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Magical Letters, Mystical Planets: Magic, Theosophy, and Astrology in the *Sefer Yetsirah* and two of its Tenth-century Commentaries

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In this essay I discuss the treatment of two important themes in the late antique work, the *Sefer Yetsirah*, and in two of its tenth-Century commentaries, Sa'adya Gaon's *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsirah*, and Shabbetai Donnolo's *Sefer Hakhmoni*. These themes are the effective power of symbols, and of the Hebrew letterform specifically, and theosophy, the belief that the created world can be used to learn about the divine. The *Sefer Yetsirah* expresses an effective view of symbols and a theosophic view of the universe. This theosophic view is intrinsic to the astrological outlook that informs the work. The commentaries on the *Sefer Yetsirah* take different positions regarding these themes, relying on non-Jewish sources and cosmological models to reinterpret the magical function of the Hebrew letterform, and the theosophic significance of the created world. In so doing, the commentators reinterpret the *Sefer Yetsirah* in light of contemporary debates.

The *Sefer Yetsirah* is a short, late-antique work and one of the core texts in the kabbalistic corpus. This work narrates the divine creation of the cosmos with Hebrew letters and numbers, and continues to show the relation between these letters, the stars and planets, the seasons, and the human body. It ends by describing how the biblical Abraham also 'created' by combining letters of the Hebrew alphabet. So it is a myth that also contains a model. This is borne out in the diagramming tradition - some of the diagrams accompanying the work and its commentaries contain instructions for creation,¹ and this shows that Abraham was taken as an exemplary figure. It follows, too, that if God really did create the universe with letters and numbers, then both the universe and linguistic

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signs could be used to learn about God. The commentaries on the *Sefer Yetsirah* attribute various meanings to signs and the created world, and they have different ideas about how this knowledge can be used. Some of these differences can be tied to culture, as a response to the thinking of those around them.

These two Jewish thinkers, Sa'adya Gaon, and Shabbetai Donnolo wrote at around the same time in significantly different cultural milieux. Sa'adya wrote in tenth Century Babylonia at the center of rationalist thought, while Shabbetai wrote in Byzantine Italy, just after the resolution of the iconoclastic debates, and at the height of the revival of astrology in Byzantium.² Both explicitly rely on different non-Jewish sources for their interpretations of the work, so that the cosmopolitan cultures in which they were immersed had a direct effect on the ways in which they understood important themes in the *Sefer Yetsirah*.

It is worth noting here that we have three separate versions of the *Sefer Yetsirah* that are dated to the tenth Century.³ These are the Long Version, the Short Version, and the Sa'adya Version. There are tenth-Century manuscripts for the Long and the Sa'adyan versions, while there are fragments of the short version embedded in later manuscripts of known tenth Century works.⁴ The tenth Century Sa'adyan recension is thought to be a genuine autograph copy, so when he disagrees with the text it is very clear, first, that he is dealing with

a pre-existent text and, second, a tradition of interpreting it. All translations appearing here are taken from A. Peter Hayman's 2005 critical edition of the text, and the quotes are taken from the earliest versions, dated to the tenth Century.

The first documented interpretation of the *Sefer Yetsirah* is the magical one articulated in the Talmud. According to the Talmud, the book is used by Rava Hanina and Oshaia to create a calf, to be slaughtered for Shabbat dinner.⁵ All of the interpretations that follow engage this one, and they do it with the tools made available to them from within Jewish thought and from those cultures surrounding them. Sa'adya Gaon (Babylonia, 882-942) thinks about the *Sefer Yetsirah* with philosophical tools provided by Muslim Kalamist thinkers, to transform the *Sefer Yetsirah* into a philosophical treatise on the nature of creation, and to neutralize or delimit any magical or astrological elements in the work. His contemporary Shabbetai Donnolo (Byzantine Italy, 913-982), on the other hand, also worked to harmonize *Sefer Yetsirah* with contemporary thought, but his goal was to reconfigure the work as an astrological-theosophical treatise, which would allow humans to see the workings of divine providence in the structure of the physical world, and to gain knowledge of the divine by reflecting on its created elements.

The magical aspects of the *Sefer Yetsirah* can be understood through an analysis of its treatment of

the Hebrew letterform. The *Sefer Yetsirah* narrates a cosmic creation, which is based in the creation of the forms of letters. In describing creation, the *Sefer Yetsirah* author writes:

Seven double letters... he carved them, hewed them, combined them, weighed them, and exchanged them, and with them he formed the planets in the universe, the days in the year, and the openings.⁶

It is important to note here that these letters are not written, but they are carved, or hewn. They can be weighed and exchanged, so they possess substance as well as form. Moreover these substantial objects are shaped by the divine hand and manipulated and juxtaposed to create.⁷ In the next *perek*, the theme of their substantiality is developed when they are described as stones:

How did he combine them? Two stones build two houses; three build six houses; four build twenty-four houses; six build seven hundred and twenty houses; seven build five thousand and forty houses. From here go out and ponder what the mouth cannot speak, and what the eye cannot see, and what the ear cannot hear.⁸

These passages are key to understanding the text because they communicate two of its central ideas: first, that the physical forms of the Hebrew letters precede speech, and second, that the letters are manipulated to arrive at something beyond representation. In this way, symbols are not barriers to knowledge but avenues.

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These letters are explicitly linked to the human body and to the cosmos. Much of the *Sefer Yetsirah* is concerned with elaborating these links, as in the passage below:

32: He made Aleph rule over air, and bound it to a crown, and combined them with each other, and formed with them air in the universe, the temperate in the year and the chest in the body.⁹

This is a melothesic model, reflecting an astrological doctrine that related the parts of the heavens (the planets or the signs of the zodiac) to the parts of the human body. According to this model, the parts related to one another were simultaneously present in each other, each substantively linked to the other. Here the aleph, which makes no sound on its own, is combined with its crown to generate in the physical world the air used to make its sound, and in human beings, the chest that provides breath. Here the chest is linked to each of the objects discussed above, and it exists simultaneously in the symbolic realm of letters, in the semi-divine celestial realm, and in the world of matter. As such it is possible to map any two of these entities with the third. The three of them together – the air in the universe, the temperate season in the year, and the chest, speak of the aleph, and the aleph speaks of the divine hand that carved it. Together, they speak of the divine force that created all of them. These letters, then, are qualitatively different from the ones used in ordinary correspondence, which possess

form without substance. If symbols are rightly used, they reveal a creative power that comes directly from the divine.

While the magical interpretation of the *Sefer Yetsirah* is the first recorded, subsequent interpretive traditions try to mediate this magical one in relation to their contemporary intellectual climates. Sa'adya's commentary is very much engaged with the elite rationalist, philosophical, and fiercely aniconic culture of his time and place. Indeed, in his commentary on the *Sefer Yetsirah*, he demonstrates his familiarity with contemporary philosophy by refuting twelve different cosmogonic views before presenting his own.¹⁰ Sa'adya's methodology bears an affinity to Kalaamist thought, which was distinctive in part because of its negative linguistic theology based on a radical doctrine of divine incorporeality, its efforts to establish revealed (i.e. scriptural) tradition as the basis for all scientific and philosophical inquiry, and to synthesize revealed tradition with science. Thus in Sa'adya's interpretation of the *Sefer Yetsirah* he tries to intervene in its magical treatment of symbols, to situate its speculative aspects in the context of Biblical traditions, and to replace its astrological doctrines with astronomical ones. In this way he excises its magical qualities and stifles the theosophic attitudes embedded in its melothesic modeling of the cosmos. These interpretive tendencies are apparent in his treatment of Hebrew letterforms, and the astrological entity, the T'li,

or the dragon.

As a philosopher Sa'adya is faced with a real problem in interpreting the *Sefer Yetsirah*, because it is at odds with the creation narrative of Genesis. *Sefer Yetsirah* narrates creation through letters and numbers, while Genesis explains that the world was created by means of the divine voice. Sa'adya tried to reconcile the creation narratives with his doctrine of the *bat kol*, the daughter of the divine voice. He quotes from *Nevi'im* (the book of the *Prophets*) to insist that the *Bat Kol* was the first created thing, followed by the visible air, in which the Creator formed ten numbers and twenty-two letters. In this way he uses the *Nevi'im* to assert that divine speech precedes the creation of the letters, and that the letters are the agents of divine speech rather than of the divine body, which reestablishes the primacy of the divine voice as it appears in Genesis. This, then, is an interpretation that treats letters as a mediation of mediation, rather than as divine artefacts or material objects.

Sa'adya also works to reinterpret the astrological entity of the T'li, or the dragon, as discussed in *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:4. In so doing, he also reinterprets the theosophical and astrological views informing the text. I examine here *pereks* 54-5. The main portion of 54 describes the creation of twelve sets of four elements by one letter. A typical description proceeds as follows: "there was formed with 'He' these: Aries, Nisan (A spring month), the liver, sight and blindness."¹¹ This passage expresses the theosophic

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conception of the universe encoded in a melothesic model. All of these four elements participate in one another via their creation with the letter 'He.' The Sa'adya version also shows a belief in astrology. The passage reads as follows:

Three fathers and their offspring, seven dominant ones and their hosts, and the twelve diagonal lines. And a proof for the matter - trustworthy witnesses: the universe, the year, and mankind...¹² There is a law of ten, three, seven, and twelve. They are commanded in¹³ the T'li, the celestial sphere, and the heart. The T'li in the universe is like a king on his throne; the celestial sphere in the year is like a king in his province, the heart in mankind is like a king in war.¹⁴

When the universe, the year and the soul are called 'witnesses' this speaks to a theosophical view of the universe as a cipher, or a 'proof' for understanding divine creation. Each element described here manifests human and cosmological qualities, which emphasizes the relationship between them, and to God.

The text shows an astrologically influenced worldview in its discussion of the T'li. In diagrams accompanying the text it was sometimes depicted as a snake eating its tail, and it exercised power over the twelve constellations.¹⁵ The writer explains that each of the powers described is ruled over by three intermediary powers - the dragon (T'li), the wheel and the heart. With the T'li 'like a king on his

throne,' and the others exercising power at greater and greater distances from the throne, it is quite clear that they are subsidiary to the T'li, and that it holds real power.

Sa'adya reads this passage quite differently, however. He writes: "I understand this to be a place where two orbits intersect... It is not a constellation resembling a dragon or any other creature."¹⁶ Thus, the T'li possesses neither image nor power. It is merely, in contradistinction to the one presented in the text, a human-identified set of coordinates on a map of the skies. Sa'adya describes the T'li in contemporary astronomical terms, but his proof text here is Job 26:13, which reads: "By his spirit he hath garnished the heavens; his hand hath formed the crooked serpent." Thus, true to Kalaamist ideals, revelation provides the basis for textual and even scientific interpretation.¹⁷ The T'li does not exercise the power granted it in the text of the *Sefer Yetsirah*.

So Sa'adya's commentary intervenes in two key tenets either expressed in or attributed to the *Sefer Yetsirah*. First, he delimits the function of symbols, so that letters do not function as magical objects, and so that the story of the *Sefer Yetsirah* agrees with the creation story told in Genesis. Next, he argues against the attribution of power to the T'li. While these points of view are inconsistent with the literal sense of the *Sefer Yetsirah*, they are quite consistent with the Kalaamist views popular in his

time and place. These include a desire to delimit the function of symbols in relation to the divine, and a non-theosophic worldview founded not in astrology but in the synthesis of empirical observation with revealed text. Sa'adya's commentary is polemical.

Next we will consider Shabbetai Donnolo, another tenth Century commentator, but from Byzantium rather than Babylonia. He works between the poles of Jewish midrashic and magical tradition, Byzantine adulation of icons, and Babylonian astrology. This is quite clear in his discussion of his aims in *Sefer Hakhmoni*, the sources of his scientific knowledge, and the function of the T'li, or the dragon. In this work, his goal was to emphasize astrological themes in the *Sefer Yetsirah*, to allow humans to interpret the stars to uncover, understand, and map the divine structures undergirding the cosmos. The relations between the shapes of the constellations, the human form, and the divine are among the central foci of the work. Throughout the work, he treats astrological patterns as the ktav-emet - true writing from the hand of God.¹⁸

He arrives at this reading by combining Jewish, Greek, Macedonian, and Babylonian science, combined with a Byzantine understanding of signs as presentational. This interesting passage from the *Sefer Hakhmoni* explains how he arrives at his methodology:

Eventually I found a Babylonian, not a Jew, called Bagdash,
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Edgar Francis IV, Univ. of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

At the Cutting Edge: the Uses of Weapons in Magical Spells, a Comparison of the PGM, the Picatrix and the Munich Handbook

David Porreca, University of Waterloo

2. Session 310, 1:30 pm, Sangren 2210

Purity and Transgression

Prsident: David Porreca, University of Waterloo

The Notion of Purity in Medieval Jewish and Christian Magic

Katelyn Mesler, Northwestern Univ.

The King, the Abbot and the Woman Druid: Secular and Clerical Magic in a Twelfth-Century Irish Death Tale

Patricia Aakhus, Univ. of Southern Indiana

Social Purity, Individual Transgression: Magic and Nationhood in Chrétien de Troye's Cligés

Jennifer Lynn Hellwarth, Allegheny College

3. Session 324, 3:30 pm, Valley II Garneau Lounge New Methodologies and Paradigms in the Study of Magic (A Roundtable)

Prsident: Frank Klaassen, University of Saskatchewan

Participants, Michael Bailey, Iowa State Univ., Edward Bever, SUNY College – Old Westbury, Lauren Kassell, Univ. of Cambridge

Saturday May 9. 11:45 a.m. Fetzner 1060

Societas Magica Business Meeting

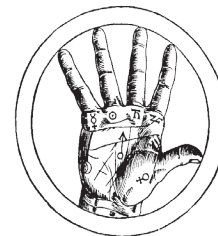
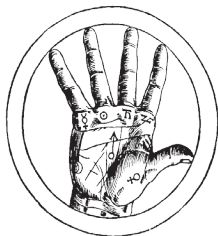
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We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.

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who knew this science very well, including how to make calculations for a true understanding of what had been and what was to be. His system completely agreed with Samuel's *Baraita*, and with all the Jewish, Greek, and Macedonian books, yet it was absolutely clear and lucid... He taught me the rules of observing the heavenly bodies, explaining which were beneficent, which maleficent, and how, by measuring the shadow thrown by

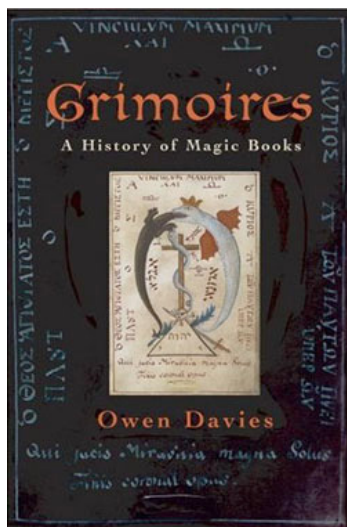
the rod, as written in Shmuel's *Baraita*, the planet and the constellation which are lords of the hour can be known, so that any question can be asked or answered...¹⁹

Here, he begins with Shmuel's *Baraita*, (a Jewish calendrical work written in 776) as his source text. There is a problem with it, because it is unclear. He accepts the other books - the Greek, the Macedonian, and particularly the thoughts of the Babylonian

Bagdash, as clarifications of that first Jewish book. In actuality, this is a superimposition as the works he discusses treat similar subjects, but quite differently. Hence he uses all the materials at hand, regardless of their source, to accomplish his goal of reading the heavens, God's creation, to gain insight into divine providence.

This bent is particularly clear in his discussion of the T'li.²⁰ He asks in the *Sefer Hakhmoni*:

New Release: Grimoires: A History of Magic Books (Oxford, May 2009) Owen Davies



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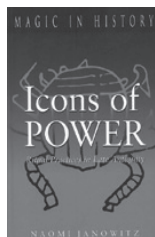
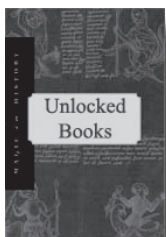
Letters cont'd

And what is the T'li? When God created the firmament above us, which is divided into seven heavens, He created the T'li from water and fire in the shape of a great dragon, like a great twisted serpent, and made for it a head and a tail and put it in the fourth heaven, which is the middle heaven, the abode of the sun... It is ...through learning handed down through ancient books that we can get to know the T'li, its power, its rule, how it was created, its goodness and its malignancy.²¹

Shabbetai quite clearly believes that the T'li, created by God, holds real power. It rules, and it exerts influence on events through its goodness and its malignancy. Traditional knowledge (learning handed down through ancient books) will help us to understand the process by which it was created, and the divine source of that power. He continues according to the text of the *Sefer Yetsirah* to employ a melothestic model,

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mapping the cosmos onto the human form. Shabbetai writes:

The universe has its signs of the zodiac, and those who observe the stars know how to foretell future events. Similarly, man has signs: when a man has scabs but no boils, lice, or fleas, experts in such learning can tell his fortune by it...²²

Thus the human body and the cosmos provide an avenue for insight into the ways of the divine. Both can reveal the true structures undergirding the cosmos.

Shabbetai's position resonates in some ways with that of the classical thinker, Philo of Alexandria, who argued that God created the universe as a kind of allegorical icon of itself. According to Philo, images of the cosmos did not represent directly but functioned as an allegory as well,²³ pointing through and beyond themselves to something greater. In Philo's time, the intellectual elites expressed their superiority through a suspicion of icons. This point of view was formulated in opposition to an overly simplistic, naïve expression of what Moshe Barasch calls an unfulfillable desire - the desire to see God. The intermediary, Philonic position is the allegorical treatment of the universe, in which the universe does not represent directly as an icon might, but as an allegory it does allow some understanding of the divine through interpretation.

Thus while we do not know whether any of Shabbetai's own manuscripts contained images, his tendency to understand

the universe as an allegorized presentational symbol may be due in part to his immersion in Byzantine culture, which was continually involved in a discussion of the meaning of the visual. This culture valued images in a way that was not acceptable to Jewish praxis, and that made it desirable for Shabbetai to take up this intermediary position as Philo did.

In this way, two different commentators on the *Sefer Yetsirah* explicitly rely on non-Jewish sources to reinterpret the magical function of the Hebrew letterform, which provides the undergirding structure for the map of the cosmos it elaborates. Sa'adya lived in tenth Century Babylonia, among the intellectual elites of both the Islamic and Jewish communities. Because the ideals of the Kalam prevailed, with their insistence on the incorporeality of the divine, their fierce aniconic ideals, and their desire to base scientific inquiry in revealed tradition, Sa'adya interprets the *Sefer Yetsirah* in this vein. Working across the boundaries of religious faith, he reconciles its doctrine of creation with the one presented in the Hebrew Bible, mediates the magical function of the Hebrew letterform, and delimits the mystical signification of the created world. Shabbetai, on the other hand, lived immersed in iconophilic culture of Byzantine Italy, which was unacceptable to him as a Jew. Thus, drawing on the classical Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria and those like him, on the non-Jewish Babylonian scholar Bagdash,

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and on his contemporaries who stressed the power of images, Shabbetai was able to reinterpret the *Sefer Yetsirah* as an astrological work. As an astrological work, it treated the created world not as icons, but as a melothesia, which presented the created world as an allegorical icon, one which, when interpreted correctly, pointed beyond itself to insight into the divine. Thus astrological ideals provided Shabbetai with the tools to forge an intermediary position between Jewish aniconism and Byzantine adulation of icons. In this way the metaphysical models created by each of these thinkers served to map cultural, as well as cosmological configurations.

Notes

¹ See JTS 1884, fol 74, 14th Century, Italian hand. Commentary on the *Sefer Yetsirah*, attributed to Abraham ibn Daud. The gloss contains instructions to 'raise him,' and this probably refers to a Golem. These interpretations of the *Sefer Yetsirah* in the Golem tradition begin to appear toward the end of the 14th Century.

² The science was revived only in the late 8th Century and the 9th Century under the impact of translations from Syriac and Arabic. The period from about 800 to 1200 was the most propitious for Byzantine astrology, though nothing was essentially added to astrological theories or techniques. For more information, see *Medieval Science, Technology, and Medicine: An Encyclopedia*, Ed. Thomas F Glick, Steven Livesey, Faith Wallis (London and NY: Routledge, 2005), 62.

³ All references to the text come from A. Peter Hayman's critical edition, (*Sefer Yesira*. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004) and when I am quoting Sa'adya's commentary, I use the Sa'adya version, the autograph copy. (The Geniza Scroll, Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter, K21/56 + Glass 32/5 + Glass 12/813, 10th Century). I will refer to it in notes as Hayman's "manuscript C." When

I am examining Shabbetai, I use the 10th Century copy of Long Version (Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana (Cat. Assemani) 299(8), fols 66a-71b, 10th Century). This is Hayman's "manuscript A."

⁴ Notably, this includes Dunash ibn Tamim's philosophical commentary on the work, which reinterpreted it as an Aristotelian cosmology.

⁵ "What [magic] is entirely permitted? Such as [the magic] performed by R. Hanina and R. 'Oshaia, who spend every Sabbath eve in studying the Laws of Creation, by means of which they created a third-grown calf, and ate it." Talmud, Sanhedrin 67a, cited in J. Neusner, *There We Sat Down* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 80.

⁶ Hayman, P 133. SY 39, Ms C, 10th Century Sa'adyan recension. Geniza Scroll, Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter K21/56 + Glass 32/5 + Glass 12/813.

⁷ For a full discussion of the artefactual, embodied nature of the Hebrew alphabet, see Leslie Atzmon's article, "A visual analysis of anthropomorphism in the Kabbalah: dissecting the Hebrew alphabet and Sephirotic diagram," *Visual Communication*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2003): 97-114.

⁸ Hayman, Ms C, *perek* 40, p 134.

⁹ Hayman, Ms C, *perek* 32, p 121. I translated nefesh as body, rather than soul, as Hayman did, because there are three souls and this is one animating the human body. This, and all those parts created 'in the nefesh' are body parts.

¹⁰ For more information on this, see Harry Austyn Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

¹¹ Hayman, 164.

¹² Sa'adya Version, manuscript C, *perek* 58.

¹³ The Hebrew reads literally "pikudeihem b'tli." Pikudei is often translated as counted, or accounted, as in the portion of the Bible *Vayakhel Pikudei* (Ex. 38:21-40:38), so that "pikudeihem b'tli" ought to read "they are counted or accounted in the T'li." Hayman translates this as "they have command over." But because of the prefix, "b" which generally means 'in,' the translation ought not to read this way. If we do accept his translation of pikudeihem as commanding them, they still do that commanding from within

the T'li. See Hayman, 177.

¹⁴ Manuscript C, *perek* 59.

¹⁵ JTS 1895, 14th Century Spanish. Commentary on the *Sefer Yetsirah*, attributed (falsely) to Sa'adia Gaon. Folio 17B. It is worth noting that these sorts of diagrams only accompany commentaries by the pseudo-Sa'adya, now attributed to Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, who lived in the late 13th Century.

¹⁶ Sadia Gaon, *Commentaire sur le Sefer Yetsirah*, tr. Mayer Lambert (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2001), 73. ("J'ai traduit teli 'dragon,' et j'entends par là l'endroit d'intersection des deux orbites...c'est ainsi que s'explique cette dénomination de dragon, et n'est-ce pas du tout une constellation ressemblant à un dragon, ni à un autre [animal].") The French is Lambert's translation from Arabic.

¹⁷ Tradition for Sa'adya demarcates a unique category of knowing unlike the three other epistemological processes he addresses (viz. sensory, inferential and reason-based knowledge). Sarah Pessin elaborates: "Sa'adya's liberal peppering of his analyses and arguments with Biblical proof texts can in this way be seen as incarnations of faith in his text, incarnations which speak volumes about his complex understanding of reason's relation to revelation. It would seem that faith — and not simply reason — runs throughout and grounds Sa'adya's text, itself a model for Sa'adya's conception of the well-lived life." Sarah Pessin, "Sa'adya [Sa'adiyah]," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (May 2003), Edward N. Zalta, ed. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/Sa'adya/>>.

¹⁸ Andrew Scharf, *The Universe of Shabbetai Donnolo* (New York: Ktav, 1976), 10.

¹⁹ Scharf, 10.

²⁰ Andrew Scharf writes that the physical notion of the T'li is taken from Samuel's *Baraita* (*Universe of Shabbetai Donnolo*, 36). In Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, a creature like the T'li supports the entire world on its fins. The notion of the T'li is comparable to the Ptolemaic axis mundi; T'li is compared to bariakh, a piercing, or a central bar or girder for the earth. (36)

²¹ Scharf, 36.

²² Scharf, 36.

²³ Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 67.