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Gli ebrei nel Salento

Secoli IX-XVI

a cura di FABRIZIO LELLI

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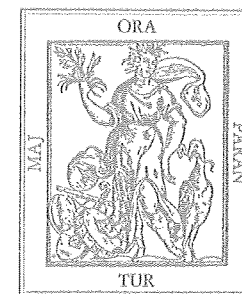
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CONGEDO EDITORE

Premessa

La presenza di nuclei ebraici nel Salento¹, attestata storicamente dall'epoca imperiale romana, si estese ininterrottamente fino al primo periodo del Vicerame spagnolo di Napoli. Le testimonianze letterarie dell'ebraismo salentino giunte ai nostri giorni sono state composte in un periodo grosso modo compreso tra il IX e il XVI secolo. Per sei secoli le comunità della Puglia meridionale conobbero epoche di intensa fioritura intellettuale, intervallate da periodi di transizione e di decadenza. Indubbiamente la produzione ebraica medievale di Terra d'Otranto, oltre ad annoverare alcune delle più antiche e significative testimonianze della poesia e della speculazione della diaspora occidentale, è stata in varia misura influente sull'evoluzione del giudaismo europeo.

Gli editti spagnoli del XVI secolo, oltre a decretare la cancellazione di una fervida tradizione intellettuale, determinarono, forse più che altrove, la rimozione pressoché totale della memoria dell'ebraismo locale. All'annullamento della presenza fisica della popolazione giudaica, reso possibile, oltre che dai provvedimenti di espulsione, da una pressante politica conversionistica per quanti decisero di restare, si affiancarono le radicali trasformazioni urbanistiche, subite dalla maggior parte dei centri salentini tra la seconda metà del XVI e il XVIII secolo, che concorsero a eliminare ogni traccia degli insediamenti comunitari medievali.

Nel lungo periodo di assenza degli ebrei dall'Italia meridionale, elementi della cultura giudaica salentina continuarono a svilupparsi in comunità geograficamente lontane dalla nostra penisola. Questa caratteristica, propria dell'ebraismo in generale e dell'ebraismo salentino in particolare, di mantenere vitali i prodotti della creatività elaborata in una specifica regione presso co-

¹ In questo volume il termine geografico si dovrà intendere come l'area che, grosso modo, dalla linea ideale che collega Brindisi e Taranto, giunge fino all'estremità meridionale della Puglia.

tardi, dalla scuola principale dei *ḥaside 'Aškenaz* in Germania¹⁶¹ all'inizio del XIII secolo, dalla più decisiva gnoseologia del Maimonide e anche da 'Avraham Abulafia in Spagna e in Italia¹⁶².

¹⁶¹ Si veda il materiale in M. IDEL, *On the Metamorphoses of an Ancient Technique for Prophetic Vision in the Middle Ages*, «Sinai» 86 (1980), pp. 1-7 (in ebraico).

¹⁶² Su queste due interpretazioni della rivelazione si veda WOLFSON, *Through a Speculum*, cit., *passim*: le analisi dello studioso sono molto importanti dal punto di vista fenomenologico.

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“WHOEVER KILLS A HUMAN BEING,
IT IS AS IF HE DESTROYS THE ENTIRE WORLD”:
THE HUMANISM OF ŠABBETAY DONNOLO
BETWEEN MYSTICISM AND SCIENCE

To my grandparents

1. Between the 9th and 10th centuries, Byzantine Apulia—and Southern Italy in general—played a major role in the re-elaboration and transmission of Jewish cultural traditions from Palestine and Babylonia to Europe and Northern Africa¹. Two medieval sources testify to the importance of this area at the time:

the first is Rabbi Ya‘aqov ben Me’ir of Troyes—best known as Rabbenu Tam, Raši’s grandson—who in his *Sefer ha-yašar* (*The Book of the Righteous*) declared: «Out of Bari shall go forth the Law, and the word of God from Otranto»²;

the second is 'Avraham 'ibn Daud, who in his *Sefer ha-qabbalà* (*The Book of Tradition*) relates the story of four rabbis who, after sailing from Bari, were captured by Muslim raiders and sold as slaves in Spain and Northern Africa. Ransomed by the local Jewish communities, they brought there their expertise in the Babylonian Talmud, and eventually became the leaders of the rabbinic academies of Cordoba, Fustat, and Kairawan³.

Against this background stands Šabbetay Donnolo, who was born in Oria (halfway between Brindisi and Taranto, on the *Via Appia*) in 913, and who died

¹ See, for example, H. ZIMMELS, “Scholars and Scholarship in Byzantium and Italy”, in *World History of the Jewish People*, ed. C. ROTH, XI, New Brunswick, 1966, pp. 175-188, 415-418; A. SHARF, *Byzantine Jewry from Justinian to the Fourth Crusade*, London, 1971, pp. 164-175; R. BONFIL, “Cultura ebraica e cultura cristiana in Italia meridionale”, in *Tra due mondi. Cultura ebraica e cultura cristiana nel Medioevo*, ed. Id., Napoli, 1996, pp. 4-64; V. VON FALKENHAUSEN, “L'ebraismo nell'Italia meridionale di età bizantina (secoli VI-XI)”, in *L'Ebraismo dell'Italia Meridionale Peninsulare dalle origini al 1541. Società, Economia, Cultura, Atti del IX Congresso internazionale dell'Associazione Italiana per lo studio del Giudaismo (Potenza-Venosa, 20-24 settembre 1992)*, eds. C. FONSECA, M. LUZZATI, G. TAMANI, C. COLAFEMMINA, Galatina, 1996, pp. 25-46.

² RABBENU TAM, *Sefer ha-yašar*, 620, Vienna, 1811, p. 74a (Hebrew).

³ See *A Critical Edition with Translation and Notes of the Book of Tradition (Sefer ha-qabbalah)* by Abraham Ibn Daud, ed. G. COHEN, Philadelphia, 1967, pp. 63-69.

possibly in Rossano Calabro after 982⁴. His place within the social and cultural framework just sketched is problematic, and depends to a great extent on how we classify Donnolo's intellectual enterprise. Scholars have considered Donnolo in very different ways: as a speculative and anti-mystical theologian⁵; or as a neo-platonic philosopher⁶, therefore emphasizing his eccentricity with respect to his fellow Jews; or as a theosophical proto-kabbalist⁷, thus stressing Donnolo's proximity to them.

In the following pages I will present some aspects of Šabbetai Donnolo's thought with special reference to the *Sefer ḥakmoni* (*The Book of the Wise [Man]*), his commentary upon the *Sefer yeširā* (*Book of Formation*)⁸. In particular, I will compare and contrast Donnolo's idea of *ḥokmā* with the one expressed in the *Sefer yuḥasin* (*The Book of Genealogies*) (also known as *Megillat 'Aḥima'aš*, *The Scroll of 'Aḥima'aš*)⁹. The *Sefer yuḥasin*, composed in Capua in 1054, informs us about the vicissitudes of the 'Amittay family from the mid 9th to the mid 11th century. The 'Amittay were a prominent rabbinic family in Oria, probably related to Donnolo¹⁰. The story of this family

⁴ On Donnolo's biography, see, among others, G. FIACCADORI, "Donnolo Shabbetai bar Abraham", in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, XLI, Roma, 1992, cols. 213-218.

⁵ See D. CASTELLI, *Il commento di Sabbatai Donnolo sul Libro della Creazione – pubblicato per la prima volta nel testo ebraico con note critiche e introduzione da David Castelli*, Firenze, 1880, Introduction p. 71; A. SHARF, *The Universe of Shabbatai Donnolo*, Warminster, 1976, p. 127.

⁶ See G. SERMONETA, "Il neoplatonismo nel pensiero dei nuclei ebraici stanziati nell'Occidente latino (riflessioni sul *Commento al Libro della Creazione* di Rabbi Sabbetai Donnolo)", in *Gli Ebrei nell'Alto Medioevo. Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, XXVI, II, Centro di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Spoleto, 1980, pp. 867-925: 872; 931ff.

⁷ See R. GOETSCHER, *La Kabbale*, Paris, 1985, pp. 38ff.; E. WOLFSON, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, Princeton, 1994, pp. 141ff.

⁸ When this article was originally written, a critical edition of the *Sefer ḥakmoni* did not exist. Accordingly, the Hebrew text consulted for the sake of this study has been the one found in CASTELLI, *Il commento*. Meanwhile, Piergabriele Mancuso has produced a critical edition of Donnolo's masterpiece, with translations in English and in Italian: *Shabbatai Donnolo's Sefer Hakhmoni: Introduction, Critical Text, and Annotated English Translation*, Leiden 2010, and SHABBATAI DONNOLO, *Sefer Hakhmoni: Introduzione, testo critico e traduzione italiana e commentata*, Firenze 2009. While Mancuso's excellent work has certainly advanced our knowledge of the sources of Donnolo's work and its influence on subsequent Jewish thinkers, it has not changed our evaluation of his overall thought. Several portions of the *Sefer ḥakmoni* translated into English appear in SHARF, *The Universe*. A complete (but sometimes too loose) translation into Italian is in *Sefer yeširā. Libro della Formazione. Secondo il manoscritto di Shabbetai Donnolo. Con il commentario Sefer Chakhmoni (Libro Sapiente) di Shabbetai Donnolo*, eds. P. MANCUSO and D. SCIUNNACH, Milano, 2001.

⁹ See 'AḤIMA'AŠ BEN PALTI'EL, *The Chronicle of Ahimaaz*, ed. M. SALZMAN, New York, 1924; 'AḤIMA'AŠ BEN PALTI'EL, *Megillat 'Aḥima'aš. The Chronicle of Ahimaaz, with a Collection of Poems from Byzantine Southern Italy and Additions*, ed. B. KLAR, Jerusalem, 1944 (Hebrew); 'AḤIMA'AŠ BEN PALTI'EL, *Sefer Yuḥasin. Libro delle discendenze. Vicende di una famiglia ebraica di Oria nei secoli IX-XI*, ed. C. COLAFEMMINA, Cassano delle Murge, 2001.

¹⁰ On this issue, see my *Shabbetai Donnolo: Un sapiente ebreo nella Puglia bizantina altomedievale*, Cassano delle Murge, 2004, p. 129.

represents one of the few sources—and, at least for the time being, the best one—we have for Byzantine Jewry in the high Middle Ages. Through a comparison between certain ideas as they are expressed in the *Megillat 'Aḥima'aš* and in the *Sefer ḥakmoni*, some peculiarities of Donnolo's perspective will emerge, among them his humanism.

2. The Apulian rabbis were known for their expertise in the fields of *halakhah*, homiletics, *midrash*, poetry, and mysticism¹¹. These masters'—effective or presumed—strengths are listed by a mother describing her daughter's ideal husband. He should be

like her father, learned in *Torā*, in *Mišnā*, and in Bible; in *halakhah* and in rendering opinions [about it]; in *Sifre* and in *Sifra*, in homiletic interpretation and in *Gemara*; in hermeneutics, in *Binā* and in *Ḥokmā*; in knowledge and in cunning, in wealth and in greatness, in courage and authority, in laws and in commandments, in piety and humility...¹²

Two different traditions coexisted in Southern Italian Jewry in Donnolo's days¹³:

— one was Hellenistic Judaism, represented by the "high society" acculturated with the Christian elite (with which these Jews shared Greek language and Greco-roman culture). In Donnolo's time, this tradition, which included the Bible, the *Targumim*, the *Mišnā*, some *midrashim*, as well as liturgical and mystical works originally from Palestine, was still preeminent. One of its most characteristic productions in this area is a work of historiography, the *Sefer Yosippon*¹⁴;

¹¹ Among the works in the above fields which probably originated in this area are the *Halakot gešuvot* (a handbook for the cult), the *Pesiqta Rabbati* (a collection of rabbinic homilies), the *Megillat 'Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (a *midrash* dealing with man as microcosm) and the ethical treatise *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. See I. TWERSKY, "The Contribution of Italian Sages to Rabbinic Literature", in *Italia Judaica, Atti del I Convegno internazionale (Bari, 18-22 maggio 1981)*, Roma, 1983, pp. 383-400; J. DAN, "La cultura ebraica nell'Italia medievale", in *Storia d'Italia: Gli ebrei d'Italia*, ed. C. VIVANTI, XI, Torino, 1996, pp. 338-358; F. LELLI, "Rapporti letterari tra comunità ebraiche dell'Impero bizantino e dell'Italia meridionale: studi e ricerche", *Materia giudaica*, 9/1-2 (2004), pp. 217-230; P. MANCUSO, "A proposito di un passo del *Sefer Hakhmoni* di Shabbatai Donnolo nel *Sefer Rossina* (ca. XII secolo)", forthcoming. I wish to thank Piergabriele Mancuso for generously making this article—as well as a few others—available to me before their publication.

¹² SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, p. 13 (Hebrew text). The translations are mine; I wish to thank Susan Einbinder for helping with the translations into English and for proofreading the entire paper.

¹³ See C. COLAFEMMINA, "Da Bari uscirà la Legge e la parola del Signore da Otranto". La cultura ebraica in Puglia nei secoli IX-XI, in *Dagli dei a Dio. Parole sacre e parole profetiche sulle sponde del Mediterraneo. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi promosso dall'Associazione Bibbia (Bari, 13-15 settembre 1991)*, ed. Id., Cassano delle Murge 1997, pp. 132-134.

¹⁴ On this work see especially *The Josippon. Edited with an Introduction, Commentary and Notes*, ed. D. FLUSSER, 2 vol., Jerusalem, 1980-1981. A more recent evaluation has been offered in S. BOWMAN, "Mock Aqedah or Mashiah? Imagining Herod in *Sefer Yosippon*", *EJJS*, 2, 1 (2008), pp. 21-43.

- the other was connected to the Babylonian Talmud, which arrived in Apulia probably in the 9th century, fostering a cultural renaissance characterized by a move away from non-Jewish culture and by a return to the roots of rabbinic tradition. Hebrew language also underwent a revival as a result.

Originating from lands where Jews lived under Islamic rule, the Babylonian tradition brought also a certain interest in the new disciplines made available through the translations of Greek classics into Arabic. However, the Byzantine Jews of Apulia were apparently not much interested in secular sciences. As a matter of fact, Donnolo claims that he had to study medicine and astrology with a gentile master (the mysterious *Bagdaš/Bagdat*) because he could not find a Jewish one¹⁵.

Thanks to this learned gentile Donnolo became an expert in medicine and in astrology. He authored the *Sefer ha-mirqaḥot* (*The Book of Remedies*; also known as *Sefer ha-yaqar*, *The Precious Book*), the oldest medical treatise written in Italy after the fall of the Roman Empire as well as the oldest medical work written by a Jew in medieval Europe¹⁶. Donnolo also composed the *Sefer ha-mazzalot* (*The Book of Constellations*), a commentary to the astronomical-astrological *midrash* known as *Barayta de-Šemu'el*¹⁷.

The scientific knowledge—incredibly vast for a Jew—that Donnolo acquired in the favorable Byzantine environment, was instrumental in establishing him as an esteemed professional among Christians. In fact, Saint Nilus of Rossano presents Donnolo as the personal physician of a high Byzantine official¹⁸. In such a context, the cognomen Donnolo (little master) might well be seen as an indication of his elevated status¹⁹.

¹⁵ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, p. 5 (Hebrew text).

¹⁶ On this work, the most recent study (with bibliography on previous scholarship) is L. FERRE, "Donnolo's *Sefer ha-Yaqar*: New Edition with English Translation", in *Šabbetai Donnolo. Scienza e cultura ebraica nell'Italia del secolo X, Supplemento agli Annali Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"*, ed. G. LACERENZA, Naples, 2004, pp. 1-20.

¹⁷ On these two works, see especially SHARF, *The Universe*, pp. 44-46, 123-124, 155-158, 184-187; G. SARFATTI, "An Introduction to *Barayta de-Mazzalot*", *Annual of Bar-Ilan University*, 3 (1965), pp. 56-82 (Hebrew); ID., "I trattati di astrologia di Šabbetai Donnolo", in *Šabbetai*, ed. LACERENZA, pp. 141-147; P. MANCUSO, "La scienza astrologica nel mondo ebraico. Dalla *Baraita Di-Semu'el* agli *Alchandreana* (ca. X-XI secolo)", *Materia Giudaica*, 13 (2008), pp. 135-141; ID., "Da una citazione del *Sefer ha mazzalot* di Donnolo nell'*Eshkol ha-kofer* (XII secolo). Una fonte orientale?", forthcoming.

¹⁸ See *Vita di S. Nilo fondatore e patrono di Grottaferrata*, ed. G. GIOVANNELLI, Grottaferrata, 1966; C. COLAFEMMINA, "San Nilo di Rossano e gli ebrei", in *Atti del congresso internazionale su San Nilo di Rossano (Rossano, 28 settembre-1 ottobre 1986)*, Rossano-Grottaferrata, 1989, pp. 119-130; F. LUZZATI LAGANÀ, "La figura di Donnolo nello specchio della *Vita* di S. Nilo di Rossano", in *Šabbetai*, ed. LACERENZA, pp. 69-103.

¹⁹ On Donnolo and his cultural training, see G. LACERENZA, "Donnolo e la sua formazione", in ed. ID., *Šabbetai*, pp. 45-68. On the possible meanings of his "nickname", see FIACCADORI, "Donnolo", col. 214.

Astrology, the other primary interest of Donnolo, was connected to medicine through the theory of melothesia, according to which each and every planet has a specific influence over a given part of the human body²⁰. Therefore, when treating his patients, a physician was supposed to take into account the position of the stars also, insofar as they rendered the treatment more or less effective.

Donnolo, who had earned respect as a physician at the Byzantine court, now aimed to have his skills and his accomplishments recognized also among the Jews. He tried to achieve this goal by dedicating his *Sefer ha-yaqar* to the Jewish physicians²¹. He also tried to persuade his fellow Jews to accept astrological doctrines that circulated in the Byzantine cultural milieu. In order to do so, in his *Sefer hakmoni* Donnolo presented such doctrines as Jewish traditional conceptions now forgotten. There he explicitly declares that the purpose of the book is to return to the Jews the paternity of astronomical and astrological doctrines currently held by the gentiles. Donnolo plans to achieve his goal by showing the perfect agreement of such scientific speculations with the doctrines contained in the *Barayta de-Šemu'el*²².

It seems that Donnolo's project was not successful: in the introduction to the *Sefer hakmoni* written in 982, he complains about the lack of wisdom of his generation, probably in the spirit of a polemic against his detractors²³. If Donnolo was effectively criticized—and, in some respects, ostracized—by his generation, this might have happened for two main reasons²⁴:

- first of all, because he made use of secular lore (particularly astrology) in order to explain a holy issue such as creation. The science of the stars is an integral part of Donnolo's attempt to build a model of rational universe. He links the study of celestial bodies to the recognition of God's majesty; by so doing, Donnolo can argue that no science is higher than astronomy/astrology. However, his fellow Jews did not understand that Donnolo's astrological studies, far from being pagan speculations, were in fact aimed at understanding the first and greatest of God's works—creation—and at acknowledging God's majesty as a result²⁵. The problem resided in the fact that, at the time, such scientific

²⁰ On Donnolo and melothesia, see SHARF, *The Universe*, pp. 48-56, 188-191; F. MICHELINI TOCCI, "Dottrine 'ermetiche' tra gli Ebrei in Italia fino al Cinquecento", in *Italia Judaica, Atti del I convegno internazionale (Bari, 18-22 maggio 1981)*, Roma, 1983, pp. 287-301.

²¹ See FERRE, "Donnolo's *Sefer ha-Yaqar*", p. 5 (Hebrew); p. 12 (English).

²² CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 4-5 (Hebrew text).

²³ See A. NEUBAUER, "Un chapitre inédit de Sabbatai Donnolo", *Revue des études juives*, 22 (1891), pp. 213-218; SHARF, *The Universe*, pp. 120-122.

²⁴ I have discussed these issues more extensively in my "La sapienza nel *Sefer hakmoni* di Šabbetai Donnolo e la mistica ebraica nella Puglia del *Sefer Yuhasin*", in *Šabbetai*, ed. LACERENZA, pp. 105-139.

²⁵ See NEUBAUER, "Un chapitre", pp. 216ff. New perspectives on astronomy/astrology in Donnolo's Jewish milieu have been offered in S. STERN and P. MANCUSO, "An Astronomical

knowledge had not been incorporated into Italian Jewish culture; therefore Donnolo's speculations must have been perceived as sacrilegious. As a matter of fact, Donnolo, who was probably the first—if not the only—Jewish sage in Europe who made recourse to Byzantine scientific sources for the sake of founding a speculative theology, felt the need to almost apologize for his extensive non-Jewish knowledge, emphasizing that astrology in particular has to be studied exclusively in agreement with the Scriptures.

– the second, and in my opinion crucial, reason for rejecting Donnolo's scientific doctrines was their connection with a Christian context. As a matter of fact, the author of the *Sefer yuhasin* praises—among others—a certain Paltī'el, a contemporary of Donnolo who (like Donnolo himself) was deported by the Saracens from Oria to Northern Africa in 925. Paltī'el is depicted as an example of success, achieved at the Fatimid court thanks precisely to his medical and astrological knowledge²⁶. Hence, the same kind of lore that was considered blameworthy and was rejected by his Jewish contemporaries when presented by the Christianized Donnolo—regardless of his usage of Hebrew (*lašon ha-qodeš*) and his attempt to root it in Jewish tradition—was praised when connected to an Islamic context. Donnolo's uneasiness can best be understood if we think that the ideas he was trying to convey to his fellow Jews should have been immediately associated with those Christians who had been persecuting them not long before. As a matter of fact, although Donnolo lived in those same years, he never mentions the anti-Jewish revolts promoted by the Byzantine emperor Romanus Lacapenus that, between 930 and 944, erased almost all traces of Jewish presence in Apulia²⁷. The fact that in his works Donnolo mentions that he suffered because of Muslims, but never because of Christians, may well indicate that he was somewhat compromised with the latter. It is therefore quite understandable that such an attitude vis-à-vis Christians should make Donnolo's fellow Jews at least suspicious towards him and his ideas²⁸.

3. Let us now focus on mystical literature. One of the fields in which Byzantine Apulia emerged in the 9th and 10th centuries as a major centre for Jewish culture was mysticism²⁹. According to the sources, here 'Abu 'Aharon

Table by Shabbetai Donnolo and the Jewish Calendar in Tenth-Century Italy", *Aleph-Historical Studies in Science & Judaism*, 7 (2007), pp. 13-41.

²⁶ See SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, pp. 16-17 (Hebrew text). See also 'AHIMA'AS BEN PALTĪ'EL, *Sefer Yuhasin*, ed. COLAFEMMINA, pp. 163-171, 179-191.

²⁷ See J. STARR, *The Jews in the Byzantine Empire (641-1204)*, Athens, 1939, pp. 34-35.

²⁸ As a matter of fact, 'Aḥima'aš ben Paltī'el shows a general favorable attitude towards the Muslims as well as a strong anti-Christian tendency. On this issue, see 'AHIMA'AS BEN PALTĪ'EL, *Sefer Yuhasin*, ed. COLAFEMMINA, p. 41.

²⁹ See J. DAN, "The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Europe", in *The World History of the Jewish People. The Dark Ages*, ed. C. ROTH, Tel Aviv, 1966, pp. 282-290; 283; ID., "La cultura", pp. 342-343; E. WOLFSON, "The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo, with Special

"Whoever kills a human being, it is as if he destroys the entire world"

of Baghdad met some members of the Kalonymos family: the former represents the symbol of the Jewish revival in Southern Italy and of the already mentioned arrival of the Babylonian tradition in Europe; the latter became the most prominent family among the *Haside 'Aškenaz*, and claimed to have preserved mystical doctrines transmitted by 'Aharon³⁰. The *Sefer yuhasin* further informs us that, when the Babylonian master arrived in Apulia, speculations concerning the *Merkavà* connected to the *Hekalot* literature were already part of the local Jewish culture³¹. Such traditions had probably reached Italy directly from the land of Israel in the form of liturgical poetry³². In this perspective, the 6th century *payyetaṇ* 'El'azar Qallir, who is credited with having established in Apulia the oldest poetic school in Europe³³, represents the Palestinian equivalent to 'Aharon the Babylonian. In 9th century Apulia we thus witness a confluence of two different Jewish mystical traditions that, once re-elaborated, would spread into the rest of Europe.

What did this mysticism consist of? According to 'Aḥima'aš ben Paltī'el, the 'Amittay family was well versed in *Merkavà* speculation. The patriarch's sons are in fact described as men who:

understand the secrets, grasp the riddles, know the mysteries, look into *Hokmà*, look out for *Binà*, and whisper in cunning. They grow wise in the *Sefer ha-yašar*, and have insight into the secret of the *Merkavà*³⁴.

In terms of sources, the *Sefer yuhasin* explicitly mentions *Sefer ha-yašar* and *Sefer Merkavà*. The former is a mystical-magical treatise dealing with divine names, perhaps composed in Babylonia in the 7th or 8th century³⁵; the latter is probably to be identified with the so-called *Ma'ašè Merkavà* (a collection of hymns which the mystics were supposed to recite before God, or which they apparently heard from the higher angels), or alternatively with the *Sefer Hekalot* (also known as Third Enoch), which describes the ascension of R. Ishmael to the 7th heaven, where he meets Metatron, the Prince of Divine Countenance³⁶. The Apulian rabbis must therefore have been familiar with the

Emphasis on the Doctrine of the Sefirot in *Sefer Hakhmoni*", *Jewish History*, 6 (1992), pp. 281-316; 282-285; G. SCHOLEM, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1941, pp. 84-85.

³⁰ See A. NEUBAUER, "Abou Ahron, le babylonien", *Revue des études juives*, 23 (1892), pp. 230-237.

³¹ See SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, p. 3ff (Hebrew text).

³² See WOLFSON, "The Theosophy", pp. 282ff.

³³ On Hebrew poetry in Medieval Southern Italy see J. SCHIRMANN, *Mivḥar ha-širà ha-'ivrit be-'Italyà*, Berlin, 1934 (Hebrew); ID., "Gli albori della poesia ebraica in Italia", *La Rassegna mensile di Israel*, 35 (1969), pp. 187-210; E. HOLLENDER, "Il Piyyut italiano: tradizione e innovazione", *La Rassegna mensile di Israel*, 60 (1994), pp. 23-41.

³⁴ SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, p. 3 (Hebrew text).

³⁵ On this text, see DAN, "The Beginnings", p. 435; 'AHIMA'AS BEN PALTĪ'EL, *Sefer Yuhasin*, ed. COLAFEMMINA, p. 64.

³⁶ On the identification of this work, see 'AHIMA'AS BEN PALTĪ'EL, *Megillat Ahimaas*, ed. KLAR, p. 142, 147; 'AHIMA'AS BEN PALTĪ'EL, *Sefer Yuhasin*, ed. COLAFEMMINA, p. 157.

Hekalot literature, as it appears also from the list of the seven skies separating the Earth from the Throne of Glory which R. Amittai mentions in a prayer³⁷. To these works, we can probably add the *Ši'ur Qomà*³⁸, and the Alphabet of Rabbi 'Aqiva, which might have been an important source for the 'Amittay's poetical production³⁹. The *piyyuṭim* composed by the Apulian sages are in fact replete with *Merkavà* and *Hekalot* material. It is thus easy to understand why poetry has been long indicated as the main vehicle for transmitting mystical traditions from the Middle East to Europe⁴⁰. And indeed it is in the works of the already mentioned poet Qallir that we find the first unequivocal reference to the *Sefer yeširà*, as well as much material coming from *Hekalot* and *Merkavà* literature. The presence of the *Sefer yeširà* in 10th century Byzantine Apulia is attested by the fact that Donnolo's *Sefer ḥakmoni* is—at least in part—a commentary on this text.

Having tried to identify some of the mystical sources Donnolo and the sages portrayed in the *Sefer yuḥasin* might have shared, I will analyze how they related to the doctrines contained in this literature.

3.1. For the rabbis of Oria, mystical lore was conceived as an elitist tradition; both the texts and the oral teachings were transmitted within the prominent families, from father to son. Esotericism was motivated by the operative implications of this lore, which mainly consisted in the magical, theurgical, and thaumaturgical usage of the Name(s) of God—particularly the Tetragrammaton. In fact, it seems reasonable to assume that the ultimate goal of studying the *Hekalot* literature or works like the *Ši'ur Qomà* was not to attain a vision of God and of the world of the *Merkavà*, but rather to learn the divine names⁴¹. In most of this literature, whatever its visible form, divine presence is characterized by names through which God manifests Himself to man. One can say that in these Names resides the immanent aspect of the deity: God in fact reveals Himself through Torah—conceived of as a single divine name—and through creation—described in the *Sefer yeširà* as a linguistic act. In this sense, knowledge of the Names implies not only a certain degree of omniscience, but, most importantly, the acquisition of a magical-theurgical power to be exercised in both the human and the divine realm. As far as we can tell then, among the rabbis from Oria, both *Ma'asè Merkavà* and *Ma'asè Bere'šit* material must have been approached essentially with

performative intentions. It is therefore likely that the Apulian mystics—just like the Ashkenazi Hasidim after them—saw the *Sefer yeširà* first and foremost as a handbook of magical formulas to be drawn through alphabetic permutation⁴².

The esoteric and elitist character of the doctrine of divine names was also due to its dangerousness. According to the *Megillat 'Aḥima'aš*, without a perfect knowledge of the Law paired with an exemplary moral behavior, the astonishing effects of the power of the Name(s)—which comprise *qefiṣat ha-derek*⁴³, suspension of death⁴⁴, and exorcism⁴⁵—are necessarily followed by extremely negative consequences. In this sense, piety and knowledge of Torah are instrumental in assuring that the mystic who receives his powers from God makes an appropriate use of them, acting in conformity with divine will and for the good of the community.

Interestingly, the *Sefer yuḥasin* displays also an ethical component, which was almost absent in earlier mysticism. 'Aḥima'aš projects his forefathers in an almost mythical past, where mystical lore was employed almost routinely. Then, as his family tales get chronologically closer to the author's own generation, he seems to suggest that in later—less "heroic"—times strict observance of the Law can bring about almost the same extraordinary results originally achieved through esoteric practices⁴⁶. As a matter of fact, the *Sefer yuḥasin* makes reference to a text of the *Hekalot* literature—the already mentioned *Sefer Merkavà*, to be identified as either the *Ma'asè Merkavà* or the *Sefer Hekalot*—where the mystical process is connected to the ethical perfecting of the subject⁴⁷. In this sense, respecting the *mišwot* assumes a mystical (and possibly a theurgical⁴⁸) value—an interpretative trend that will be developed, among others, by Ashkenazi Hasidism. Conferring a deeper

⁴² See G. SCHOLEM, "Yezirah Sefer", in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, XVI, cols. 782-788, Tel Aviv 1971. The practice of creating a golem through the recitation of letter combinations found in the *Sefer yeširà* is explicitly attested in the works of 'El'azar of Worms. Considering that his family—the Kalonymos—came originally from Southern Italy (Oria or Capua), moving northward in the IX and X centuries, my reading of the Apulian rabbis' approach to the *Sefer Yezirah* seems legitimate. See NEUBAUER, "Un chapitre", p. 23; 'AḤIMA'AŠ BEN PALTI'EL, *Sefer Yuḥasin*, ed. COLAFEMMINA, pp. 30ff. On the *Sefer ḥakmoni* among Ashkenazi Hasidim, see, among others, P. MANCUSO, "Il Sefer Hakmoni tra gli scaffali della biblioteca degli Hasidei Ashkenaz. L'esempio del Commento alle *tefillot* di El'azar da Worms", *Materia Giudaica*, 12/1-2 (2007), pp. 1-24, which also includes an extensive bibliography on the subject.

⁴³ See SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, pp. 9, 18-19 (Hebrew text).

⁴⁴ See SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, pp. 5, 10 (Hebrew text).

⁴⁵ See SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, pp. 7-8, 13 (Hebrew text).

⁴⁶ See 'AḤIMA'AŠ BEN PALTI'EL, *Sefer Yuḥasin*, ed. COLAFEMMINA, pp. 38ff.

⁴⁷ See SCHOLEM, *Major Trends*, pp. 78-79; 'AḤIMA'AŠ BEN PALTI'EL, *Sefer Yuḥasin*, ed. COLAFEMMINA, p. 157.

⁴⁸ On this issue, see C. MOPSIK, *Le grands textes de la Cabale. Le rites qui font Dieu*, Paris, 1993, pp. 54-61.

³⁷ See SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, p. 13 (Hebrew text).

³⁸ On the circulation of this text in Byzantine Apulia, see SHARF, *The Universe*, pp. 80-82.

³⁹ See COLAFEMMINA, "Da Bari", pp. 140ff.

⁴⁰ See, for example, DAN, "The Beginnings", p. 287.

⁴¹ On this still controversial issue, see, among others, SCHOLEM, *Major Trends*, pp. 43-48; I. GRUENWALD, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, Leiden-Köln, 1980; D. HALPERIN, *The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature*, New Haven, 1980; M. IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven-London, 1988, p. 27; P. SCHAEFER, *Le Dieu caché et révélé*, Paris, 1993, p. 142.

meaning to religious observance through a mystical interpretation of ethics (or ethical interpretation of mysticism) presented two main advantages:

1. firstly, it spiritualized Jewish ethics, often attacked by Christians for its focus on external behavior;

2. secondly, it elevated mere observance of the commandments to the rank of a *halakhic* (nomian) technique through which each and every Jew could secure an immediate and meaningful relationship with the divine. In this perspective, Jews were given a stronger motivation for religious observance in times of Christian proselytism.

3.2. The mystical lore of the masters from Oria can be rightfully termed gnosis. However, by labeling them as Jewish gnostics, scholars have too easily set an unbridgeable gap between these mystics and Donnolo. Although there certainly are important differences in approaching and interpreting ancient mystical literature between the two, it seems to me that the scholarly arguments addressing this point rest mainly on the confusion between gnosis and Gnosticism.

With the term Gnosticism we identify a number of Christian heretical movements of the 2nd century CE, who maintained a dualistic doctrine of deity, believed in the ontological negativity of matter, preached the escape from the world, and refused worldly ethics⁴⁹.

On the other hand, following Scholem⁵⁰, by gnosis we mean an esoteric lore with salvific implications—where the power of saving does not necessarily imply redemption (even if this aspect is explicit in such texts as the *Ši'ur Qomà*⁵¹) but, more generally, deliverance from a dangerous situation through supernatural means.

One of the main arguments scholars have emphasized in order to differentiate between Donnolo and the mystics of Oria is the explicit anti-dualism of the former⁵². As a matter of fact, Donnolo maintains that even if God has the power to create new worlds, he decided to make *this* creation eternal and incorruptible (save for the bodies of the living beings). God adopted this resolution so that man would not be tempted to hypothesize the existence of several creators, one better than the other⁵³. This is to say that from the existence of one single world descends, according to Donnolo, the existence of only one God.

⁴⁹ See, for example, P. ALEXANDER, "Comparing Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism: an Essay in Method", *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 35/1 (1984), pp. 1-18.

⁵⁰ See G. SCHOLEM, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, New York, 1960, p. 1.

⁵¹ See SCHOLEM, *Major Trends*, p. 64.

⁵² See CASTELLI, *Il commento, introduction* pp. 2, 54ff., 70ff.; SHARF, *The Universe*, p. 50, 79-87, SERMONETA, "Il neoplatonismo", p. 872.

⁵³ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 17ff. (Hebrew text).

In contrast, as far as the Apulian masters are concerned, one should not mistake their effort to preserve divine transcendence with Gnostic dualism, whose presence in the literature we are dealing with is far from being universally acknowledged⁵⁴. It is actually quite unlikely that the mystics of Oria, insofar as they were reputed hardcore representatives of mainstream Rabbinic Judaism⁵⁵, maintained a non-monistic conception of the deity. Therefore, defining their doctrine in terms of gnosis does not make the Apulian masters followers of Gnosticism. (On the other hand, ironically enough, the views about the lunar dragon—the *Teli*—and its terrible powers maintained by the anti-gnostic Donnolo seem to derive from Gnostic astrology!⁵⁶) Apart from the doctrine of dualism, these mystics were clearly opposed to Gnosticism's negation of matter, of this world, and of worldly ethics. As we have noticed in fact, their esoteric practices were not aimed at leaving the human realm for the divine one, but were rather focused on acquiring powers to be used in this very world. In addition, one should take into account some leitmotifs in the *Megillat 'Aḥima'aš*: mundane values such as social affirmation and material wealth are viewed with favor, and morality and legal stringency represent a major concern for the sages therein presented⁵⁷.

3.3. Apart from the issue of monism vs. dualism, the other major theme scholars have debated for the sake of differentiating Donnolo from the mystics of Oria is the question of anthropomorphism⁵⁸.

On the one hand in fact, Donnolo argues several times against a literal understanding of those scriptural passages where anthropomorphic characters are attributed to God. In the first part of the *Sefer ḥakmoni*, devoted to the exegesis of Gn 1:26 («*na'ašè 'adam be-šalmenu ki-demutenu*» – "let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness"), Donnolo's task is precisely to explain how the similarity between man and God should not be understood in material terms, since God has no body.

On the other hand, as we have already seen, it is likely that one of the sources of the Apulian sages was the *Ši'ur Qomà*, a text that depicts the vision of the deity achieved by the mystic in radically anthropomorphic terms. Here

⁵⁴ On this issue, see SCHOLEM, *Major Trends*, p. 65-66; C. MOPSIK and E. SMILEVITCH, "Observations sur l'oeuvre de Gerschom Scholem", *Pardes*, 1 (1985), p. 7-30: 9.

⁵⁵ That the masters from Oria were Rabbanites as opposed to Karaites appears evident from the *Sefer yuḥasin*. See SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, p. 6 (Hebrew text). See also COHEN, *Sefer ha-qabbalah*, p. 68 (Hebrew); p. 93 (English).

⁵⁶ See SHARF, *The Universe*, pp. 48-51; MICHELINI TOCCI, "Dottrine 'ermetiche'", pp. 289-291.

⁵⁷ For these motifs, see 'AḤIMA'AŠ BEN PALT'EL, *Sefer Yuḥasin*, ed. COLAFEMMINA, pp. 28ff, 41.

⁵⁸ See, for example, CASTELLI, *Il commento, Introduction*, pp. 39ff.; SHARF, *The Universe*, pp. 76-87.

the divine body is meticulously described, and for each limb the text gives its secret name and its exact measurements. Such a representation has provoked scandal and reprobation, from the time of the Karaites up until our days (even among scholars)⁵⁹. However, no matter if this description refers to the divine Glory⁶⁰ or to God himself⁶¹, its scandalous bodily character is mitigated by the fact that divine dimensions are expressed in such exorbitant numbers that it becomes actually impossible for the human mind to produce a representation. If, as we have already suggested, the names (of the divine limbs, in this case) constitute God's immanence, these measurements beyond measure—as Schafer argues⁶²—paradoxically represent His transcendence. On the other hand, as far as the names are concerned, one should recall Scholem's famous reading⁶³. According to him, these almost unpronounceable sequences of consonants are nothing but *nomina barbara*, employed in the liturgy for their non-signifying character which would suggest divine otherness as well as the impossibility to define God through human language. If this reading were correct, then a body so huge as to exceed representation, whose limbs are constituted by names, would represent the "anthropomorphic" image of God according to the mystics of Oria.

Let us turn to analyze Donnolo's position in detail. At the beginning of his commentary to Gn 1:26, Donnolo argues that, according to the Bible, man cannot have a direct knowledge of God. While divine essence is out of human reach, patriarchs and prophets were allowed to see the divine Glory (*Kavod*), a light emanated from God so out of scale to result invisible⁶⁴. The *Kavod* would represent God revealing Himself in the creation, coessential with the Absolute yet somehow distinct from Him. As a mediator between infinite God and finite creation, the divine Glory needs to be accessible to man; this is the reason why the *Kavod* took on human likeness or spoke human language sometimes. That said, Donnolo emphasizes how the similarity established in Genesis is to be understood only in a spiritual and ideal sense. It could not be otherwise, since God is different from man precisely because of His

⁵⁹ On the Karaites' attack against Byzantine Rabbanites for their association with the *Ši'ur Qomà* and its divine anthropomorphism, see SHARF, *The Universe*, pp. 80-82. As far as modern scholars are concerned, it will suffice here to remark the pains Castelli and Sharf took in their studies for the sake of showing Donnolo's distance from Gnostic and anthropomorphic conceptions.

⁶⁰ According to SCHOLEM, *Major Trends*, p. 65; see also I. GRUENWALD, *Apocalyptic*, pp. 98-123.

⁶¹ According to I. CHERNUS, "Visions of God in Merkabah Mysticism", *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 13 (1982), pp. 123-146; WOLFSON, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 82-96.

⁶² See SCHAEFER, *Le Dieu*, p. 153.

⁶³ See SCHOLEM, *Major Trends*, p. 63.

⁶⁴ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 6-8 (Hebrew text).

⁶⁵ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 13ff. (Hebrew text).

independence from the body. The body represents the limit of the human being yet, at the same time, her/his only chance to host and to preserve the *ruah*, the living spirit of divine origin. To serve as the recipient for the living spirit—the divine part of man—is in fact the ultimate purpose for which the human body exists. The *ruah* provides man with knowledge (*da'at*), understanding (*binà*), and ability to speak (*dibbur*): these faculties make her/him similar to God yet, at the same time, different from every other living being⁶⁵. Man shares with other creatures her/his corporeal part, which Donnolo—showing in this his medical background—describes at great length⁶⁶ (and it has been suggested that this stress on anatomical details is aimed at demonstrating the absurdity of understanding man's likeness with God in physical terms⁶⁷). Every limb of the human body was created by God for a specific purpose; if it is removed or becomes malfunctioning, it prevents the body from fulfilling its ultimate goal: the living spirit in fact goes out of this "pierced vessel" and the body dies desiccated⁶⁸.

Once established that all the anthropomorphic expressions in the Bible must be seen as metaphors or as allegories, adopted in order to express divine realities in a language accessible to the human mind, Donnolo argues that the problematic plural (*na'asè* – "let Us make") of Gn 1:26 is to be understood as if God told the world that man would be similar to both the Creator and the creation at the same time⁶⁹. With respect to the latter, man as microcosm will be the image of the world as macrocosm; as far as the Former is concerned, man parallels God essentially in matters of knowledge, governance over nature⁷⁰, and creative power. Hence, rather than a physical resemblance, between man and God there is an abstract similarity that concerns common activities and functions⁷¹. However, since God and his deeds are everywhere in every moment, the analogy with man's plane will always be one of Unlimited to limited, of Infinite to finite. This being the case, it seems reasonable to conclude that man's possible knowledge of God cannot regard His essence, but only His operational aspect. If Donnolo's preoccupation with uprooting anthropomorphism from the Scriptures seems sincere, one should note that the tools he has for such an operation are those of the physician rather than those of the philosopher. He does not have the ability for abstraction or

⁶⁶ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 10-12 (Hebrew text).

⁶⁷ See SHARF, *The Universe*, pp. 76-82. It is worth mentioning that, in his review of Sharf's book, Vajda raised some doubts about the supposed anti-gnostic and monistic inspiration of Donnolo's anthropology. See G. VAJDA, *Sharf, A., "The Universe of Shabbetai Donnolo"*, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 22 (1977), p. 230-232: 231.

⁶⁸ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 13ff. (Hebrew text).

⁶⁹ This interpretation appears already in the *midrash Bere'sit Rabbà*, VIII, 3.

⁷⁰ Donnolo's assertion that man can alter natural laws and even modify God's decree should not be mistaken for a magical-theurgical attitude. Through piety and observance of the *mišvot* man can only deserve God's favor, not perform any supernatural operation.

the conceptual tools possessed by Sa'adyà Ga'on or Dunaš 'ibn Tamim, his contemporary commentators of the *Sefer yeširà*⁷². Donnolo's epistemology is based upon functional and material relations rather than on theoretical explanations. His mind works with images and with concrete analogies; this is why he cannot discuss the divine Being except in terms of life functions and human activities. When Donnolo describes God, he uses a set of adjectives (reminding of the list of divine *middot* in Ex 34:6-7) that suggest an intense spiritual life of the deity, analogous to human existence⁷³. Hence, if man is the image of God in His doing and undergoing—not in His essence—then, reversing the relation, it seems reasonable to argue that God performs activities and functions typical of human beings. In this sense, God will certainly not be anthropomorphic, but rather anthropomimetic⁷⁴.

4. Donnolo's system of thought is exposed in his *Sefer ḥakmoni*, one of the oldest commentaries upon the *Sefer yeširà*⁷⁵. It is not by chance that our Apulian physician chose the first classic of Jewish esotericism as a framework into which he could lay down his theories. Dealing essentially with cosmogony and cosmology, the *Sefer yeširà* appears as a patchwork of different elements: Greek, Jewish—and perhaps even Islamic and Indian—philosophical, religious, and scientific traditions are inextricably intertwined in the layers of

⁷¹ For the similarities between man and God, see CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 15ff., 25ff. (Hebrew text). SERMONETA ("Il neoplatonismo", pp. 912ff.) has remarked a striking parallel to Donnolo's argumentation in Gregory of Nissa's *De Opificio Homini*s and has suggested, if not a direct influence, at least a common source.

⁷² On Sa'adyà's commentary, see M. LAMBERT, *Commentaire sur le Séfer Yesira ou Livre de la Création*, Paris, 1891; *Sefer Yetzirà (Kitab al-Mabadi)* 'im perush rabbi Sa'adyà bar Yosef Fayyumi, ed. J. QAFI, Jerusalem, 1972 (Hebrew); G. VAJDA, "Le commentaire de Saadia sur le Sefer Yeçira", *Revue des études juives*, 106 (1941), pp. 64-86. On Dunash's commentary, see G. VAJDA, "Quelques notes sur le commentaire kairouanais du Sefer Yesira", *Revue des études juives*, 105 (1939), pp. 132-140; Id., "Le commentaire kairouanais sur le Livre de la Création", *Revue des études juives*, 107 (1947), pp. 5-62; 110 (1949-50), pp. 67-92; 112 (1953), pp. 5-33; Id., "Deux nouveaux fragments arabes du commentaire de Dunash b. Tamim sur le Livre de la Création", *Revue des études juives*, 113 (1954), pp. 37-61; 122 (1963), pp. 149-166; Id., *Le commentaire sur le Livre de la création de Dunash ben Tamim de Kairouan. Xe siècle. Revue et augmentée par Paul B. Fenton*, Leuven-Paris, 2002. See also R. JOSPE, "Early philosophical commentaries on the Sefer Yezirah: some comments", *Revue des études juives*, 149 (1990), pp. 369-415.

⁷³ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, p. 15 (Hebrew text).

⁷⁴ Credit for this term should be given to Giovanni Filoramo, whom I thank for the suggestion.

⁷⁵ Probably the best bibliography on the *Sefer yeširà* can be found online, courtesy of Don KARR, at www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/karr/syie.pdf. The *sine qua non* editions of this work are I. GRUENWALD, "A Preliminary Critical Edition of Sefer Yezirah", *Israel Oriental Studies*, 1 (1971) pp. 132-177; P. HAYMAN, *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*, Tübingen, 2004.

this work without clear references to specific sources⁷⁶. As a consequence, the character of the *Sefer yeširà* is not easily determined. Quite rightfully, Gruenwald affirms a-propos: «it would be preposterous to classify it as either philosophical, or mystical, or even magical, by nature. SY could well have been written in a spiritual milieu which maintained no conscious distinction between these branches of knowledge»⁷⁷. Obscure and allusive, the *Sefer yeširà* presents itself as an "open text", which made possible for the thinkers who commented it to interpret this work creatively, encapsulating in it whatever ideological agenda they wished to put forward⁷⁸.

This being the case, it should not surprise us to find out that the *Sefer yeširà* was dealt with in very different ways by the Apulian rabbis, by Donnolo, and by such Jewish philosophers as Sa'adyà Ga'on and Dunaš 'ibn Tamim⁷⁹. Operating in an Islamic milieu where the Arabic translations of Greek classics fostered a rediscovery of secular sciences, Sa'adyà and Dunaš engaged in philosophical reflections about creation. The Biblical account maintained by Judaism (the revealed truth) had to be tested against Greek physics, astronomy, and psychology (the rational truths) and to be justified. In this perspective, Sa'adyà and Dunaš filtered the cosmological and psychological doctrines contained in the *Sefer yeširà* through Aristotelian naturalism. As a result, both elaborated an abstract and rationalistic model of the universe where the boundaries between physics and metaphysics—and the consequent limits to the believer's speculation—are clearly set.

⁷⁶ See, for example, G. SCHOLEM, *Kabbalah*, Jerusalem-New York, 1974, pp. 23-30; S. WASSERSTROM, "Sefer Yesira and Early Islam: A Reappraisal", *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 3/1 (1993), pp. 1-30; J. DAN, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, Tel Aviv, 1993, pp. 198-211; Id., *Jewish Mysticism, I: Late Antiquity*, Northvale-Jerusalem, 1998, pp. 138-145, 155-187; E. WOLFSON, "Jewish Mysticism: A Philosophical Overview", in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, eds. D. FRANK and O. LEAMAN, London-New York 1997, pp. 450-498: 463-466; Y. LIEBES, *Torat ha-yeširà šel Sefer Yeširà*, Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 2000 (Hebrew); M. IDEL, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, New Haven-London, 2002, pp. 34ff.; D. SHULMAN, "Is There an Indian Connection to Sefer yesirah?", *Aleph*, 2 (2002), pp. 191-199.

⁷⁷ I. GRUENWALD, "Some Critical Notes on the First Part of Sefer Yezira", *Revue des études juives*, 132 (1973), p. 475-512: 477. See also N. SED, "Le Sefer Yesira: L'édition critique, le text primitif, la grammaire, et la métaphysique", *Revue des études juives*, 132 (1973), pp. 513-518: 515-516: «Le Sefer Yesira n'est pas un traité mystique. Il n'y a point de cloison qui séparerait la métaphysique de la cosmologie, la cosmologie de la linguistique, de l'astrologie ou de l'anthropologie».

⁷⁸ Such an operation appears even more legitimate insofar as, properly speaking, we do not possess an "original" version of the *Sefer yeširà*. All we have are medieval commentaries containing slightly different redactions of the text. On this issue, see DAN, *Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 155-187.

⁷⁹ On Donnolo's *Sefer ḥakmoni* compared with Sa'adyà's and Dunaš's commentaries, see SERMONETA, "Il neoplatonismo", pp. 880ff.; PUTZU, *Shabbetai*, pp. 103-106; Id., "La sapienza", pp. 126-127.

Donnolo's perspective is more influenced by Neoplatonism. He maintains an organic understanding of both the empirical and the spiritual world. There is continuity, rather than rupture, between the realm of physics and that of metaphysics: the two stand in harmonious relationship, insofar as one plane mirrors the other. In Donnolo's system creation is conceived of as emanation or hypostasis from God. The Biblical account sets the limits for human speculation on the one hand, maintaining that the Creator is unknowable; on the other hand, it establishes a similarity between God and man, thus leaving some room for the latter's understanding of the Deity. However, the plural in the expression «*na'asè 'adam*» requires the introduction of a third term of comparison, represented by the world. The parallelisms between the man microcosm and the world macrocosm found in the *Sefer yeširà* suggest a common origin and a common pattern of formation. Granted that all beings originated from one Source, finding the principles through which everything developed from the Creator paves the way for acquiring all the knowledge accessible to man. In this sense, Donnolo's *Sefer ḥakmoni* can be seen as an encyclopedia that includes all of his author's knowledge—which, *ça va sans dire*, equates in Donnolo's eyes with everything a human being can possibly know—systematized around a neoplatonic grid⁸⁰. All science stems from certain ideal principles, represented by the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the *sefirot*, that constitute at the same time the limits of knowledge insofar as man cannot speculate beyond them. The combination between the letters and the nine lower *sefirot* represents in fact the trigger of creation, beyond which only the Creator exists. Each permutation thus obtained realizes itself on three ontological plans: the ideal one, the macrocosmic one, and the microcosmic one⁸¹. Therefore, the same phenomenon presents itself in three different yet essentially interrelated aspects. The study of these manifestations shall accordingly be achieved by three interdependent disciplines, which, together, constitute the totality of science:

1. The highest one can be termed (after Sermoneta⁸²) "ideal symbology", and it concerns the letters, the *sefirot*, and their combinations. Donnolo affirms that knowing all the possible alphabetical permutations amounts to knowing all the languages in the world; given the ambivalence of the Hebrew term *davar*—meaning both word and thing—such a knowledge corresponds to no less than omniscience.

⁸⁰ On the *Sefer ḥakmoni* as encyclopedic work, see G. SERMONETA, "Le enciclopedie nel mondo ebraico medievale", *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, 1 (1985), pp. 16-25.

⁸¹ See SERMONETA, "Le enciclopedie", pp. 18-21.

⁸² See SERMONETA, "Le enciclopedie", p. 21.

This kind of perfection is however exclusive to God⁸³. Man must be contented with investigating the two lower ontological levels, in which the ideal symbols become real:

2. Astronomy/astrology, which deals with the realm of the cosmos, and
3. Medicine (including psychology), which is concerned with the human realm.

In Donnolo's system every other scientific discipline is absorbed in the above two, insofar as it would be sufficient to uncover the macrocosm-microcosm parallels between elements operating in the universe and their equivalents in the human body in order to know the entire empirical creation. Beyond and above that, in the realm of metaphysics, ideal symbology allows man a limited investigation of the preliminary phase of creation (the one characterized by permutations between letters and *sefirot*).

At this point, it seems fair to say that the principle underlying Donnolo's whole epistemological project is that the truth humanly attainable resides inside man. Since God's creative activity, according to the *Sefer yeširà*, is essentially a reification of linguistic elements that He had previously organized and contemplated, the human being can understand the mechanism of creation only if she/he recognizes the process of development of her/his own interior speech and its concretization into ideas, numbers, and letters. In this sense, Donnolo proves consistent with the Platonizing tradition that saw knowledge as a single, accomplished, and eternal science, reckoned to be attainable a priori through knowledge of one's self. However, as Sharf suggests⁸⁴, one should wonder if Donnolo subscribed to the Delphic maxim «know thyself»—seen as a means for knowing the entire reality—more out of his medical background than because of his philosophical beliefs. Probably Neoplatonism represented in fact the general theoretical framework of Donnolo's cultural environment, and he made use of this *Weltanschauung*—more or less consciously—for the sake of organizing his knowledge in a sufficiently coherent system. I would contend that Donnolo was neither a great expert nor a self-aware partisan of Neoplatonism; he simply adopted this theoretical outlook instrumentally⁸⁵. Be that as it may, Donnolo's itinerary towards knowledge could not begin but with the discipline he was most expert in: medicine. Through medicine Donnolo could get to know himself as man, the microcosm. The following step on the way to knowledge would be astrology, which, through a set of parallel influences, would shed light on the divine order of the universe as well as on

⁸³ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, p. 54 (Hebrew text).

⁸⁴ A. SHARF, "Shabbetai Donnolo's Idea of the Microcosm", in *Studi sull'ebraismo italiano in memoria di C. Roth*, ed. E. TOAFF, Roma, 1974, pp. 205-226: 224.

⁸⁵ My reading here challenges Sermoneta's assessment about Donnolo's perfectly consistent integration into Neoplatonism. See his "Il neoplatonismo", p. 932, and my "La sapienza", p. 128.

man's task in the creation. Finally comes the science of ideal symbols, which implies the acknowledgement of an all-encompassing schema—inaccessible in its entirety to human limitation—that unifies and legitimates all phenomena.

As we have seen, compared to Sa'adyà's and Dunaš's commentaries to the *Sefer yeširà*, Donnolo's displays a less rationalistic and naturalistic tendency. On the other hand, as Dan suggests⁸⁶, one should not consider Donnolo's commentary as a mystical work, or as an investigation on God's intrinsic nature, since the inspiration of the work is scientific. Here one should note, however, that Donnolo's "scientific" approach rests on the belief in the creative power of the Hebrew letters. Combined with the *sefirot*, they constitute the elements of that ideal symbology which represents the metaphysical part in Donnolo's system⁸⁷. Rather than a scientist in the modern sense of the term, Donnolo was a sage—a *hakam*⁸⁸—devoted to an organic, aprioristic science constituted by a system of interdependent disciplines. Just as he believed in the intrinsic unity of all phenomena manifesting themselves in the three realms of being, Donnolo believed in the unity of knowledge.

5. The *hokmà* Donnolo drew from the *Sefer yeširà* had a much more speculative character than the magical-theurgical lore Apulian mystics found in that same text. As a matter of fact, if my inference is correct, the rabbis from Oria used the *Sefer yeširà* essentially as a handbook of magical formulas. For them, the knowledge of *Ma'asè Bere'sit* granted supernatural powers; for Donnolo, instead, understanding the *opus creationis* and consequently acknowledging its perfection could help man to strengthen his faith in God and to praise the Creator for His work. Donnolo's God is in fact first and foremost a creator, characterized by deeds. He gave human beings the ability to understand and to reproduce all the processes of creation, thus making them similar to Him, so that men could realize God's majesty and might⁸⁹. Given the limits of and the restrictions on man's knowledge of God, Donnolo believed that the religious duty to know for the sake of complying with the divine will would necessarily be fulfilled through the study of subjects accessible to man. In this perspective, theosophy—regardless of its being possible or licit—was

⁸⁶ See DAN, "La cultura ebraica", p. 345. More recently, Donnolo's scientific attitude, his "pragmatic" use of the *Sefer yeširà*, and his distinction between the knowable plane of the letters and the unknowable plane of the *sefirot* have been emphasized in P. MANCUSO, "Shabbatai Donnolo commentateur du *Sefer Yetzirah*", in *Réceptions de la cabale*, eds. P. GISEL and L. KAENNEL, Paris-Tel Aviv, 2007, pp. 89-107.

⁸⁷ On the other hand, here one should also notice the difference between Donnolo's conception of the letters, and the one maintained by the mystics of Oria, who ascribed to the Names a magical-thaumaturgical power.

⁸⁸ The usage of this term seems particularly apt when one keeps in mind that in Arabic the word *hakim* is used to indicate, among other things, the wise, the sage, but also the physician.

⁸⁹ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, p. 27 (Hebrew text).

not necessary; in Šabbetai's eyes, anthropology, cosmology, and theology would in fact correspond one another.

If defining Donnolo's *hokmà* in terms of theosophy is therefore improper⁹⁰, labeling it as gnosis (an "esoteric lore with salvific implications") will be even more problematic. The mere fact that this thinker seeks recognition among his fellow Jews⁹¹ and complains for not getting it rules clearly out the esoteric component. As far as a possible salvific and operative character of Donnolo's *hokmà* is concerned, we might at best say that medical and astrological knowledge, combined with the understanding of the structure and of the mechanisms of creation, provide directions for a righteous and happy worldly existence—from which a seeming life in the world-to-come shall follow.

At this point, one needs to emphasize that for Donnolo the translation of knowledge into power occurs in the form of a better understanding of the divine order which results in a more scrupulous observance of God's will. This was not the case for the mystics of Oria. Their gnosis had in any case an immediate, almost automatic, practical efficacy. Compliance with divine will determined only whether the effects of the practice are positive or negative. In order to understand this aspect, let us consider that, according to Donnolo, God's providential plan is fixed in the cosmos. Man can perceive in the stars glimpses about his condition and his fate, and modify his behavior accordingly. This is possible only insofar as in such predetermined picture, which necessarily includes also the evil man will do or will suffer from, *Tešuvà*—representing the free will human beings have been granted—is included too⁹². Man's opportunity for salvation/redemption, which consists in his realignment to the perfect divine order, is connected to the wise management of the two principles dwelling in his *ruah*, the *yešer tov* and the *yešer ra'*. According to this conception, the divine decree mirrored in the stars can be modified only until a human being is alive. In fact, once the living spirit (immortal because of its derivation from the divine *ruah*) leaves the body, it keeps enduring forever in peace or in suffering, depending on having or not having done *Tešuvà*⁹³. Being a physician, not only Donnolo does not advocate the escape from the body (as

⁹⁰ On this point I disagree with WOLFSON, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 128-137, who equates the knowledge of the *sefirot* to the contemplation of God's invisible *demut*, ending up arguing for a theosophical conception of the *sefirot* in Donnolo's thought. In this sense, as GOETSCHEL, *La Kabbale*, p. 38ff., had already suggested, Donnolo would anticipate some speculations to be found in the *Sefer ha-bahir* [*The Book of Brightness*]. My point here is that a theosophical conception of the *sefirot* would be both hardly consistent with and—more importantly—irrelevant to Donnolo's overall intellectual project and to his *Weltanschauung*.

⁹¹ At the beginning of his *Sefer hakmoni* (CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 1-3, Hebrew text) Donnolo puts a recommendation for the copyists, urging them to credit Šabbetai bar 'Avraham for the work. In order to further defend his authorship and to preserve the text from manipulations, Donnolo includes an acrostic containing his name and place of birth.

⁹² CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 33ff. (Hebrew text).

⁹³ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 24-25 (Hebrew text).

the Gnostics did); he also attaches a crucial role to earthly existence and to commitment to the material world. As a matter of fact, in understanding the *yeşer tov* and the *yeşer ra'* as reason and instinct rather than as the good and the evil inclinations, Donnolo makes them both necessary to human life. In particular, since the *yeşer ra'* drives toward the perpetration of the species and the manipulation of the world for the benefit of man, from this principle depends the preservation of the creation⁹⁴. In fact, if the ultimate goal of human life is the implementation in the world of the divine order, God's will shall find its expression in the preservation of the creation, so that from the oneness of the latter one can acknowledge the oneness of the former. Hence, for man the microcosm merit will come from his righteous life on earth, and guilt/judgment from the heavenly Law. In the same way, at a macrocosmic level the favorable side of the universe will be the earthly one, whereas the unfavorable one will be that of the heavens⁹⁵. One cannot but remark that here again Donnolo—perhaps because of his “physician’s attitude”—privileges man’s side of the relationship between human and divine realm.

As a conclusion, putting together all the elements we have discussed so far regarding Donnolo’s idea of *hokmà*, it seems to me that one can reasonably make the case for a decisively anthropocentric perspective. I would like to argue that Donnolo’s consistent anthropocentrism can also be qualified of humanism. In this sense, his paraphrase of the Talmudic saying “Whoever kills a human being, it is as if he destroys the entire world”⁹⁶—which epitomizes the microcosm-macrocosm relationship between man and the universe—can be contrasted with the ruthless ethical rigor (exemplified by death sentences and by families exterminated because of ritual transgressions)⁹⁷ advocated by his fellow Jews, whom the *Sefer yuhasin* praises as champions of Rabbinism. Put together, Donnolo’s syncretistic Neoplatonism, his conception of reality as an integrated whole, his approach to science and to knowledge in general, his familiarity with non-Jews and non-Jewish sources, and his humanistic anthropocentrism, shape up a picture of the intellectual quite similar to those who will become typical in the Italian Renaissance⁹⁸.

⁹⁴ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, p. 18 (Hebrew text).

⁹⁵ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, pp. 22ff. (Hebrew text). Drawing upon *Sefer yeşirà*’s opposition between the scale of indulgence (associated with water) and the scale of judgment (connected to fire), Donnolo confers a positive value to the southern/lower part and a negative value to the northern/upper part both of the universe and of man.

⁹⁶ CASTELLI, *Il commento*, p. 25 (Hebrew text). Compare with Jerusalem Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 4:1 (22a): «Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world».

⁹⁷ See SALZMAN, *The Chronicle*, pp. 5, 16 (Hebrew text).

⁹⁸ In this sense, my reading is substantiated by Fabrizio Lelli’s recent (and still unpublished) discovery of a quotation from Donnolo’s *Sefer hakmoni* in a work of an Italian author of the Renaissance.

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THE MANUSCRIPT TRADITION
OF ŠABBETAY DONNOLO’S *SEFER HAKMONI*.
A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS*

The *Sefer hakmoni* (*Book of the Wise [Man]*) by Šabbetay Donnolo (912-913 - d. after 982) is without any doubt one of the most significant testimonies of the cultural and literary renaissance of southern Italian Jewry between the early 9th and 11th century. *Sefer hakmoni* consists of three main parts: an introduction, containing important autobiographical information; a commentary on Genesis 1:26 («Let us make man in our image, after our likeness») and the commentary on *Sefer yeşirà* (*Book of Formation*; an anonymous text which described the creation of the universe as the combined action of the letters of the alphabet and the *Sefirot*), where the author dealt at length and in great details with problems concerning astrology, medicine and biblical exegesis¹. As pointed out since the beginning of the 20th century, Donnolo’s *Sefer hakmoni* (hereafter SH) was well known to 11th-13th century northern European Jews (especially the Jews of the Renanian area), playing an important role in shaping their intellectual and ideological identity.

Since the middle of the 19th century Donnolo’s work was the subject of several studies, the most significant being the publication of the Hebrew text edited by the Italian scholar David CASTELLI (*Il commento di Sabbatai Donnolo sul Libro della creazione*, Florence, 1880) and, almost one hundred years later Andrew SHARF’s *The Universe of Shabbetai Donnolo* (New York, 1975), one of the most comprehensive studies on the figure of Donnolo and

* This article is a slightly varied version of a chapter of my doctoral thesis, conducted at the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies of University College London under the supervision of Dr. Ada Rapoport-Albert. In the specific task of describing the manuscript tradition of Donnolo’s work, constructive criticism and useful suggestions were offered by professor Nicholas de Lange of Cambridge University to whom I express my sincere gratitude.

¹ In this article, the edition reference of the text of *Sefer yeşirà* is A. P. HAYMAN’s *Sefer Yeşira – Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary*, published in Tübingen in 2004. Paragraph and section of this work have been indicated according to Hayman’s edition.