

THE WORK OF CREATION



Aside from the *Work of the Chariot*, the other field of early Jewish mysticism mentioned in the *Talmud* is the *Work of Creation*. In many ways, this mystical topic is based upon the *creation* presented at the beginning of *Genesis*.

“The work of creation may not be expounded in the presence of two.”
(B. Chagigah 11b)

When it comes to *creation*, there are two basic types identified within Judaism and elsewhere. The first time is called *yesh m'ayin, something from nothing creation*, and this is the type of *creation* the *God* engages in at the beginning of the *Bible* where the universe is brought into existence out of nothing, The other mode of creation is *yesh m'yesh, something from something*, and this is the type of *creation* we do whenever we turn a dirty room into a clean room by simply rearranging the objects.

The oldest extant text on *Kabbalah*, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, deals with these topics of *something from nothing* creation and *something from something* creation as well as additional areas of inquiry. The title, *Sefer Yetzirah*, is often translated as *Book of Creation*, but a more apropos translation might be *Book of Formation*. This is because the verb *yatzar*, to form, is generally connected with *something from something* creation while it is the verb *bara*, to create, that is paired with *something from nothing* creation. Thus, I sometimes refer to this writing in English as the *Book of Formation*. Also, one of the best English translations and commentaries I can recommend is *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation* by Aryeh Kaplan. Also good, but more difficult to find these days, is *The Fundamentals of Jewish Mysticism: The Book Of Creation and Its Commentaries* by Leonard Glotzer.

According to tradition, the *Sefer Yetzirah* was authored by *Abraham*. However, that is hardly possible. The text dwells extensively on the mysticism of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and that alphabet was not even in existence during the time of *Abraham*. Others believe that it was the famous *Talmudic* rabbi, *Rabbi Akiba*, who authored the work. Possible, but I have another theory as to its authorship. Based upon the grammatical style of the book, it was probably written, more or less, around the year 200 CE.

This was about the time that the great *Talmudic* scholar, *Rav Huna*, was born, and he is, nonetheless, my best guess as to the true author of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Here is my argument. If we look in the *Talmud*, we see that a theory that the universe was created with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet is cited in the name of *Rav*. This in itself suggests that *Rav* was knowledgeable of mystical traditions.

“Rab Judah said in the name of Rav, ‘Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created.’”
(B. Berachot 55a)

Rav was born in the year 175 CE and lived in Babylonia where he started an academy at Sura, and this is the academy where much of the *Babylonian Talmud* was ultimately constructed. Also, *Rav's* student and successor at the academy was *Rav Huna*, and teachings recorded in rabbinic literature indicate that *Rav Huna* also had a deep, mystical understanding of the universe. For example, the first quotation below shows that he understood that everything we see is a part of *God*, but we can never see the totality of *God*, and the second quotation indicates that he understood that much of what we see is fleeting and utterly lacking in substance. Mystical, indeed!

“Lo, these are but parts of His ways, and what blemish of aught is heard of Him! But the thunder of His mighty deeds who can understand (Job 26:14)?’ Rav Huna said, ‘Whatever things you see are but parts of the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, “Lo, these are but parts of His way, and what blemish of aught is heard of Him? What defect is heard of Him? But the thunder of His mighty deeds who can understand?”’ Rav Huna said, ‘When thunder goes forth in its full force, no creature can understand it. It is not written, none understands, but “who can understand?” The intelligent know His hints and His thoughts.’ Said Rav Huna, ‘If you cannot comprehend the essential nature of thunder, can you comprehend the essence of the world?’”
(Genesis Rabbah XII:1)

“Solomon said, “For who knows what is good for man in his life, all the days of his vain life which he spends as a shadow (Ecclesiastes 6:12)?” As a shadow of what? If life is like the shadow cast by a wall, there is substance in it. If like the shadow cast by a date-palm, there is substance in it!’ David came and explained, ‘His days are as a shadow that passes away (Psalm 144:4).’ Rav Huna said in the name of R. Aha, ‘Life is like a bird which flies past and its shadow passes with it.’”

(Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3)

There is but a single mention in the *Talmud* of the *Sefer Yetzirah* and its use for magical creation. The particular people involved are *Hanina*, *Oshaia*, *Rabbah*, and *Zera*, and all of these are people that were involved one way or another with *Rav Huna*. *Oshaia*, *Zera*, and *Rabbah* (*Rabbah bar Nachmani*) were students of *Rav Huna*, and *Hanina* was *Oshaia*'s brother. Thus, all the principal players are one way or another linked to *Rav Huna*.

“Rabbah said, ‘If the righteous desired it, they could by living a life of absolute purity be creators, for it is written, ‘But your iniquities have distinguished between etc.’”
Rabbah created a man, and sent him to R. Zera. R. Zera spoke to him, but received no answer. Thereupon he said unto him, ‘Thou art a creature of the magicians. Return to thy dust.’ R. Hanina and R. Oshaia spent every Sabbath eve in studying the Sefer Yetzilah, by means of which they created a third-grown calf and ate it.”

(B. Sanhedrin 65b)

In summary:

- The *Sefer Yetzirah* describes at length how the universe was created from the letters of the alphabet, and *Rav Huna's* teacher, *Rav*, was a teacher of this doctrine according to the *Talmud*.
- Quotations from the *Midrash Rabbah* collection show that *Rav Huna* had a deep mystical understanding of the universe.
- The people mentioned in the *Talmud* as actually having used the *Sefer Yetzirah* for purposes of creation were all connected to *Rav Huna*.

Another connection between this text and *Rav Huna* is the use of the appellation “*Life of the Worlds*” for God. This expression occurs only fourteen times in the *Midrash Rabbah*, and one of those times it is used by *Rav Huna* (*Genesis Rabbah* 1:5). Additionally, in the *Babylonian Talmud* we find a story where a student and a son of *Rav Huna* are performing just the kind of creative magic that is discussed in the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

“What is the reference to witchcraft? — R. Hisda and Rabbah son of R. Huna were travelling in a boat, when a certain non-Jewish matron said to them, ‘Seat me near you,’ but they did not seat her. Thereupon she uttered something, a charm, and bound the boat, and they uttered something and freed it.”
(B. Shabbat 81b)

Is this conclusive proof? No, this is just circumstantial evidence. Nonetheless, I would not at all be surprised if *Rav Huna* was the true author of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Also, the particulars of the *Work of Creation* will be explained more fully in my commentary on the verses of the *Sefer Yetzirah* that follow.