



PROJECT MUSE®

**Sefirotic Depiction, Divine Noesis, and Aristotelian Kabbalah:
Abraham ben Meir de Balmes and Italian Renaissance
Thought**

Brian Ogren

Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 104, Number 4, Fall 2014, pp. 573-599
(Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/jqr.2014.0040



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jqr/summary/v104/104.4.ogren.html>

Sefirotic Depiction, Divine Noesis, and Aristotelian Kabbalah: Abraham ben Meir de Balmes and Italian Renaissance Thought

BRIAN OGREN

FIFTEENTH- AND SIXTEENTH-CENTURY Italy witnessed a conspicuous prevalence of syntheses between philosophical speculation and kabbalistic thought. This is due, in part, to the autodidactic syncretism of many Italian Jewish thinkers, who were garnering variegated forms of knowledge from diverse textual sources. It is also due, in part, to the *priusca philosophia* tradition of the Renaissance, which saw the revitalization of a wide range of ancient speculative sources as a necessary factor in human perfection and the search for truth. It is within this milieu that writers like the famed Jewish exegete Isaac Abravanel were able to bring Socrates into constructive dialogue with Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai.¹ It is also in this milieu that a thinker like Abravanel's illustrious son Judah, better known in humanist circles as Leone Ebreo, was able to boldly make the following assertion regarding Plato, in allusion to Kabbalah as ancient wisdom:

Plato, because he had greater notions of this ancient wisdom than Aristotle, followed it. Aristotle, who penetrated less deeply into abstract things, and unlike Plato did not have the testimony of our ancient theologians, denied that hidden territory, which he could not see . . . And

I would like to thank Professor Fabrizio Lelli of the University of Salento for encouraging me to carry out research on Abraham de Balmes. This research was completed with the help of a grant whose givers prefer to remain anonymous, and was appositely administered through the University of Salento, which is in Abraham de Balmes's birth city of Lecce.

1. See, for example, Isaac Abravanel, *Commentary on The Torah*, vol. 5, *Deuteronomy* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1999), 385.

though Plato was for so many years Aristotle's teacher, he learned from better teachers than Aristotle, who learned from Plato, because Plato studied with our ancient fathers.²

This audacious statement, written in the vernacular and circulated beyond the Jewish world, concerns the primacy of ancient Jewish learning. For Ebreo, Plato is legitimate and Kabbalah can be understood via Platonic philosophy because Plato studied directly with ancient kabbalists. What is more, Aristotle's philosophy cannot enter into the depths of Kabbalah, due to the fact that Aristotle's learning was distant from kabbalistic sources, leaving Aristotelian philosophy more superficial and, in a sense, corrupted.

Aristotelian philosophy is, by this reading, unsuited to the job of elucidating true, pristine kabbalistic lore. This take on Aristotle, which was carried over from medieval thinkers such as Ya'akov ben Sheshet and Shem Tov ben Shem Tov,³ was prevalent in the Renaissance and had wide influence. This is especially so with respect to an understanding of the kabbalistic hypostases known as the sefirot. Indeed, when turning to a discussion of the sefirot, even the avowed Aristotelian David ben Judah Messer Leon made reference not to Aristotle but to Plato and to the Platonic Ideas.⁴ As Hava Tirosh-Rothschild has astutely noted, David ben Judah "could incorporate Kabbalah into philosophy because he highlighted the Neoplatonic dimensions of medieval Aristotelianism."⁵ Similar shifts from Aristotelianism into Neoplatonism with regard to philosophical explications of the sefirot are visible in the works of other Jewish Renaissance thinkers as well, among them Yoḥanan Alemanno and Elia Ḥayyim ben Binyamin da Genazzano.⁶

2. Leone Ebreo, *Dialogues of Love*, trans. C. D. Bacich and R. Pescatori (Toronto, 2009), 325.

3. Moshe Idel, "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. L. E. Goodman (Albany, N.Y., 1992), 320–22.

4. For a detailed analysis, see Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, "Sefirot as the Essence of God in the Writings of David Messer Leon," *AJS Review* 7 (1982): 420–23. As Tirosh-Rothschild points out, such ideas are filtered through both Averroes and Aquinas, and they take on the nature of the question of God's essence as existence. Nevertheless, it is significant that Plato enters into the picture here and that, at one point, he even utilizes the standard Platonic concept of Ideas as the blueprint in the mind of the divine architect (for more on this, see *ibid.*, 422).

5. Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, *Between Worlds: The Life and Thought of Rabbi David ben Judah Messer Leon* (Albany, N.Y., 1991), 186.

6. For more on this latter figure and his explication of the sefirot, see Fabrizio Lelli, "Introduzione," in E. H. Genazzano, *La Lettera Preziosa* (Florence, 2002).

In line with this tendency, modern scholarly treatment has widely overlooked Aristotelian trends in Jewish Kabbalah of the Renaissance in relation to sefirotic exegesis,⁷ focusing instead on Neoplatonic ideas.⁸ Perhaps this is due to the pervasiveness of the Renaissance concept of the primacy of Plato in understanding kabbalistic notions. Notwithstanding, there was at least one important Jewish thinker of the Italian Renaissance who did attempt to interpret the sefirotic system by utilizing a more thoroughly Aristotelian philosophy. This was the Averroean-Aristotelian theorist and translator Abraham ben Meir de Balmes, who entered into the *pardes* of sefirotic exegesis without once invoking Plato.

This essay will seek to balance the Neoplatonically slanted picture of the Jewish philosophical Kabbalah of the Renaissance by examining the Aristotelian Kabbalah of de Balmes. After a brief introduction to the life and works of this important thinker, I will explicate his little-known, understudied commentary on the sefirot. I will contrast his theories of the sefirot in relation to Aristotelian noesis with sefirotic theories of his contemporaries in relation to Neoplatonic ideation, and I will propose an Averroean understanding of the sefirot in terms of intellectual conjunction through phantasy. In so doing, I will endeavor to show that the philosophical-kabbalistic syncretism of the Renaissance was far from monolithic. Moreover, de Balmes was an important thinker, and a consid-

7. Despite the lack on the Jewish side, recent Renaissance scholarship has interestingly seen some important treatment of Christian kabbalistic usages of Aristotelian philosophy in interpreting the sefirotic structure. Of significance is Bernd Roling, *Aristotelische Naturphilosophie und christliche Kabbalah im Werk des Paulus Ritius* (Tübingen, 2007), esp. 305–58. Even more recently, Saverio Campanini, “Il *De divinis attributis* di Cesare Evoli,” *Materia Giudaica* 15–16 (2010–2011): 339–55.

8. Moshe Idel has recently treated the question of Kabbalah and Aristotelianism in the Italian Renaissance in his book *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280–1510* (New Haven, Conn., 2011), esp. 198–201. Nevertheless, he does not focus on Aristotelian interpretations of the sefirot there but rather on Aristotelian ideas of intellectual conjunction; and even in this last regard, he explicitly notes a “shift from a more Aristotelian to a more Neoplatonic orientation” (141). For examples of scholarly emphases on Neoplatonic readings of the sefirot, see the following: Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (Albany, N.Y., 2001), 46; Arthur Lesley, “Proverbs, Figures, and Riddles: The Dialogues of Love as a Hebrew Humanist Composition,” in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, ed. M. Fishbane (Albany, N.Y., 1993), 216–17; Moshe Idel, “Kabbalah and Ancient Philosophy in the Thought of Rabbi Isaac and Rabbi Judah Abravanel” (Hebrew), in *The Philosophy of Love of Judah Abravanel: Four Lectures on the Study Day of the University of Haifa*, ed. M. Dorman and Z. Levy (Haifa, 1985), 79–81.

eration of his little-known Aristotelian elucidation of the sefirot will provide a new element to the complex contemporary scholarly picture of Jewish thought in the Renaissance.

ABRAHAM DE BALMES—HIS LIFE AND TIMES

Abraham ben Meir de Balmes was born in the southeastern Italian city of Lecce. Due to its location, Lecce was highly influenced by both Greek and Italian culture having been under Byzantine, Norman, and Angevin rule, but around the time of de Balmes's birth, the city passed into the hands of the Aragonese kings of Naples. The precise date of de Balmes's birth is not known. Some estimates place his birth year around 1440,⁹ though the bibliographer Menahem Schmelzer has brought to light a manuscript written in the hand of Abraham's grandfather of the same name, which records the birth year of the younger Abraham's father Meir, in 1442.¹⁰ Thus, it seems more likely that the younger Abraham was born in the 1460s or 1470s.

The elder Abraham had come from Provence and had served as a doctor in the court of the king of Naples. The younger Abraham would follow in his grandfather's footsteps, thereby causing much confusion for historians and bibliographers, who have had to distinguish between two different physicians named Abraham de Balmes, both active in Naples. Indeed, records show that under special permission from Pope Innocent VIII, the younger Abraham matriculated at and received a *laurea* in medicine from the Studium Generale of Naples.¹¹ This was the city's medieval institution of higher learning, which had maintained a strong Aristotelian Scholastic tradition that included among its ranks its famed thirteenth-century alumnus Thomas Aquinas. It was also later to become the seat of one of de Balmes's most illustrious contemporaries, the famed Latin Averroist Agostino Nifo.¹² The Studium indeed had a strong Aristotelian

9. See, for example, Joseph Elijah Heller, "Balmes, Abraham ben Meir de," *Encyclopædia Judaica* (2007), 3:94–95.

10. Menahem Schmelzer, "A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Book List," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 20 (1998): 90.

11. This is quoted and discussed at length in Francesco Pierro, "Abramo di Meir de Balmes (1460–1523), medico filosofo e grammatico ebreo della scuola napoletana," in *Atti del XIX congresso nazionale di storia della medicina* (l'Aquila, September 26–29, 1963) (Rome, 1964), 366–71, cited in Saverio Campanini, "*Peculium Abrae*: La grammatica ebraico-latina di Abraham de Balmes," *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 36.3 (1997): 6.

12. Charles B. Schmitt, "Philosophy and Science in Sixteenth-Century Italian Universities," in *The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. A. Chastel et al. (London, 1982), 299.

affinity, and it is reasonable to assume that during his time there, de Balmes was exposed to Aristotelianism in a more than cursory manner.

While in Naples, de Balmes seems to have imbibed Aristotelianism from another source outside of the Studium, namely, the famed Jewish philosopher and rhetorician Judah Messer Leon. In several places within his seminal work *Mikneh Avram*, de Balmes explicitly names Messer Leon as one of his teachers.¹³ Messer Leon was a consummate logician and had spent the better part of his intellectual career arguing that, properly understood, Aristotle's philosophy did not contradict Torah but in fact proved its superiority over all other forms of human wisdom.¹⁴ One of the fruits of such argumentation was his seminal *Nophet tsufim*, often translated as *The Book of the Honeycomb's Flow*. This was the very first Hebrew book printed during the lifetime of its author, and it argues that the Hebrew Bible exhibits the characteristics of Aristotelian rhetoric par excellence.¹⁵ In addition to *The Book of the Honeycomb's Flow*, Messer Leon had written compilations of Aristotelian logic, as well as supercommentaries on several Averroean texts. Messer Leon's strong Aristotelian foundations had already been laid by the time his yeshiva in Naples was established, toward the end of his life. It is thus only reasonable to assume that de Balmes would have discussed such philosophy with his teacher Messer Leon, even if he had only attended the yeshiva for Torah learning. For the teacher, as too would become true for the pupil, Torah learning and philosophy were indistinguishable endeavors.

Twenty-three years prior to de Balmes's own *laurea* in medicine at the Studium, in 1469, Messer Leon had been conferred a special doctoral degree in philosophy and medicine by Emperor Frederick III.¹⁶ This degree not only allowed Messer Leon to treat non-Jewish patients; it granted him the unique right to award doctoral degrees to his own Jewish students. One of these students was Yoḥanan Alemanno, who would go on to combine philosophy and Kabbalah in his own unique manner. It is highly significant to note in this context that while Judah Messer Leon explicitly came out against the Kabbalah, at least three of his students, including Alemanno, Messer Leon's own son David, and Abraham de Balmes, would go on to integrate Kabbalah into their own systems of thought. With his strong advocacy for an Aristotelian exegesis of the

13. See Campanini, "*Peculium Abrae*," 6–7.

14. Tirosh-Rothschild, *Between Worlds*, 249.

15. See Judah Messer Leon, *Nofet Zufim: On Hebrew Rhetoric* (Hebrew; Mantua, ca. 1475; repr. Jerusalem, 1981).

16. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

Jewish tradition, perhaps Messer Leon had inadvertently paved the way for the next generation's usage of Aristotle and his commentators in order to show the boundless wisdom of the Kabbalah. Not only does the Bible perfectly epitomize Aristotelian rhetoric, as the master had taught, but for Messer Leon's students such as Abraham de Balmes, kabbalistic ideas like the sefirot most impeccably exemplify Aristotelian concepts connected to intellection.

De Balmes's status, acumen, and erudition brought him out of the world of Jewish learning and propelled him onto center stage in the world of the Christian Renaissance elite. In fact, in the wake of the expulsion of the Jews from the Kingdom of Naples in 1510, his next stop was the Republic of Venice. There, he entered into the personal service of the famed cardinal and patron of humanistic learning Domenico Grimani. Among Grimani's many pursuits were book collecting and a deep interest in Aristotelian philosophy. Thus, even though de Balmes was Jewish, someone with his skills and background would have been a natural fit for Grimani's employ.

Grimani seems to have hired de Balmes primarily as a physician, but under Grimani's patronage de Balmes also expounded Aristotelian philosophy in its medieval Avverroan form.¹⁷ This came in the manner of several important Latin translations that de Balmes carried out from medieval Hebrew versions of Averroan commentaries and philosophical works.¹⁸ It also came by way of personal teaching. Indeed, if we are to take the famous sixteenth-century Italian Jewish chronicler Gedalya ibn Yaḥya at his word, de Balmes publicly taught Christian students at the Studium of Padova and was so respected by these students that upon his death in 1523 they followed after his funeral bier.¹⁹ Ibn Yaḥya's testimony is fraught with difficulties, including the fact that no record exists of de Balmes having taught at the Studium of Padova, as well as the fact that no Jew would have been allowed to hold such a position. Nevertheless,

17. For the most expansive treatment of this, see Giuliano Tamani, "I libri ebraici del cardinal Domenico Grimani," *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 34.3 (1995): 5–52.

18. For more on de Balmes's translations, see the studies of Silvia di Donato, especially the following: "Il Kitāb al-Kašf 'an Manāhiḡ al-adilla fī 'aqā'id al-milla di Averroè nella traduzione ebraico-latina di Abraham De Balmes," *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 41.3 (2002): 5–36; "Il Kašf 'an manāhiḡ di Averroè: Confronto fra la versione di Abraham De Balmes e le citazioni di Calo Calonimo nel De mundi creatione," *Materia Giudaica* 91/2 (2004): 241–48; "La traduzione latina della Risāla al-wadā' d'Avempace," in *Gli ebrei nel Salento (secoli ix–xvi)*, ed. F. Lelli (Galatina, 2013).

19. Gedalya ibn Yaḥya, *The Chain of Tradition* (Hebrew; Venice, 1587; repr. Jerusalem, 1962), 146.

ibn Yahya's testimony is telling, in that de Balmes may very well have been teaching and tutoring outside of the official framework of the Studium. Perhaps even more importantly, it shows that, at the very least, de Balmes was perceived by his contemporaries and by subsequent generations of Jewish scholars as a bridge between the Jewish world and the world of Renaissance learning. To be sure, de Balmes's linking of medieval Arabic Aristotelian philosophy, Jewish thought, and Renaissance Latinism is an extraordinary legacy that left a lasting imprint through the dissemination of his works.

DE BALMES'S WORKS

De Balmes's most prolific area of production was without a doubt his translation of medieval Arabic philosophical works into Latin. This comes as no surprise, given his background and given a surge in interest in medieval Arabic philosophy. The general Renaissance attention to variant forms of perennial wisdom that brought about the rebirth of classical learning also had as a byproduct a surge in interest in medieval Arabic thought. A new wave of translations via Hebrew intermediaries began around 1480 and lasted for about seventy years; this new wave saw nineteen additional Averroean commentaries translated into Latin for the very first time.²⁰ Part of this was due to an increased interest in Aristotle, who during the Middle Ages had been left in the custodianship of Arab thinkers. Indeed, Averroes was commonly known as "The Commentator" on Aristotle, a title usually expressed with the telltale definite article. One recent scholar has pointed out that during the sixteenth century more translations of Aristotle and his commentators, including Averroes, were carried out into Latin and vernacular languages than had been carried out in all previous centuries combined.²¹ An interest in Aristotle prompted an interest in his commentators, who were now being taken more seriously in the Latin West.

De Balmes figured quite prominently within this new wave of interest. A relatively recent scholarly inventory lists fourteen Averroean works that were translated by de Balmes into Latin, in addition to works of Avempace and Alfarabi.²² This is by far the longest list on an inventory that includes illustrious figures such as Elia del Medigo, Paolo Ricci,

20. Dag Nikolaus Hasse, "Arabic Philosophy and Averroism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. J. Hankins (New York, 2007), 114–15.

21. Luca Bianchi, "Continuity and Change in the Aristotelian Tradition," in *Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, 50.

22. Hasse, "Arabic Philosophy," 134–36.

Jacob Mantino, and even classical orientalists such as Johannes Buxtorf the Younger and Edward Pococke.²³ Thus, de Balmes was prolific. Not only were his translations numerous, they were also influential; indeed, they were incorporated into what would become the standard sixteenth-century edition of Aristotle, which was published in Venice in 1560.²⁴ In this respect, de Balmes played a remarkable part in the bringing of Averroistic ideas, such as universal intellection, to the fore of Western thought.

In addition to the Averroean works, de Balmes wrote what was to become a famous Hebrew grammar, at the behest of the eminent Christian printer of Hebrew works, Daniel Bomberg. This work was titled *Mikneh Avram* and was printed shortly after de Balmes's death, alongside a Latin translation titled *Peculium Abrae*. It is noteworthy that several important European thinkers used this grammar; these included Johannes Buxtorf, Menasseh ben Israel, Benedict Spinoza, and Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont.²⁵ It is also noteworthy that this was the first Hebrew grammar to treat the importance of syntax within the construction and understanding of the Hebrew language.²⁶ The book has eight chapters and was translated, up until the beginning of the seventh, by de Balmes himself; the remainder was translated by Calo Kalonymos ben David after de Balmes's death.

De Balmes's grammatical work was influenced by the classical Hebrew grammatical tradition, by Greek and Latin grammar, by Aristotelian philosophy, and also by kabbalistic thought.²⁷ In this last regard, it is important to note that de Balmes references *Sefer yetzirah* at least four times throughout the work, and that the term *barkavah* (composition) is key to de Balmes's theory of syntax. While in Hebrew grammar, the term *barkavah* typically denotes a linguistic unit, de Balmes may also very well be deploying it in a different manner. He may be using it as a play on the concept of *ma'aseh merkavah* (the works of the chariot), which is a designation for one of Judaism's secret traditions, and which was understood by de Balmes's precursor, Abraham Abulafia, as signifying the mystical linguistic practice of letter combinations.²⁸ This reading of de Balmes

23. Ibid.

24. Heller, "Balmes," 94–95.

25. Anthony J. Klijnsmit, *Balmesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Pre-Rationalist Thought* (Amsterdam, 1992), 5.

26. For a full linguistic analysis, see Dror Ben-Aryeh, "The Linguistic Theory of Abraham de Balmes according to His Grammatical Composition *Mikneh Avram*" (Hebrew; Ph.D., diss.; Bar Ilan University, 2010).

27. Ibid., 35–36.

28. Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, N.Y., 1989), 51.

seems quite tenable, especially given that fact that, as Saverio Campanini has perspicaciously indicated, de Balmes explicitly refers to kabbalists within his grammar, albeit in an unnamed manner, but specifically in relation to “connexio et combinatio” (*hibur ve-tsiruf*).²⁹ This is a phrase directly related to the *ars combinandi* of Abraham Abulafia, and it relates back to de Balmes’s own assertion, toward the beginning of his grammar, of the superiority of the Hebrew language as utterly seemly to nature.³⁰ Hebrew grammar, for de Balmes, is more than an exercise in linguistics; it ultimately relates to the Creator in that it seeks to understand the natural language of creation itself.

De Balmes not only displayed his kabbalistic thought intermittently in his grammatical opus *Mikneh Avram*, thereby giving this kabbalistic thought a purely linguistic feel; as would perhaps be expected, he also clothed it in philosophy, giving it an Averroistic character. This he does in his epistle titled *Igeret ha-’asiriyah*, or *Epistle of the Decad*. If de Balmes’s grammar partly represents his interpretation of *ma’aseh merkavah* and linguistic Kabbalah, then perhaps it is safe to say that the epistle partly represents his interpretation of those other branches of Jewish mysticism, *ma’aseh bereshit*, or “the works of creation,” and sefirotic Kabbalah. At the outset of the epistle, de Balmes explicitly sets out his agenda as an examination of “which way the spirit of the Lord went in its certain unification, emanating and emitting and creating, in his upper wisdom, perfect creatures.”³¹ He seeks to do this by discussing the ten sefirot as first laid down in *Sefer yetzirah*. If within his grammar he expounds upon *Sefer yetzirah*’s ideas of the character of the Hebrew letters for an understanding of reality,³² here he is expounding upon *Sefer yetzirah*’s ideas of the ten sefirot *belimah* for an understanding of the Creator himself. In a sense, the two come together to make up the thirty-two paths of wisdom with which *Sefer yetzirah* begins.³³

Until recently, however, de Balmes’s exposition concerning the ten sefirot has little been discussed by scholarly literature. The independent scholar Raphael Kohen produced a Hebrew transcription of the epistle with notes and an introduction in 1998 in Jerusalem, though it was

29. Campanini, “*Peculium Abrae*,” 26.

30. Cf. Klijnsmit, *Balmesian Linguistics*, 9.

31. Abraham de Balmes, *Epistle of the Decad*, Hebrew, NYPL MS Heb. 186, 1a.

32. Abraham de Balmes, *Mikneh Avram* (Tel Aviv, 1972), 12.

33. *Sefer yetzirah* 1.1: “With thirty-two paths of wondrous wisdom Yah, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, the Living God and the King of the world, El-Shaddai, the Merciful and Long-suffering, Exalted and Lofty, who dwells forever in the heights and whose name is holy, engraved and created his world.”

printed and disseminated privately and without scholarly review.³⁴ Eminent Kabbalah scholar Moshe Idel has mentioned its importance several times in his works,³⁵ though has not given it a detailed analysis. Indeed, he has recently written: “At the beginning of the sixteenth century R. Abraham ben Me’ir de Balmes also offered an Aristotelian interpretation of the ten sefirot in his *Igeret ha-‘asiriyah*, a topic that requires detailed analysis.”³⁶ Fabrizio Lelli has begun such a process of detailed analysis, with two recent articles in Italian dedicated almost entirely to de Balmes’s epistle.³⁷ Finally, my critical translation and edition of the epistle will soon be published with the I Tatti Renaissance Library of Harvard University Press, in a compendium of kabbalistic texts of the Renaissance.³⁸ Such is the current state of research on de Balmes’s epistle, which is beginning to elucidate an often overlooked Aristotelian trend in the Jewish Kabbalah of the Italian Renaissance.

THE EPISTLE OF THE DECAD—SOURCES AND INFLUENCES

De Balmes’s kabbalistic *Epistle of the Decad* has at its foundation some discernible philosophical and mystical sources. Toward the beginning of the epistle, de Balmes cites both *Sefer yetzirah* and the aggadic midrash Pirke deRabbi Eliezer, both at length; this is in order to establish the importance of the number 10 for an understanding of the Creator and his workings. The citation from *Sefer yetzirah*, which de Balmes infuses with

34. Abraham ben Meir de Balmes and Raphael Kohen, *Igeret ha-‘asiriyah* (Jerusalem, 1998). Kohen’s edition includes a nice facsimile of the manuscript, but the transcription and the footnotes are full of errors.

35. See, for example, Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 416; Idel, “Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah between 1560 and 1660,” in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. D. Ruderman (New York, 1992), 345; and Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, Conn., 1988), 256.

36. Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 394.

37. Fabrizio Lelli, “Cabbalà e aristotelismo in Italia tra XV e XVI secolo: Le ‘radici’ nell’ *Igèret ha-‘asiriyà* (*Lettera della decade*) de Avraham ben Me’ir de Balmes,” in *Aristotle and the Aristotelian Tradition: Innovative Contexts for Cultural Tourism, Proceedings of the International Conference (Lecce, June 12–14 2008)*, ed. E. De Bellis (Soveria Mannelli, 2008), 229–42; Lelli, “Osservazioni sull’uso del termine *siyyur* in alcuni trattati cabbalistici dell’Italia rinascimentale,” *Materia giudaica* 15/16 (2010–11): 331–38.

38. This compendium will also include a version of Abraham Abulafia’s *V’zot l’Yehuda*, prepared by Brian Copenhaver and Moshe Idel; a version Egidio da Viterbo’s *De litteris hebraicis*, prepared by Daniel Stein Kokin; and a version of Elia Hayyim ben Binyamin da Genazzano’s *Igeret hamudot*, prepared by Fabrizio Lelli.

his own injunction that he then goes onto violate, namely, “do not enter into the orchard,”³⁹ seems to base the perceived importance of 10 upon a mystical pronouncement. For example, the opening of the quote from *Sefer yetzirah*, “Ten *sefirot belimah*; bridle your heart from contemplating, bridle your mouth from speaking,” seems to place the importance of these ten beyond rational thought and language. The quote from Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, however, seems to attenuate this. Referencing the significantly ten-stringed harp and lyre that King David would play in praise of God, Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer says: “The Creator, blessed is he, said, ‘I want logic in the mouths of Israel, the harp and the lyre, as it is said: *upon the logic of the lyre* (Ps 92.4).”⁴⁰ For de Balmes, mysticism and logic seem to go hand in hand in a dialectical process of simultaneous silence and explication. Since God is pure contemplation that is beyond all human contemplation, then it is precisely only through contemplation that we can paradoxically begin to fathom the uncontemplatable nature of God. This process takes place for de Balmes through a philosophical contemplation of the ten sefirot.

De Balmes explicitly references Aristotle and Averroes several times throughout the epistle, and given his Averroean background, this is certainly not surprising. By contrast, absolutely no mention is made of any specific kabbalistic work or author. When alluding to kabbalistic ideas, he usually utilizes the nondescript, abstruse epithet “wise men of truth,” rather than mentioning his specific sources. Nevertheless, it is possible to postulate at least some of the types of kabbalistic works that may have influenced the epistle. Such speculation is based on some of the concepts that de Balmes espouses, coupled with a unique manuscript compendium of Spanish kabbalistic sources that was in his possession, at least toward the end of his life. This is MS Milano-Biblioteca Ambrosiana 62 (S 13 Sup), which contains what appears to be an autographed eulogy by de Balmes for his father Meir, penned in Italian rabbinical script and written in 1521.⁴¹ While the eulogy itself was written twelve years after the epistle, it falls at the very end of the compendium on folios 150a–b and may have been an addendum to a collection that de Balmes had in his possession prior and that influenced him in the writing of his epistle. An indica-

39. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 1a.

40. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 1b. De Balmes seems to be playing upon the word *bigayon*, which in the context of Psalms indicates some type of melody, but which is a common word for “logic” in medieval Hebrew philosophical texts.

41. See Carolo Bernheimer, *Codices Hebraici Bybliothecae Ambrosianae*, no. 62 (Florence, 1933), 80. Bernheimer published this eulogy in its entirety on pp. 185–86 of this same volume.

tion of this would be the fact that some of the references that de Balmes makes in his epistle figure prominently in the Ambrosiana compendium. For example, de Balmes's allusions to "Yakhin and Bo'az" as pillars representing the seventh and eighth sefirot, and as support strengthening Solomon's temple,⁴² figure as entire subheadings in the Ambrosiana compendium.⁴³ It is thus perfectly reasonable to hypothesize a case of direct influence from a source that we know to have been in de Balmes's possession during his lifetime.

The Ambrosiana compendium that de Balmes had at his disposal includes about ten different kabbalistic pieces, among them an anonymous commentary on the ten sefirot.⁴⁴ They also include a version of Joseph Gikatilla's *Sba'are orab*,⁴⁵ which is by far the longest piece within the compendium, and which seems to have had a profound influence on de Balmes. Indeed, not only does de Balmes follow in Gikatilla's footsteps by conflating *En-Sof* and the first sefirah of Keter; he also uses much of the precise language of *Sba'are orab*. An example of this is his association of various sefirot with different prophets and forefathers, which closely resembles such association in *Sba'are orab*.⁴⁶

The Ambrosiana compendium also comprises materials from the school of the fourteenth-century Spanish kabbalist David ben Judah he-Hasid, which include two diagrams of the sefirot in four sets of concentric circles,⁴⁷ and which also may have influenced de Balmes's epistle. Evidence of this possible influence is de Balmes's statement on folio 12a of the epistle that God's unity "unifies all opposites," with "the covenant [that] was made between two opposites." This has clear resonance with the theory of *du-partzufin*, or the "dual nature" of God, as expounded by David ben Judah on folio 3b of the Ambrosiana manuscript. There, based on the *Idra rabba*, David ben Judah writes that the divine attributes of "Judgment and Mercy combine, and the male and female pleasantly comeingle in such a manner that one cannot exist without the other."⁴⁸

42. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 11a and 12a.

43. See MS Milano-Biblioteca Ambrosiana 62, 32a and 36a. These are a part of Joseph Gikatilla's *Sba'are orab*.

44. Ambrosiana, 118a–124b.

45. Ambrosiana, 10a–77a.

46. The most salient example of this parity of language is the association of Moses with the sefirah of *Tiferet*. See de Balmes, *Epistle*, 10b.

47. Ambrosiana, 2a–4b. The diagrams of the sefirot are on fols. 2a–2b.

48. This text on *du-partzufin* was published and discussed by Moshe Idel, "Kabbalistic Material from the Beit Midrash of Rabbi David ben Judah he-Hasid" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1983): 193–97.

Such ideas of *du-partusufin* as *coincidentia oppositorum* are certainly not unique to David ben Judah and indeed could have been taken from a number of sources. Nevertheless, David ben Judah is one possible source for de Balmes, and the placement of the discussion of *coincidentia oppositorum* in the epistle makes this all the more plausible.

In the passage of the epistle immediately following the idea of “two opposites,” de Balmes writes that “each and every *sefirab* counted in and of itself contains all of the ten.”⁴⁹ He expresses the same sentiment at the end of the poem with which he opens his epistle: “For in a circle is another decad within it.”⁵⁰ This idea of the sefirot as concentric circles may very well be reflective of David ben Judah’s circle diagrams on fols. 2a–2b of the Ambrosiana manuscript, which, in turn, were probably influenced by David ben Judah’s contemporary, Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi.⁵¹ In addition, the idea of each of the sefirot containing all of the other sefirot is highly characteristic of the school of thought of David ben Judah he-Hasid.⁵² For David ben Judah, the idea regards infinite sets of sefirot within sefirot, with a special supernal set within *Keter*, while for de Balmes it seems to indicate a self-contained linkage of the one set of ten, which is actually one. Nevertheless, for both, the starting point is *Keter* as *En-Sof*, which for de Balmes is “the Leader among them;”⁵³ this suggests a commonality of thought between David ben Judah and de Balmes at the very least, with a distinct possibility of literary influence.

Another possible influence upon de Balmes’s epistle is the early thirteenth-century Provençal commentary on *Sefer yetzirah* by Rabbi Isaac the Blind. Even though it does not exist in the Ambrosiana compendium, and no copy is explicitly known to have been in the hands of de Balmes, much of the language of the epistle is strikingly similar to Isaac the Blind’s commentary, as are some of the overall ideas. One case in point is the metaphorical language of “suckling” in relation to imbibing wisdom from the supernal source.⁵⁴ For both Isaac the Blind and de Balmes, this

49. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 12a.

50. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 1a.

51. See the commentary of the pseudo-Rabad (who is actually Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi) to *Sefer yetzirah* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2004), 42.

52. For a thorough discussion of this, see Moshe Idel, “Sefirot above the Sefirot” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 51 (1982): 239–80; Idel, “The Image of Man above the Sefirot: R. David ben Yehuda he-Hasid’s Theosophy of Ten Supernal *Sabwabot* and Its Reverberations,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 20 (2009): 181–212.

53. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 12a.

54. See, for example, de Balmes, *Epistle*, 10a. For more on this idea in medieval Kabbalah, especially in relation to the Zohar, see Ellen Haskell, *Suckling at My*

is a prevalent metaphor for a certain type of mystical intellection that goes beyond mere inductive or deductive reasoning and involves a self-contained, all-encompassing type of intellection.

Such metaphorical language fits into the metaphysical projects of both thinkers, who both have decidedly cognitive orientations and who both seek to conflate human and divine thought. As Mark Brian Sendor has discerningly written concerning Isaac the Blind, "He regards the *sefirot* and letters not only as categories of divine activity, but as categories of human cognition. To be precise, they are those categories of divine activity which human thought is capable of discerning."⁵⁵ Such is the case with de Balmes as well. Indeed, after a full explication of intellection with regard to God as pure intellect, intellection, and intelligible all in one and as one, de Balmes writes:

For as has already been explained in what has preceded, the intellect and the one who intellectualizes truly conjoin with the intelligible in an existential conjunction, like the matter of that which is said, *that thou may love the Lord thy God . . . and that thou may conjoin with him.*⁵⁶

It is not clear here, or in other places throughout the epistle, whether de Balmes is speaking of the intellection of God as a subjective process in which God is the intellect, the one who intellectualizes, and the intelligible. Conversely, de Balmes may be speaking of the intellection of God as an objective process, in which the human intellect intellectualizes and loves God and thus is able to conjoin with him. This blurring of the distinction between subjective and objective intellection seems rather deliberate. Just as for Isaac the Blind, the *sefirot* are categories of both divine activity and human cognition, for de Balmes, the conflation of subjective and objective intellection as reflected in the *sefirot* is what allows us to understand God as pure intellect through our intellects and is what conversely allows God to somehow relate to his creation. This whole process ultimately ends and begins in a state in which one *may conjoin with him*, in a state of *unio mystica*, in which all boundaries are blurred, and all relates to the One, and in a sense becomes one.

Mother's Breasts: The Image of a Nursing God in Jewish Mysticism (Albany, N.Y., 2012).

55. Mark Brian Sendor, "The Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah: Rabbi Isaac the Blind's Commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1994), 2:2.

56. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 10b. The biblical reference here is to Dt 30.20.

STRUCTURE OF THE EPISTLE

De Balmes's *Epistle of the Decad* is extant in a single manuscript that is now housed at the New York Public Library.⁵⁷ The epistle is in Italian cursive script; according to Hartwig Hirschfeld, who was an early twentieth-century cataloguer at the manuscript's former home in the Montefiore library of London, it is an autograph copy.⁵⁸ Hirschfeld surmises this based on the date hinted to at the end of the document, where de Balmes writes: "I write today, Sunday, the tenth counting of the sons of Israel, the pericope *Kedoshim tehiyu*, 'you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,' in the year that *my doctrine shall drop as the rain* (Dt 32.2)." The Hebrew word for "as the rain" numerically equals 269, hinting at the Hebrew year 5269, which is 1509 according to secular reckoning. This does not necessarily indicate an autograph, as a careful scribe copying several years later could have just as easily copied this information verbatim, but it does indeed give us a precise time for the composition of the epistle itself; and indeed, the time of composition is revealing: before any clear record of de Balmes's activity in Venice and Padova, and after any clear record of his sojourn in Naples. Thus, it seems to have been written at a transitional period in de Balmes's life, after his schooling in Naples but before his Averroistic translations for Grimani, and certainly before his composition of his grammar, *Mikneh Avram*.

Toward the beginning of the epistle, de Balmes writes that his goal is to elucidate "how those who are created conjoin with those who are emitted and emanated and brought forth through thinking."⁵⁹ Such language of emission and emanation in relation to creation seems to fly in the face of de Balmes's Aristotelianism, leaning more in the direction of Neoplatonism. Was de Balmes entering into the Neoplatonic exploits of his contemporary fellow Aristotelian, David, the son of his own Aristotelian teacher Judah Messer Leon? It is possible. As Herbert Davidson has explained, medieval Islamic Aristotelianism usually contains a strong Neoplatonic addition. "The added feature," writes Davidson, "is the linking of the several levels of existence through emanation. The intelligences are understood to be brought into existence by the first cause of the universe through a process of emanation."⁶⁰ As de Balmes was a staunch

57. New York Public Library MS Heb. 186 (formerly London Montefiore 291).

58. Hartwig Hirschfeld, *The Hebrew Mss. of the Montefiore Library* (London, 1904), 91.

59. Balmes, *Epistle*, 1a.

60. Herbert Davidson, "Medieval Jewish Philosophy in the Sixteenth Century," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. B. D. Cooperman (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 108.

Averroist, such Aristotelianized Neoplatonic ideas may have filtered into his ruminations. Notwithstanding, unlike David ben Judah, de Balmes never mentions Plato, and throughout de Balmes's epistle, Aristotle, as filtered through Averroes, remains indomitable.

Regardless, it is important to keep in mind that the unification of notions such as creation and emanation stands at the heart of de Balmes's overall project. At the time of the composition of the epistle, an ongoing controversy thundered in Italy regarding the nature of the sefirot,⁶¹ and people who were a part of de Balmes's intellectual milieu were involved in the debate. Yohanan Alemanno, who was also a fellow student of Judah Messer Leon, tended toward the opinion that the sefirot are instruments of divine activity; in his formulation, they are ontologically distinct from God.⁶² The aforementioned Aristotelian son of Judah, David Messer Leon, held to a theory of the sefirot as the essence of God;⁶³ this was against the idea that they are merely divine instruments.

De Balmes's *Epistle of the Decad* can be read in light of this debate and can be seen as his own interjection. For him, everything starts not in the sefirot but in ten "roots" that derive from and approach the divine essence. From these emanate ten "extensions," and then, finally, ten "depictions," which are related to the sefirot. These latter are, in a manner of speaking, "tools" that are used not necessarily by God but by adepts to understand God's essence. Here de Balmes interestingly deviates from both the emanationist reading and the creationist reading, which both place the sefirot at God's service, whether as a part of his essence or as his tools. For de Balmes, the tools are in the hands of the adepts, and since they are used in an essential manner of intellection, concepts of "tools" and "essences" are somehow unified in his thought.

Regardless of such unification, the epistle is roughly divided into four sections of ten subsections each, as based on the ten roots, the ten extensions, the ten depictions, and the ten sefirot. While the first two deal mainly with abstract notions of intellection on the human, celestial, and divine planes, the last two deal more directly with depictions of the divine as made available to human intellection.

INTELLECTION AND INTELLIGIBLES

The first of the four sections of the epistle is by far the longest and sets down certain philosophical principles, or what de Balmes calls "root

61. For an extensive treatment of this controversy, see Idel, "Between the View," 89–111.

62. *Ibid.*, 95.

63. Tirosch-Rothschild, "Sefirot as the Essence of God," 409–25. This essay outlines a theory of Aristotelian cognition in relation to Kabbalah that is strikingly similar to that espoused by de Balmes.

terms," that are important for his overall exposition.⁶⁴ One recent scholar has read de Balmes's idea of "roots" as possibly influenced by the philosophy of the early fifteenth-century Spanish Jewish philosopher Joseph Albo.⁶⁵ This is based on Albo's usage of the term "roots" in relation to his three principles as set down in chapter 4 of the first part of his *Book of Principles*.⁶⁶ An alternative view has been posited by another scholar, who sees the possible influence of the eleventh-century Spanish Jewish writer Bahya ibn Pakuda. This view is based on Bahya's famed treatise *Duties of the Heart*, which begins with "ten roots" that unify in regard to the duties of the hearts of the devout.⁶⁷ Both of these theories are certainly plausible, especially given the fact that de Balmes is known to have been in possession of both Albo's *Book of Principles* and Bahya's *Duties of the Heart*.⁶⁸ Notwithstanding, given de Balmes's reference, toward the end of the first section, to God as "the tree upon which all depends,"⁶⁹ and given his later statement in regard to the sefirot, considering heretics as "those who cut the shoots of this tree"⁷⁰ of depictions, another explanation ensues. Perhaps de Balmes is simply painting a metaphorical picture of God as a complex tree, with the roots as its foundation and the sefirot as its visible fruits.

Whatever the case may be, this first section on roots deals primarily with Aristotelian notions of intellection. This is from the side of God, from the side of humanity, and from the side of the separate intellects. From the side of God, for example, de Balmes writes that "His intelli-

64. For an extensive treatment of this first section, see Lelli, "Cabbalà e aristotelismo."

65. Raphael Kohen, "Introduction" to his edition of the *Epistle of the Decad* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1998), 9.

66. Joseph Albo, *Book of Principles* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1984), 1:55–60: "It seems to me that the correct manner of counting the principles, which are the *roots* and foundations of the divine Torah, is to say that the encompassing and necessary principles for the divine religion are three. These are the existence of the Lord, divine providence in relation to reward and punishment, and the fact that the Torah is from heaven . . . These three principles are the *root* and foundation of faith."

67. Lelli, "Cabbalà e aristotelismo," 236.

68. Schmelzer, "A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Book List," 92.

69. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 5a. Cf. *Sefer ha-bahir*, ed. R. Margaliot (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1978), 1:22. There, the *Bahir* states: "I am the one who planted this tree so that I and the whole world would delight in it. I established in it everything and I called it All . . . for everything is dependent upon it and everything comes out from it." (Translation from Elliot Wolfson, "The Tree That Is All: Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbol in *Sefer ha-Bahir*," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 [1993]: 48).

70. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 10a.

gence is the Cause of existence,"⁷¹ and that "all that the first existent does will only be done by way of some type of intellection."⁷² From the side of humanity, for example, de Balmes writes that "the more known to us will precede the more hidden,"⁷³ and that "representations are not in our intellects according to their singular, simple and absolute existence, but according to their existence within us."⁷⁴ From the side of the separate intellects, for example, de Balmes writes that "the intellection of all the separate intellects, except the First, which is the divine, may his name be blessed, is of a separate intelligible in some manner."⁷⁵ Here de Balmes seems to be making a distinction between God as the First intellect and all the other intellects. Indeed, he writes that "the essence of the upper is separate from the essence of the lower," and that "since the upper is separate from the lower, the intellection of all of the separate intellects that are below the First includes some type of division."⁷⁶ Nevertheless, toward the end of this section, de Balmes writes that God's unity "unifies all of the existents within him," and that "multiple entities return to the One in order to unify him."⁷⁷ Division, then, is only perceptual, and this idea of unifying intellection in relation to God, humanity, and the separate intellects sets the tone for the entire epistle.

The second section of the epistle concentrates on what de Balmes calls ten *nimabakhim*, or extensions. The word *nimabakh*, translated as "extension," is one of the lesser-employed terms within the Hebrew philosophical tradition as used to denote some type of emanation from, and natural linkage to, something that is an ontological precedent.⁷⁸ In Samuel ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, for example, the term is used in its verbal form to refer to time as "extended" from movement; it is also used as a verbal noun to refer to embodied intellection within time as an "extension" of its existence on a metaphysical plane. There Maimonides writes: "Time extends from motion . . . and everything that arises in the intellect is from an extension of its existence

71. Ibid., 1b.

72. Ibid., 2a.

73. Ibid., 1b.

74. Ibid., 2a.

75. Ibid., 4b.

76. Ibid., 5a.

77. Ibid., 5a.

78. Abraham Even-Shoshan, *The New Dictionary: A Full Anthology of the Literary, Scientific, and Spoken Hebrew Language, Aramaic and Hebrew Idioms and Sayings, and International Terms* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1997), 1:380; cf. Abraham Bibago, *Derekh ha-emunah* 2:6; David ben Judah Messer Leon, Tehillah l'David, cited in Tirosh-Rothschild, *Between Worlds*, 172.

prior to the creation of the world."⁷⁹ De Balmes seems to be using the term in this philosophical sense of emanation in reference to his ten "extensions" that derive from, and are naturally linked to, their ontological precedents in the ten roots.

While de Balmes's roots refer mainly to intellection in the abstract realm, his extensions refer mainly to intelligibles from the realm of existence. For de Balmes, these are essentially "things that are in material existence," that "do not conjoin with their intellection; they are multiple in existence, and from the aspect of existence, and in representation, and also in speech."⁸⁰ This is in regard to their existence outside the intellect; but their existence in the intellect through the process of intellection is one existence. This is especially so in regard to God, in whom the intelligible "has its existence conjoin with the divine intellect in existence and from the aspect of existence and in representation"; in this case, the whole process of multiplicity reverses itself. De Balmes reiterates that "difference is in the aspects of existence alone,"⁸¹ but it does not apply to intelligibles as intellectualized. In the divine intellect, this is pure and simple, while in the human intellect, intelligibles "differ from the aspect of speech alone."⁸² While we certainly approach the divine through intellection, our finite, embodied intellects cannot fully grasp the sense of infinite, simple unity that characterizes pure intellection; rather, our intellects depend, in the process, upon those precise "forms of speech" that differ, which de Balmes says "are more suitably named *ṭīyur*, or *depiction*."⁸³ Through such intermediaries, the human mind can abstract the unity of the First Existent.

DEPICTION, SPEECH, AND REPRESENTATION

De Balmes posits ten *ṭīyurim*, or depictions, that mediate in the process of human intellectual abstraction in regard to God.⁸⁴ Unlike the roots and the extensions, which deal with processes of intellection on both the divine and on the human planes, these depictions are descriptions of the divine as an intellectualizing essence, which present themselves to the human intellect. One theory, based on the Arabic word *ṭawṣūf*, which

79. Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* (Hebrew; translated from the Arabic by Samuel ibn Tibbon, Sabionetta, 1553, repr. Jerusalem, 1960), 30a.

80. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 5b.

81. *Ibid.*, 6b.

82. *Ibid.*, 6a.

83. *Ibid.*, 7a.

84. For a detailed analysis of the usage of the term *ṭīyur* by de Balmes, as well as by some of his contemporaries, see Lelli, "Osservazioni."

is a cognate for *tsiyur* and which in its medieval philosophical context means “conceptualization,” holds that de Balmes’s usage of the term refers to “conceptual representations.”⁸⁵ According to this theory, these representations bring de Balmes to combine Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic exegesis; separate intellects and Neoplatonic forms meet, and where logical categories and causes end, emanations and ideas begin.⁸⁶

Such a theory has great consonance with the thought of de Balmes’s contemporary Isaac Abravanel. Indeed, in 1506, a mere three years before Balmes drafted his own epistle, Abravanel wrote an epistle in which he equated the sefirot with the Platonic forms as extant within the divine mind. Explicitly utilizing the term *tsiyur*, Abrabanel tellingly wrote concerning the “image of God”:

The existence of a thing is necessarily in [the form of] an active depiction, before the existence of that action is actually active. And this “image” [of God] is without a doubt the world of the *sefirot*, which were mentioned by the wise men of truth; these are divine depictions, through which the world was created. Thus, they said that the *sefirot* are not created, but are emanated, and that all of them are unified within him, may he be blessed. For they are the depiction of his righteousness and his will in regard to that which he created. This was truly the idea of the separate, all-encompassing forms that Plato set down, and it is not as Aristotle understood from this.⁸⁷

For Abravanel here, just as for de Balmes, the sefirot are synonymous with “divine depictions” that unify within God. Not only does God relate to his creation through these depictions but, for both Abravanel and de Balmes, it is through such depictions that humanity can at least approach an understanding of God. These striking similarities may indicate some type of influence, or at least a common source.⁸⁸ Unlike Abravanel, how-

85. Ibid., 331, 333.

86. Ibid., 335–36.

87. Isaac Abravanel, *Questions of the wise and honorable Saul Ha-Kohen, may his memory be for the world to come, which he asked from the universal sage, the great minister of the people of Israel, the divine philosopher, sir Isaac Abravanel, may his memory be for the world to come* (Hebrew; Venice, 1574), 12b.

88. Another contemporaneous source that utilizes the term *tsiyur* is one of the versions of an epistle purported by Moshe Idel to have been written by Isaac of Pisa. Nevertheless, in this epistle, the author only writes of four *tsiyurim* and does not link them directly to the sefirot. Instead, they seem to denote four general principles. See Moshe Idel, “The Epistle of Rabbi Isaac of Pisa (?) in Its Three Versions” (Hebrew), *Kovets ‘Al Yad* 10.20 (1982):170, 188.

ever, de Balmes greatly diverges in that he does not see Aristotle as mistaken and Plato as correct. As such, for de Balmes, a different understanding of “depiction” than the classical Neoplatonic model must ensue. This is especially apparent when considering de Balmes’s theory of speech and depiction, in contradistinction to similar theories in contemporaneous Neoplatonic thought.

In regard to speech and depiction, Yoḥanan Alemanno writes in a Neoplatonic vein: “Speech and verbal expression are representations of the internal depiction that emanates outward and is revealed.”⁸⁹ For Alemanno, speech is a mere representation, or imitation (*ḥikūi*), of something that happens deeper within the mind. On the celestial plane, the deeper depiction begins in the divine mind in the form of Platonic ideas and emanates outward into the earthly realm in the form of representation in speech. Elsewhere within this same treatise, Alemanno elaborates:

Moses wrote his book, the book of the Torah, as a copyist, and not as an author, like the other prophets who authored all that which the Lord had spoken to them. To this purpose, they each mentioned the name of the author, for fame and for glory. But Moses wrote and God spoke, for the simple, spiritual existence that is depicted in the supernal source emanates and comes forth into the plural plane of existence of the intelligible and the perceptible, whereas it was one in the divine depiction. For speech is its representation, as it says: *By the speech of the Lord were the heavens made* (Ps 33.6).⁹⁰

God’s depiction in-itself is one and perfect. As it emanates outward in the act of speech, it takes on a plural form and becomes a less perfect representation (*ḥikūi*) of its ontologically more perfect self in God’s mind. According to this theory, there necessarily exists an unbridgeable gap between the one who represents his depictions, who is singular and perfect in himself as related to the singular and perfect character of his depiction, and his representation of his depiction as it comes forth into the plural plane of existence.

In stark contrast to this Neoplatonic characterization of depiction, speech, and representation as set forth by Alemanno, de Balmes writes:

And those forms of speech are more suitably named *depiction* and *impression* (*tsiyur v’riḥbum*) than if they were named *representation* (*ḥikūi*).

89. Yoḥanan Alemanno, *Enc ha-edah*, MS Paris 270, 22b.

90. *Ibid.*, 8b.

This is because the name *representation* teaches about the matter of one who represents. And within the divine, blessed is he, there is no matter of one who represents as differing from the representation, even though our intellect cannot imagine this, except by way of depictions and impressions that differ within us.⁹¹

The distinction is subtle yet crucial. Alemanno's Neoplatonic characterization portrays a top-down emanation, from the One to the many. De Balmes's more Aristotelian trend portrays a bottom-up form of conceptualization that begins in the human world of plurality and attempts to rise to an understanding of the divine.

For thinkers like Alemanno and Abravanel, the latter of whom claims that Plato got it right while Aristotle got it wrong, "the existence of a thing is necessarily in [the form of] an active depiction, before the existence of that action is actually active."⁹² In Alemanno's formulation, the actually active action of the depiction about which Abravanel writes comes through the act of speech and allows for creation. To use a commonplace Neoplatonic metaphor, for both Alemanno and Abravanel, divine depictions act as the blueprint by which the world was created.

In contrast to both Alemanno and Abravanel, de Balmes turns the order on its head. This reversal of order hearkens back to his question of representation in speech. If, for de Balmes, God is beyond representation, then so too would his depiction be completely and totally unattainable. The unbridgeable gap as perceived by de Balmes would make such Neoplatonic theorizing somewhat futile. Even if divine depiction does stem from God, there is no possible way that we can know of it, for its representation is not the same as it is in-itself. Nevertheless, de Balmes holds that depictions are necessary for us to be able to cognize the unrepresented, undifferentiated God that is essentially beyond all true depiction in representation.

What, then, for de Balmes, are these depictions if they are not Platonic ideas? The answer to this question does indeed seem to refer to an understanding of the Arabic philosophical term *tasāwwur*, which is a cognate for the Hebrew *twiyur*, and with which I began this section. Nevertheless, given de Balmes's explication of the representational gap in regard to divine depiction, it seems as though he does not understand this term as "conceptual representation" in such a manner that would lead to Neoplatonic ideation. Rather, his understanding seems to relate back to Aristot-

91. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 7a.

92. Abravanel, *Questions*, 12b.

le's concept of noesis (νόησις), as filtered through Averroes. As Harry Austryn Wolfson has observed regarding Averroes's rendering of noesis in Aristotle's *De Anima* III, 6, "the term νόησις in this passage was translated by *taswir*, for in the Latin it is *formare* and in the Hebrew *zayer*. By *formare* and its underlying Arabic *taswir* is meant here the process of forming a concept in the mind."⁹³ It is known that shortly before his death, de Balmes translated Averroes's short commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* for Domenico Grimani,⁹⁴ and it stands to reason that he would have been quite familiar with the Averroean-Aristotelian connection between *taswir* and noesis. Indeed, it seems to be in this manner that he is employing the Hebrew cognate *tsiyur* in relation to the sefirot.

The problem with understanding *tsiyur* in the abstract as noesis is that de Balmes writes of a particular plurality of *tsiyurim*, depictions. One possible explanation is that when positing the idea of depictions, de Balmes is indeed referring to noesis, but his reference is not abstract; rather, it is in the form of *phantasms*, which lead to a noetic understanding of the abstract divine intellect. Indeed, the idea of the phantasm is derived from the Greek work *phantazō* (φαντάζω), to make visible, which directly relates to the Hebrew word *tsiyur*. The phantasm participates in the process of abstraction by making data visible and available to the intellect, analogous to the noetic process described by de Balmes in relation to the depictions.

In Aristotelian philosophy, the idea of the phantasm is directly related to noesis and is based on that which Aristotle ascertained in chapter 7 of the third book of the *De Anima*: "To the thinking soul images [or alternately, phantasms] serve as if they were contents of perception . . . That is why the soul never thinks without an image [or alternately, a phantasm]."⁹⁵ He goes on to state that this is true for not only material entities but also "so-called abstract objects" as well. In this regard, he states, for example, that "the mind when it is thinking the objects of mathematics thinks of them as separate though they are not separate."⁹⁶ If this is the case regarding "so-called abstract objects" like the objects of mathematics, then phantasms could also presumably be applied to God. For de

93. Harry Austryn Wolfson, "The Terms *Tasawwur* and *Tasdiq* in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents," *Moslem World* 33.2 (1943): 120.

94. *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy between 500 and 1500*, ed. H. Lagerlund (Dordrecht, 2011), 505.

95. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. J. A. Smith, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 1, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, N.J., 1984), 685.

96. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 686.

Balmes, this seems to be the case, and just like the objects of mathematics, which seem separate but are actually not separate, God is also perceived by way of separate depictions, even though they are not truly separate in him.

The Aristotelian reading of phantasms as related to intellection was picked up by the likes of Thomas Aquinas⁹⁷ and would prove to have enormous influence in subsequent generations of philosophical speculation.⁹⁸ It most certainly held popular sway during the Italian Renaissance,⁹⁹ and it is reasonable to assume that de Balmes would have been familiar with it. As the historian of religion Ioan Culianu has perceptively noted regarding the complex relation between phantasms, the intellect, and the process of intellection, “the phantasm has absolute primacy over the word,” and “stemming from the soul, itself phantasmatic in essence, intellect alone enjoys the privilege of understanding the phantasmatic grammar.”¹⁰⁰ This characterization perfectly fits de Balmes’s project in regard to his depictions, which ultimately serve to be understood by the intellect and to provide a key for the human soul to get beyond its own phantasmatic essence. Thus, de Balmes’s turn to the ten depictions is not a sudden move from Neoaristotelianism to Neoplatonism; rather, it is a part of his unified attempt to deal with the complex issue of intellection in regard to both the human and the divine.

De Balmes first sets down his depictions as philosophical propositions, such as the idea that God “is an intellectual potential that is separate and exalted above everything.”¹⁰¹ In this section of the epistle, absolutely no kabbalistic language enters into the picture, and at first glance, it would certainly seem that de Balmes is discussing a realm or structure of ten that is distinct from the sefirot.¹⁰² However, further analysis reveals that for de Balmes, the depictions and the sefirot refer to a corresponding

97. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, revised by D. J. Sullivan (Chicago, 1952), q. 85, 451–61.

98. For an excellent survey of the history of the concept, see Ioan P. Culianu, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* (Chicago, 1987), 3–25.

99. Even Marsilio Ficino, the exemplar of Italian Renaissance Neoplatonism, held to the standard Aristotelian hierarchy of abstraction from sense perception to intellection, utilizing the idea of the phantasm. Paul Richard Blum notes that in scholastic fashion, he wrote that “particular concepts of the phantasy are called . . . the bodiless intentions of bodies.” *Platonic Theology* II: 265, quoted in Paul Richard Blum, “The Immortality of the Soul,” in *Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, 214.

100. Coulianu, *Eros and Magic*, 5–6.

101. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 7b.

102. Cf. Kohen, “Introduction,” 16.

matter. Evidence for this is his common usage of the term “depictions” for both sets of ten. Further evidence comes toward the beginning of the epistle, where de Balmes writes: “And we will first say that it is important to set down root terms that are ten in number, and ten extensions from them, and *ten necessary depictions conjoined to the ten sefirot*, all of which will be unified in the exposition of these words.”¹⁰³ From the outset, the depictions are conjoined by de Balmes to the ten sefirot. Moreover, at the conclusion of the third section of the epistle, which consists of descriptions of the ten depictions as philosophical propositions, de Balmes writes: “The masters of the wisdom of the Kabbalah, who are the wise men of the Truth, called them *sefirot*.”¹⁰⁴ Here he is talking specifically about the depictions, which is a term he then uses throughout the fourth section of his epistle to refer to the sefirot. Thus, the depictions and the sefirot are not two separate realms; rather, they are two different ways of referring to the same cognitive phenomenon.

One way of explaining such parity would be the conflation of the divine intellect with the human intellect in the process of noesis. In this process, the depictions as phantasms become indistinguishable from the sefirot as divine entities. Such a model is partly explained by Abravanel, who in a different context writes: “The model of the divine depiction is within the human. For this reason, it is said about him [i.e., the human] that he is in the image of God, for within him are all of the perfections that exist in the divine depiction.”¹⁰⁵ Even though Abravanel’s divine depiction within the human relates back to the Neoplatonic Ideas by which God’s influx enters into the created realm, the message is very similar to that of de Balmes’s Averroean reading. For de Balmes, since the human is created in the divine image, the divine imaginal phantasms, which are depictions synonymous with sefirot, lead to a true state of *unio mystica* in an Aristotelian form of intellectual conjunction for the noetic adept. Where the human intellectual process ends and the divine intellect begins seems to be deliberately unclear for de Balmes.

Hints of this parity between human depictions as set out in the third section of the *Epistle* and the divine sefirot as explicated in the fourth part can already be detected in the third section. For example, the second depiction is described there as “that which is within its [i.e., the First Intellect’s] reach to intellectualize.”¹⁰⁶ This seems to be directly related to

103. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 1b.

104. *Ibid.*, 9b.

105. Isaac Abravanel, *Commentary on the Torah, Volume 1: Genesis* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2007), 117.

106. De Balmes, *Epistle*, 7a.

the sefirah of *Hokhmah*, which is God's divine Wisdom. The fourth depiction is that "through which he desires the pleasant good through the action of the absolute will."¹⁰⁷ In kabbalistic thought, this is highly characteristic of the sefirah of *Hesed*, which is divine Mercy. The fifth "negates falsehood," similar to *Gevurah*, divine judgment, and the sixth is a "mean that mediates the difference" between the fourth and the fifth, exactly as the sixth sefirah acts as a mediator. The seventh "limits the second and the fourth depictions together,"¹⁰⁸ just as the seventh sefirah, *Netzah*, aligns with the second and the fourth, *Hokhmah* and *Hesed*, respectively. Finally, the tenth is "the King of the battalion . . . who receives the power of all of the nine depictions mentioned."¹⁰⁹ This clearly parallels *Malkhut*, which is Kingship, and which is the passive receiver within the sefirotic hierarchy.

Toward the end of his epistle, when he is finished explicating the sefirot, de Balmes warns his reader: "One should not derive plurality from their depiction, nor any form of corporeality, God forbid." He goes on to state: "If you have brought forth depictions within your intellect in order to depict him, you will not be able to depict him as he is in himself, but rather as that which you estimate him to be according to his emanation to those who are emanated from him."¹¹⁰ De Balmes seems to be caught in an exegetical quandary. God is only graspable to the human mind through a plurality of ten depictions, but those threaten to cast God as a plurality, and as a possible corporeality. This is especially so if we understand the depictions as phantasmatic stages in the process of abstraction, which often involve a plurality of corporeal entities.

In the end, for de Balmes, God as he is in himself is ultimately beyond all depiction, and is thus beyond all human intellection. The closest that one can get through such a process is to an understanding of his emanation. If such emanation is not of Neoplatonic formal character, as has been argued above, then what de Balmes means by this is not entirely clear, though it may be a reference back to the extensions that ultimately derive from the roots. What is clear is that for de Balmes, "the Master of *Malkhut*, 'Kingship,' and *Hesed*, 'Mercy,' is unified, and unifies in his intellect that intellectualizes itself." Outside of him, "there is no existing intellect that can depict him at all."¹¹¹ For de Balmes, the best we can do is to

107. Ibid.

108. Ibid., 8b.

109. Ibid., 9a.

110. Ibid., 11b.

111. Ibid., 12a.

assert the unity of God's intellect that is beyond human intellection, and his essence that is beyond knowing. If depiction and intellection cannot lead to such a true knowledge and understanding, then perhaps it can at least lead to an assertion of the ultimate unknowability and unity of God. This seems to be an underlying theme of the *Epistle of the Decad*, which seeks to unify God through a markedly Aristotelian processes of ten.