in his *Synopse zum Talmud-Yerushalmi* (1991–). Schäfer provides no critical apparatus in these works but just lays out the text of the most important manuscripts in synoptic form. He leaves it to scholars using his works to make what comments they like on the text and, if they so wish, to engage in the futile task of reconstructing an original text which never existed. The extent of Schäfer’s scepticism can be gauged from the introduction to his synopsis of the Jerusalem Talmud where he claims that the most that can be achieved is to reconstruct the text as it existed in the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries.³⁰

I have a lot of sympathy for Schäfer’s position. However, I am not as pessimistic as he is over the possibilities of using textual criticism to at least reconstruct earlier forms of texts than are attested in the manuscripts we have. Hence the layout of my edition of SY is a compromise between that of Gruenwald and that which would be suggested if I followed Schäfer’s procedures in his synopses.³¹ I present the earliest manuscripts of the three main recensions in synoptic form with a limited textual apparatus for each of them. Only major variants affecting the meaning of the text are presented in the apparatus; errors and orthographical variants are excluded. The principal function of the apparatus is to provide support for my observations in the commentary on the text. Where, in any particular paragraph, recording the

²⁸ I have dealt with this issue in some detail with particular reference to SY in Hayman 1995.

²⁹ *Hekhalot-Studien* (Tübingen, 1988).

³⁰ Schäfer 1991: VII.

³¹ I have taken to heart Malachi Beit-Arié’s advice at the end of his 1993c article (p. 51) where he says that we must use medieval Hebrew manuscripts “with great caution, suspicion and scepticism, and above all refrain from establishing authentic texts, or even critical editions, and rather resort to the safe synoptic presentation of the transmitted texts, while proposing our critical analysis and reconstruction in the form of notes.”

readings of a manuscript would overly complicate the apparatus because it varies too much from the base manuscript for its recension I have printed its text in full in the synoptic section. Moreover, I have from time to time varied the base manuscript for the collations – though always printing the text of the three main manuscripts. See, for example, the apparatus to § 15 where I have collated all the short recension manuscripts to Ms P rather than K. My aim throughout has been to make the critical apparatus as simple as possible.

My solution to the problems of editing the text of SY may be contrasted with that chosen by Daniel Abrams in his edition of *The Book Bahir*.³² Faced with the more than one hundred extant manuscripts of this text Abrams chose to provide a diplomatic reproduction of the earliest dated manuscript (Munich 209) with an apparatus recording the variants of the next earliest dated manuscript (Vatican-Barberini Or. 110). These two manuscripts represent two separate recensions of the text and, in Abrams's opinion, all the other extant manuscripts descend from one or other of these recensions. The Munich manuscript has been extensively corrected and readings from the other recension (and some from an unknown source) recorded in the margin and hence the manuscript represents "a kind of critical edition of the Bahir as it was known in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries."³³ But to more clearly illustrate the differences between his two manuscripts Abrams does also set out in parallel columns thirteen of the one hundred and forty paragraphs of *Sepher Ha-Bahir*. It might have been better and more helpful to the reader for him to have set out all the paragraphs in this fashion. Abrams regards his work not as a definitive edition of the text but as providing "what will hopefully be the groundwork for future enquiries in the text and its influence" (1994: *11). He provides a list of the other manuscripts of the text and refers to some of their readings in the course of his discussions of the redaction and reception history of the text. Reading between the lines one has the feeling that Abrams thinks that not a great deal would be gained by the massive amount of work required to provide a complete critical edition based on all the manuscript evidence. That is my own feeling in the case of SY. What is required at this stage is an edition that makes the major recensions and variants available to scholars in as usable a form as possible. SY is a short enough text to make an edition based on nineteen manuscripts possible, but one based on the one-hundred and thirty-one manuscripts listed in the Collective Catalogue of the Jewish National and University Microfilm Institute would be a daunting task and probably virtually unreadable, unless the choice of variants to be included in the apparatus was ruthlessly selective – very much more so than the choice represented in this edition of SY. But what represents a real variant and what is just a scribal error are matters over which scholars constantly disagree, and, in any case,

³² *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts* (Los Angeles, 1994).

³³ Abrams 1994: *11–*12.

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