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1114 But seeing pseudepigraphy as distinct from forgery is a theory of ancient lit-
1115 erary practice, not a sign of credulity. Scholars who critique this equivalence see a
1116 mismatch between modern norms and ancient practices. Today, when the default is
1117 for authors to write under their own names and claim credit and responsibility, pre-
1118 senting one’s writing as the work of another person is a deceitful transgression. But
1119 ancient writers lived in a world where pseudepigraphy was a dominant literary
1120 practice—a convention. As Morton Smith observed decades ago, much biblical
1121 literature is also pseudepigraphic; it was a major mode of voicing one’s work
1122 and participating in literary culture. Pseudonymous texts do efface their own
1123 origins. (I have argued myself that, if we are using modern concepts, a text like
1124 Jubilees is closer to forgery than interpretation, because it claims superior author-
1125 ity for itself, not its sources.) But when pseudonymous attribution is a dominant
1126 practice, not a transgressive outlier, its implications are different; in fact, it is
1127 the emergence of individual authorship within a tradition of pseudepigraphy or
1128 anonymity that needs an explanation. Scholars who offer an account of pseudepig-
1129 raphy in its own context are not letting ancient forgers off the hook, and are no
1130 more likely to be fooled by modern ones.

1131 While my assessment of scholarship on pseudepigraphy differs, I am sym-
1132 pathetic to Klawans’s broader challenge for scholars to ask less timid questions.
1133 The book’s bold framework reveals continuities between Jewish and Christian atti-
1134 tudes about what makes traditions legitimate, and invites us to approach the
1135 sources in a spirit of productive risk-taking.

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1146 MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ERAS 1147

1148 Tzahi Weiss. “*Sefer Yeşirah*” and Its Contexts: *Other Jewish Voices*. Philadelphia:
1149 University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 208 pp.
1150 doi:10.1017/S0364009421000210

1151 Sefer Yeşirah (The book of formation) is a Jewish cosmogonic book which
1152 focuses on the role of the decimal number system (*sefirot*) and the twenty-two
1153 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in the creation and in the created world. Considered
1154 a canonical Jewish text since the tenth century—notably, the same period in
1155 which the book is first attested—Sefer Yeşirah became one of the most influential
1156 compositions for Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah. Unique in style and content,
1157 it has attracted remarkable attention both in Jewish and non-Jewish circles, fascin-
1158 ating scholars from various disciplines as well as a broader readership. Despite the
1159 rich scholarship devoted to it, Sefer Yeşirah has not been fully deciphered yet,
1160 especially for what concerns its authorship, dating, and ultimate significance.
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1167 With his masterful monograph, Tzahi Weiss offers a clever new interpret-
 1168 ation and contextualization of Sefer Yeşirah, which, for the first time, takes into
 1169 account and interrelates the actual subject of the book, its textual tradition, and
 1170 its reception history. The identification of the precise interest of Sefer Yeşirah in
 1171 the speculation on the twenty-two Hebrew letters and their creative powers
 1172 enables Weiss to draw solid comparisons with Syriac Christian literature and,
 1173 ultimately, to trace the intellectual matrix from which the book developed.
 1174 Weiss shows how the nuances of the linguistic, physiologic, astrological, and
 1175 cosmological notions displayed in the text point to a sophisticated late antique
 1176 Jewish tradition that cannot be identified with rabbinic Judaism. Challenging
 1177 the main theories on the time and context of Sefer Yeşirah, he convincingly dem-
 1178 onstrates that the book was “written and edited around the seventh century by Jews
 1179 who were familiar with Syriac Christianity” (2). Showing how the history of the
 1180 text is interwoven with its reception, Weiss argues for the existence of a
 1181 mystical-mythical-magical interpretation of Sefer Yeşirah prior to the twelfth
 1182 century. The idea that late antique and early medieval Judaism was much more
 1183 nuanced than the monolithic and rabbinocentric portrait outlined by a certain
 1184 type of scholarship is the *fil rouge* of the book. Weiss situates both the formation
 1185 and the earliest reception of Sefer Yeşirah in a nonrabbinic milieu, showing that
 1186 the text not only crystallized in an intellectual world neatly detached from both
 1187 rabbinic culture and the known magico-mystical circles spinning in the rabbinic
 1188 orbit—those that produced the *hekhalot* literature—but also, already in an early
 1189 age, was transmitted and interpreted by Jews clearly interested in mysticism and
 1190 magic and not only by “a limited section of the rabbinical elite” (104).

1195 The volume consists of an introduction, five chapters, a short epilogue, and
 1196 three appendices. The introduction discusses the main issues which complicate a
 1197 definitive contextualization of Sefer Yeşirah, explaining how Weiss’s theory inter-
 1198 connects with or challenges the most relevant studies on the topic. This section
 1199 should be read together with appendix 1, which unveils the anachronism of the
 1200 argument for an Abbasid context for Sefer Yeşirah.

1202 In the first three chapters, Weiss advances his thesis on the composition of
 1203 Sefer Yeşirah, starting by demonstrating that—albeit contested by church author-
 1204 ities—letter speculation developed remarkably also in Syriac Christian marginal
 1205 circles, the specific intellectual environment in which Sefer Yeşirah was conceived
 1206 (chapter 1). In his analysis of late antique conceptions on letter speculation, Weiss
 1207 identifies two main traditions. The first—outlined in chapter 2—resurfaces in rab-
 1208 binic and *hekhalot* literature and assumes the creation of the world/seal of the
 1209 abyss from the ineffable name of God—or, in later articulations, from its specific
 1210 letters. Within this model—which may be traced back to a Greek/Coptic prefer-
 1211 ence for vowels—the *matres lectionis* (Hebrew vowels) hold a higher status. Con-
 1212 versely, the second tradition—discussed in chapter 3—conceives the creation of
 1213 the world from the twenty-two Hebrew letters as a whole and with no hierarchy
 1214 between vowels and consonants. Completely unattested in rabbinic and *hekhalot*
 1215 sources, this second model characterizes Sefer Yeşirah and a few Syriac Christian
 1216 grammar writings. The content and linguistic (i.e., same technical terminology)
 1217 proximity between Sefer Yeşirah and these sources point to a shared intellectual
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1220 matrix, “an area in which Greek texts were translated into Syriac and in which
1221 Syriac grammar was developed (north Mesopotamia)” (72), possibly seventh-
1222 century Edessa or Nisibis.

1223 The second part of the book offers a new understanding of the early recep-
1224 tion of Sefer Yeşirah. Through intelligent analysis of an early gloss to Sefer
1225 Yeşirah and of an excerpt from the epistle of Agobard of Lyon, Weiss demon-
1226 strates how the spiritual world of the first readers of the book was equally
1227 rooted in midrash, myth, and mysticism (chapter 4). By the ninth century—
1228 approximately two centuries after its crystallization and a century before the
1229 appearance of its first commentaries—the tradition of Sefer Yeşirah circulated
1230 within the Jewish world even in Europe and was understood in connection with
1231 *hekhlot* literature. This argument is reinforced in chapter 5, where Weiss compel-
1232 lingly interprets a midrash on Sefer Yeşirah and Ben Sira—copied in the eleventh-
1233 century manuscript Vatican 299/4 and given in Hebrew transcription in appendix 3
1234 —and discusses Rashi’s (1040–1105) approach to the cosmogonic treatise. It
1235 emerges that, already before the twelfth century, Sefer Yeşirah was read as a
1236 magico-mystical text and that the tenth-to-twelfth-century philological/scientific
1237 commentaries known to us—regarded by scholarship as expression of the only
1238 (rabbinic) interpretative direction of the book in this period—were penned in reac-
1239 tion to these early magico-mystical readings.

1240 The epilogue, which stresses the wider implications of Weiss’s findings for
1241 our understanding of Jewish history, is followed by the two above-mentioned
1242 appendices and by the Hebrew transcription of the long version of Sefer Yeşirah
1243 based on Vatican 299/4 and juxtaposed to Peter A. Hayman’s English translation
1244 (appendix 2).

1245 Extremely accessible and well written, *Sefer Yeşirah and Its Contexts* is
1246 commendable for its rigorous analysis of primary sources and its remarkable his-
1247 torical sharpness. Fundamental for whoever intends to approach Sefer Yeşirah
1248 from a historical perspective, it is an important reading for students and scholars
1249 of Jewish thought, who will be exposed to alternative late antique and medieval
1250 Jewish voices. The book has much to add to the growing research on cross-
1251 cultural encounters between late antique Judaism and early Syriac Christianity.
1252 Similarly, its solid methodology offers interesting insights also for manuscript
1253 studies and book history. Weiss’s twofold thesis—on the composition and
1254 reception of Sefer Yeşirah—is cogent and opens the way for further research on the
1255 interpretation of Jewish texts in light of the rich Syriac literary tradition, on the
1256 history of late antique Jewish communities in conversation with Syriac Christianity,
1257 as well as on the intellectual world of the early medieval Jews who approached Sefer
1258 Yeşirah (and possibly other canonical books) from a magical perspective.

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