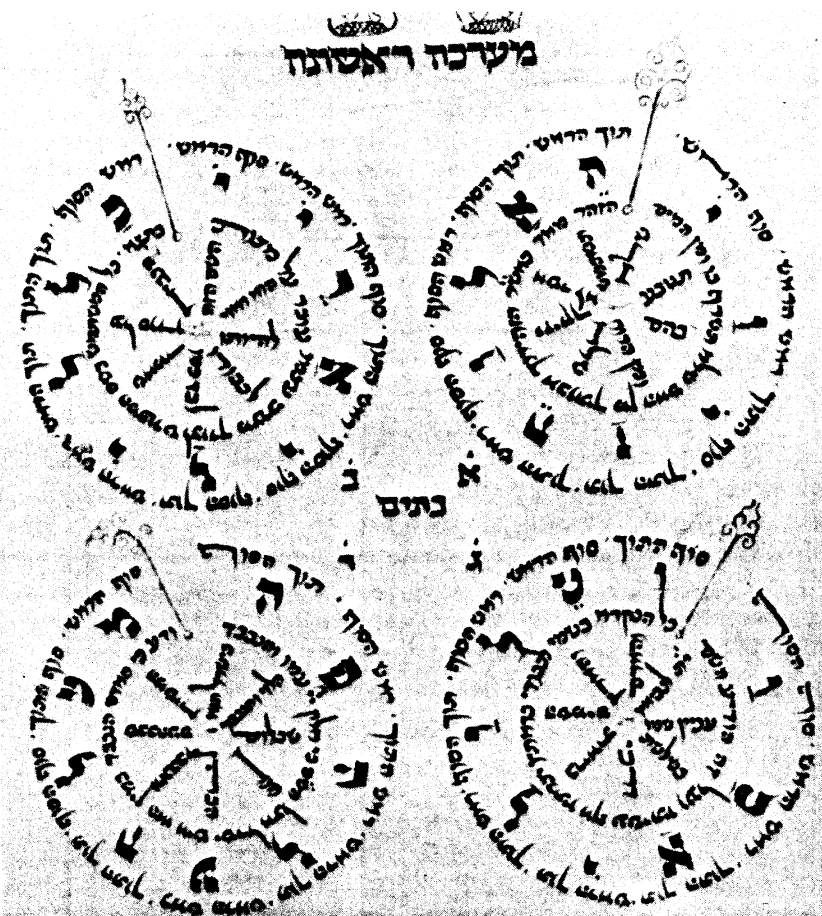


Abraham Abulafia (Hebrew, 1240–c. 1291)  
 From LIFE OF THE WORLD TO COME

“Circles”

(1)



READING INSTRUCTIONS: Beginning at the marker: the outer rims read right to left; the inner rim leads to the inner spokes, & from circle into circle, right to left. The words at top = “first order.”

TRANSLATION / TEXT / GLOSS

UPPER RIGHT

*outer rim:* middle of the first . middle of the last . first of the last . last of the last . first of the middle . middle of the middle . last of the middle . first of the first . last of the first

*middle rim* (large letters): permutations of the name “72”

*inner rim:* be very wary as your fathers warned you of the fire don't be burnt by it & water

*inner spokes:* not to / drown / in it / & wind / that it not / harm you / you not / use

UPPER LEFT

*outer rim:* first of the last . middle of the middle . middle of the first . first of the first . middle of the last . last of the last . first of the middle . last of the middle . first of the first . last of the first

*middle rim* (large letters): permutations of the name “72”

*inner rim:* it on condition anyone who takes the name for his own needs transgresses the command

*inner spokes:* about said name / was formed / to be / for his own glory / only thus / the prophet / said about / its secret

LOWER RIGHT

*outer rim:* last of the middle . last of the first . first of the last . middle of the last . first of the middle . middle of the first . middle of the middle . first of the first . last of the last

*middle rim* (large letters): permutations of the name “72”

*inner rim:* whatever has my name I made it for my honor formed it worked it truly & concerning this the name informed

*inner spokes:* his prophets (be he blest) / about his name / by 3 / ways / of creation / of the skies / & earth / & man

LOWER LEFT

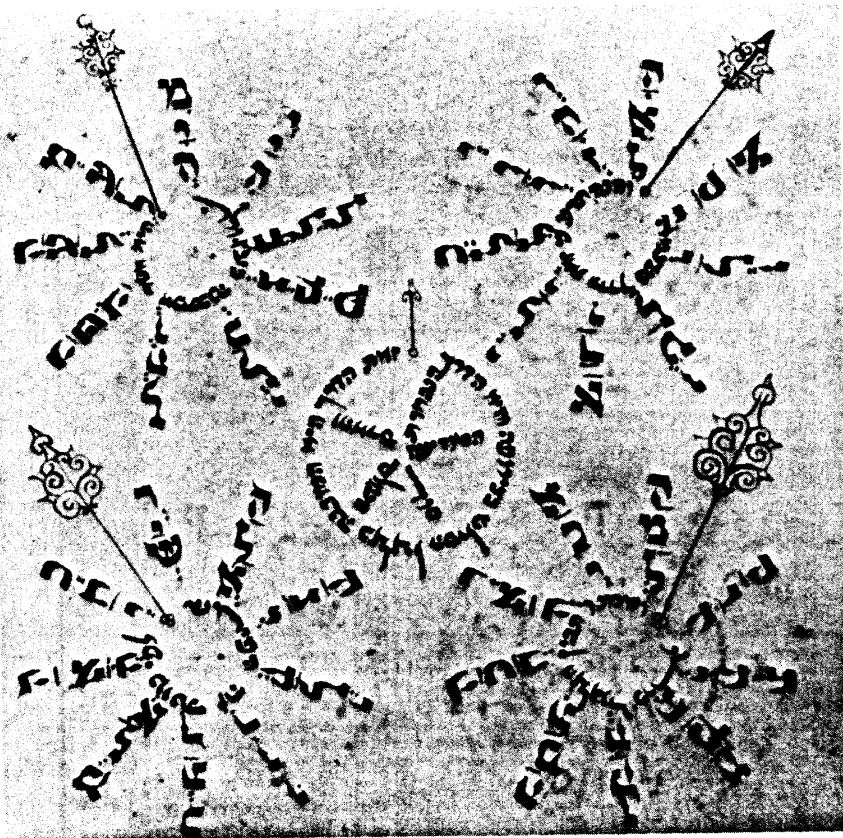
outer rim: last of the first . last of the middle . last of the last . middle of the middle . first of the first . middle of the first . first of the middle . first of the last . middle of the last

middle rim (large letters): permutations of the name "72"

inner rim: & know according to the name the one most honored is the one of Israel because the name's own portion is his people & the most honored one

inner spokes: of Israel is / the Levite & the most honored / of the Levites / is the / priest / & the most honored / of the priests / is the Messiah

(2)



READING INSTRUCTIONS: Right to left & circle into circle toward the center. Larger letters are permutations of the name "72."

UPPER RIGHT, the rim: o look here now this is the way itself

UPPER LEFT, the rim: by which you'll understand the gilgul metempsychosis complete

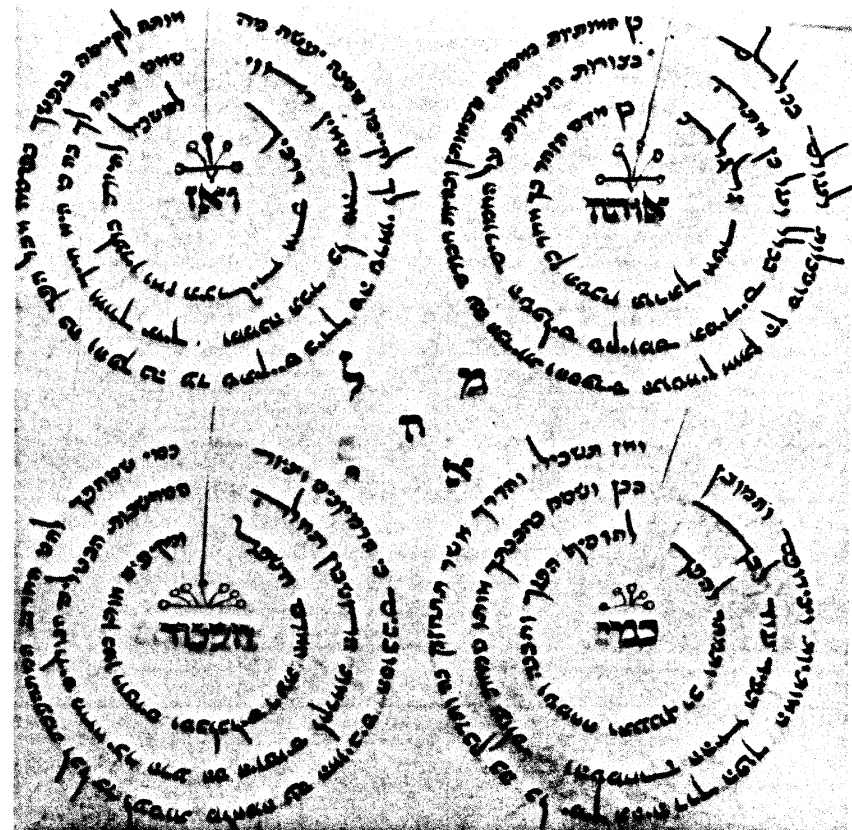
LOWER RIGHT, the rim: the one I now write in the circle

LOWER LEFT, the rim: the intention of the explanation

CENTER, the rim: way that may be understood as three-fold gilgul metempsychosis

CENTER, the spokes: the chosen way / disclosing / secrets / of the world / & man

(3)



READING INSTRUCTIONS: upper rims to lower, right to left, & circle into circle.

UPPER RIGHT: so are the letters in their true essentials & when joined to people & to books that carry them are made intelligible as wholes to world & public: forms that the lowly asses carry though their existence is eternal: so then manchild you be careful that you not forget that you are working transformation of the Torah

UPPER LEFT: making it exist inside your soul in its particulars: so turn through it o turn through it & what of it is fit for your fulfillment let your hand fulfill: do what I tell you here it is your life your length of days from which you come to know what isn't fitting that a wise man be without & then your ways will be successful

LOWER RIGHT: & then you will be wise: the way that you must cleave to & be strong in all your days will be the way of turning letters & combining them: & understanding what is understood rejoicing in your understandings & eternally rejoicing this rejoicing further wakening your heart to keep on turning them & understanding: joy & pleasures as you rush to turn

LOWER LEFT: like one who turns the sword the flame that turns itself toward every side & wages war against the enemies around you: for the empty images & forms of thought born of the evil impulse are the first emerging into thought surrounding it like murderers to foul the gnosis of the lowly tortured man

(4)

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.  
& the secret

ITS MEASURE IS RIGHT	& LEFT
MEASURE OF ITS RIGHT	ITS LEFT
MEASURE OF ITS LEFT	ITS RIGHT
IT HAS NO IMAGE	SKIES
IMAGE OF ITS RIGHT	LEFT
IMAGE OF ITS LEFT	RIGHT
& ITS BIRTHPLACE	BEING FROM NON-BEING
FATHERING FROM NOTHING	NAMES

MY NAME IS OTHER THAN	
WHAT HAS NO	IMAGE
MY IMAGE IS OTHER THAN	
WHAT HAS NO	NAME
& I HAVE NO NAME	OTHER THAN IMAGE
& I HAVE NO IMAGE	OTHER THAN NAME
EN-EY-EM-EE	WRITTEN OUT FULLY
MY NAME AN IMAGINING	FOR MY TRUTH

J.R./H.L.

#### COMMENTARY

(1) Abulafia's poetry of permutations (a kind of medieval "letterism," etc.) here takes the form of nearly 200 circles, consisting of a discourse on meditation, a set of instructions for specific permutations, & the permutations of the letters themselves. In the present instance the permutations work off the so-called Name-of-72: i.e., 72 three-letter syllables "based on the three verses of Exodus 14.19-21, each of which contains 72 letters. . . . [It] was made up by joining the first letter of verse 19, the last letter of 20, and the first of 21, to form its first triad; the second

letter of 19, the penultimate of 20, and the second of 21, to make the second triad, and so on until we have 72 three-letter terms comprising all the letters of these verses." (J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic & Superstition*, page 94.) Abulafia in turn arranges the syllables in rows & columns, then sets them into circles according to instructions ("middle of the first, middle of the last," etc.), which form part of the circles as well. In this way the disciple is led into the circles, must follow their message as an act of concentration.

Abulafia himself writes of the abstracting/spiritualizing process which he then employs & by which the world is apprehended as language/sound: "Know that the method of *tseruf* (the combination of letters) can be compared to music; for the ear hears sounds from various combinations, in accordance with the character of the melody & the instrument. Also, two different instruments can form a combination, & if the sounds combine, the listener's ear registers a pleasant sensation in acknowledging their difference. . . . The same is true of the combination of letters. It touches the first string, which is comparable to the first letters, & proceeds to the second, third, fourth, & fifth, & the various sounds combine. And the secrets, which express themselves in these combinations, delight the heart which acknowledges its God & is filled with ever fresh joy." Thus the letters—by a process called *dilug* (skipping)—become a basis for meditation "on the essence of one's thought, abstracting from it every word, be it connected with a notion or not . . . (by putting) the consonants which one is combining into swift motion." (From *Sha'are Tsedek*, for which, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pages 154–55.) For Abulafia & others, such processes remain essentially "oral," in the sense of open-ended: an improvisatory meditation on a fixed base (torah, names of God, etc.) whose true meanings are not "literal" but the occasion for an ongoing process of reconstruction (revelation) & sounding. In touch with Yogic currents from the East, Abulafia's intention here seems clearly mantric; but his practice of a systemic & concrete poetry also closely resembles the 20th-century lettrism of Isidore Isou, the asymmetries & nuclei of Jackson Mac Low, & the blues kabbala improvisations of Jack Hirschman, all of whom he may have influenced.

(2) "Abulafia who was never admitted into the great rabbinic canon of the Jews because in fact he was the Jews first truly modern poet / visual artist saw the abstract musical beauty of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet went for the form of the thing itself which of course was nothing but the absolute *ain* of the pinpointed pain of the elohimic struggle." (J. Hirschman.)