

## Kabbalistic Symbolism in the Tarot, Part II: The Wheels

By Jeffrey R. Day — August 31, 2020.

If you haven't yet read Part I: Rectifying the Tarot, I would recommend doing so before proceeding, as it will demonstrate how to arrive at the card-to-letter scheme used in this article. I have included that scheme again here as Table 1, for ease of reference. If you disagree with some of these correspondences, however, I trust that the present topic will also stand largely on its own, mostly independent of the cards themselves.

**Table 1. The Day Rectified Tarot. (Traditional names are given in parenthesis for clarity.)**

A	1 - The Performer (Magician)	<b>AIR</b>	L	30 - Justice	<i>Libra</i>
B	2 - The Old Man / Prudence	<b>Saturn</b>	M	40 - The World	<b>WATER</b>
G	3 - The Lightning-Struck Tower	<b>Jupiter</b>	N	50 - Death	<i>Scorpio</i>
D	4 - The Emperor	<b>Mars</b>	S	60 - Temptation (The Lovers)	<i>Sagittarius</i>
H	5 - Osiris, High Priest (Pope)	<i>Aries</i>	O	70 - The Devil	<i>Capricorn</i>
V	6 - Isis, High Priestess (Popess)	<i>Taurus</i>	P	80 - The Empress	<b>Venus</b>
Z	7 - Solar Twins (The Sun)	<i>Gemini</i>	TZ	90 - The Star	<i>Aquarius</i>
CH	8 - High Tide (The Moon)	<i>Cancer</i>	Q	100 - The Chariot	<i>Pisces</i>
T	9 - Fortitude (Strength)	<i>Leo</i>	R	200 - The Fool	<b>Mercury</b>
I	10 - Fortune (The Wheel)	<i>Virgo</i>	SH	300 - The Trumpet	<b>FIRE</b>
K	20 - The Hanged-Man	<b>Sun</b>	TH	400 - Temperance	<b>Moon</b>

Alchemy has often been summarized as the pursuit of a method to transmute base matter into Gold. Most occultists recognize this as a metaphor for a personal transmutation of the soul, which is termed the accomplishment of the Summum Bonum, or the Great Work.

**Table 2. Planets, Alchemical Metals, Greek Gods, the Week.**

Saturn	♄	Lead	Cronus	Saturday
Venus	♀	Copper	Aphrodite	Friday
Jupiter	♃	Tin	Zeus	Thursday
Mercury	♁	Quicksilver	Hermes	Wednesday
Mars	♂	Iron	Ares	Tuesday
The Moon	☾	Silver	Selene	Monday
The Sun	☉	Gold	Helios	Sunday

The history of Alchemy is too involved to fully develop here, but it has been around since at least the first century CE, and from that period, has been co-developed along with western Astrology. For example, the seven planets are identified with seven metals, and share the same symbol as their corresponding planet, as shown in Table 2.

The early Hebrew alphabet is descended from the Proto-Sinaitic script, the earliest known form of alphabetic writing, which is itself derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs. I have reproduced a version of this pictogram alphabet, along with the equivalent modern Hebrew character, a transliteration, the name of the letter and some possible meanings of the pictograms in Table 3.

**Table 3. Proto-Sinaitic Script, Transliteration, and Pictogram Meanings**

		A	<b>Alef</b> Ox-Head			L	<b>Lamed</b> Whip/Prod
		B	<b>Bet</b> House			M	<b>Mem</b> Water
		G	<b>Gimel</b> Camel/Foot			N	<b>Nun</b> Snake/Fish
		D	<b>Dalet</b> Door Hanging			S	<b>Samekh</b> Tether
		H	<b>He</b> Lo/Window			'	<b>Eyin</b> Eye
		V	<b>Vav</b> And/Fastener			P	<b>Pe</b> Mouth
		Z	<b>Zeyin</b> Weapon/Plow			Tz	<b>Tzadi</b> Fish-Hook
		Kh	<b>Khet</b> Wall*			Q	<b>Quf</b> Nape/Nemes
		T	<b>Tet</b> Clay/Basket			R	<b>Resh</b> Head/Top
		Y	<b>Yud</b> Hand/Arm			Sh	<b>Shin</b> Teeth/Bow
		K	<b>Kaf</b> To Cup/Palm			Th	<b>Tav</b> Mark/Cross

Some of these pictograms have universally accepted meanings, such as Alef, which is the head of an ox, Mem, a representation of water, or Vav, a fastener such as a nail or peg. Many of the meanings listed are reinforced by Hebrew words cognate with the name of the letter. For example, the word for house in Hebrew is “beyt.” However, I must point out that not all of the pictogram’s meanings are agreed upon. Quf is particularly mysterious, and is speculated to be one of many diverse representations, ranging from a monkey, to the eye of a needle, to the back of a person’s head. Dalet might originate either from a pictogram of a fish or a different pictogram of a door, however, the word Dalet in Hebrew means door, so I have chosen to include that version in the table.

I would like to take the three groups of letters from *Sefer Yetzirah* and look at their pictogram meanings. For this exercise, I will choose just one meaning for each letter.

Mother Letters:

Ox, Water, Teeth.

Double Letters:

House, Foot, Door, Palm, Mouth, Head, Mark.

Simple Letters:

Lo!, Fastener, Weapon, Wall, Basket, Arm,  
Whip, Snake, Tether, Eye, Fish-Hook, Nape.

How are the three primordial elements of Air, Water and Fire related to the three ancient pictograms of the mother letters, and the three contemporary Hebrew letters?

The Torah begins, “In the beginning God created the heaven (shamiym) and the earth (aretz). Now the earth (aretz) was unformed (tohu) and void (bohu), and darkness was upon the face of the deep (tehom); and the spirit (ruakh) of God hovered over the face of the waters (miym).” (JPS, with some transliterated Hebrew words given in parenthesis.)

**Tohu and Bohu**, which are translated as unformed and void in the JPS, are actually impossible for us to translate with much certainty. Perhaps a more appropriate translation in considering the elements would be “brine” and “mud.”

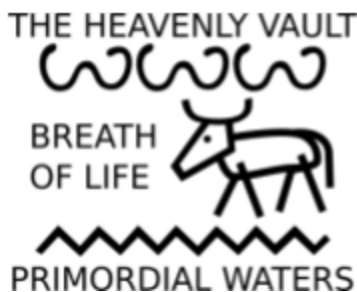
**Tohu** is the root word from which **Tehom** (the deep, the abyss) is derived, and is cognate with Tiamat, a Sea Monster from the Babylonian Creation Myth, representing Chaos. This Sea Monster is also known as Leviathan, by which name it is mentioned in Job, Psalms, and Isaiah.

**Bohu** is the root word from which Behemoth, another primordial monster, this one, land-dwelling, and is paired together with Tiamat in the book of Job.

**Miym.** Water falls from the sky to the ground, forming puddles, streams, rivers, and lakes, continuing downward by the force of gravity until reaching the sea. It is a cool source of refreshment, and the apparent source of life.

**Shamiym** refers to the heavens. It begins with the letter Shin. The heavens are the place where the Sun, Moon and Stars are placed later in the Genesis account. The sound of air hissing through the teeth resembles the sound of a roaring fire. Fire rises, flames move upwards, consuming. Food is cooked on a fire, and teeth are used to consume food. We can feel the heat of the sun beating down upon us from above. Fire, and teeth, are both apparent destructive forces. Shin in the modern Hebrew alphabet looks like flames of fire.

**Figure 1. Mother Letters**



**Aretz.** Cattle dwell upon the dry land, and is the first named beast in Genesis which does so. It occupies the space which remains between the vault of the heavens and the gathered primordial waters (See Figure 1.) Living creatures come forth from the earth and are filled with the breath (ruakh) of life.

Much could be said about the mother letters, but considering this a satisfactory groundwork, let us proceed to examine the double letters. I will do some association of ideas and see what can be found. For the moment, I'm going to let go of the idea that the letters should match with the planets given in *Sefer Yetzirah*, but I will return to that principle before drawing any final conclusions.

Bet - House - Family, Shelter, Offspring, Fertility. Could this be **Venus, The Empress?**

Gimel - Foot - Nomad, Traveler, Vagrant. Could this be **Mercury, The Fool?**

Dalet - Door - Doorpost and Curtain, Veil, Hidden. Separator of that which is Familiar from that which is Foreign. There isn't enough here for an obvious connection.

Kaf - Palm - To Touch or Hold? There isn't enough here for an obvious connection.

Pe - Mouth - To Speak? There isn't enough here for an obvious connection.

Resh - Head - Crown or Helmet, Leader. Could this be **Mars, The Emperor?**

Tav - Mark - Placed upon the forehead in Ezekiel 9:4. This could be **The Sun, The Hanged Man**, for reasons touched upon in Part I. Forehead, Thought, Signifier of Life or of Death.

These observations are not entirely satisfactory to come to a complete set of planetary connections, so as in Part I, I shall once again consider the simple letters first, and then come back to the planets at the end.

I will begin by looking at the simple letters intuitively, based on our understanding of the pictograms, without giving heed to *Sefer Yetzirah's* associations.

He - Lo! - Drawing attention to things, teaching, prophecy.

Vav - Fastener - A pair, joined together. Could refer to **Gemini** (the Sun) or **Pisces** (the Chariot.)

Zeyin - Weapon - An instrument of offense, could be the Chariot card (although Pisces taken alone doesn't seem to fit), or the claws of the Lobster of **Cancer** (the Moon.)

Khet - Wall - protection, defense, fortitude, **Leo** (Fortitude, or Strength.)

Tet - Basket - harvest, bounty or famine, **Virgo** (Fortune, the Wheel.)

Yod - Arm - No connection seems obvious.

Lamed - Whip - Could be a shepherd, Aries, or the action of the tail of **Scorpio**.

Nun - Snake - **Sagittarius**, or perhaps more properly, Ophiuchus. To explain why this connection can be drawn, I must digress for a moment from this list in order to introduce the concept of Ophiuchus:



There is a “thirteenth” Zodiac constellation which exists between Scorpio and Sagittarius along the ecliptic. It is Ophiuchus, the Serpent-Bearer. The attentive reader will have noticed in the table given at the end of Part I, and reprinted as Table 1 in the current article, that I had renamed the card formerly known as “The Lovers” to “Temptation.” This was partly done in order to de-emphasize the idea of a couple in the Lovers card, which had formerly, and incorrectly, linked it to the sign of Gemini. A look at the Lovers in the Tarot de Marseille will show that there isn't simply a couple depicted, but a group of three individuals, apparently engaged in some kind of love-triangle conflict. Waite decided in his deck to depict the Lovers as the Biblical Adam and Eve, with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil situated behind Eve, and the Tree of Life behind Adam. The Serpent is drawn entwined around the Tree of Knowledge, and positioned to whisper into Eve's ear. I believe Waite's innovation on the design of this card was quite appropriate, even if his initial motivation may have been to remove the third person. The artwork of both of

these cards, nonetheless, can be summoned up by the idea of Temptation, and it is quite convenient that the Serpent comes just before Sagittarius, indeed looking over the shoulder of the Lovers, while Cupid's arrow is also poised to strike. We can now continue looking intuitively for associations in the simple letter pictograms:

Samekh - Tether - Hitched or joined, could be **Pisces**, **Gemini**, or the two chained figures on the Devil card (**Capricorn**.)

Eyin - Eye - Unclear.

Tzadi - Fish-Hook - Could refer to **Pisces**.

Quf - Nape/Nemes - A piece of clothing like the keffiyeh, which would have been worn by shepherds in the middle east, to protect them from sunburn, dust, and sand. This refers to Osiris and **Aries**.

See Table 4 where I have listed these findings compared to the associations given in *Sefer Yetzirah*. (I've moved He from the beginning to the end, to simply arrow-drawing.)

**Table 4. Surface-Level Association of Simple Letters Compared to Sefer Yetzirah.**

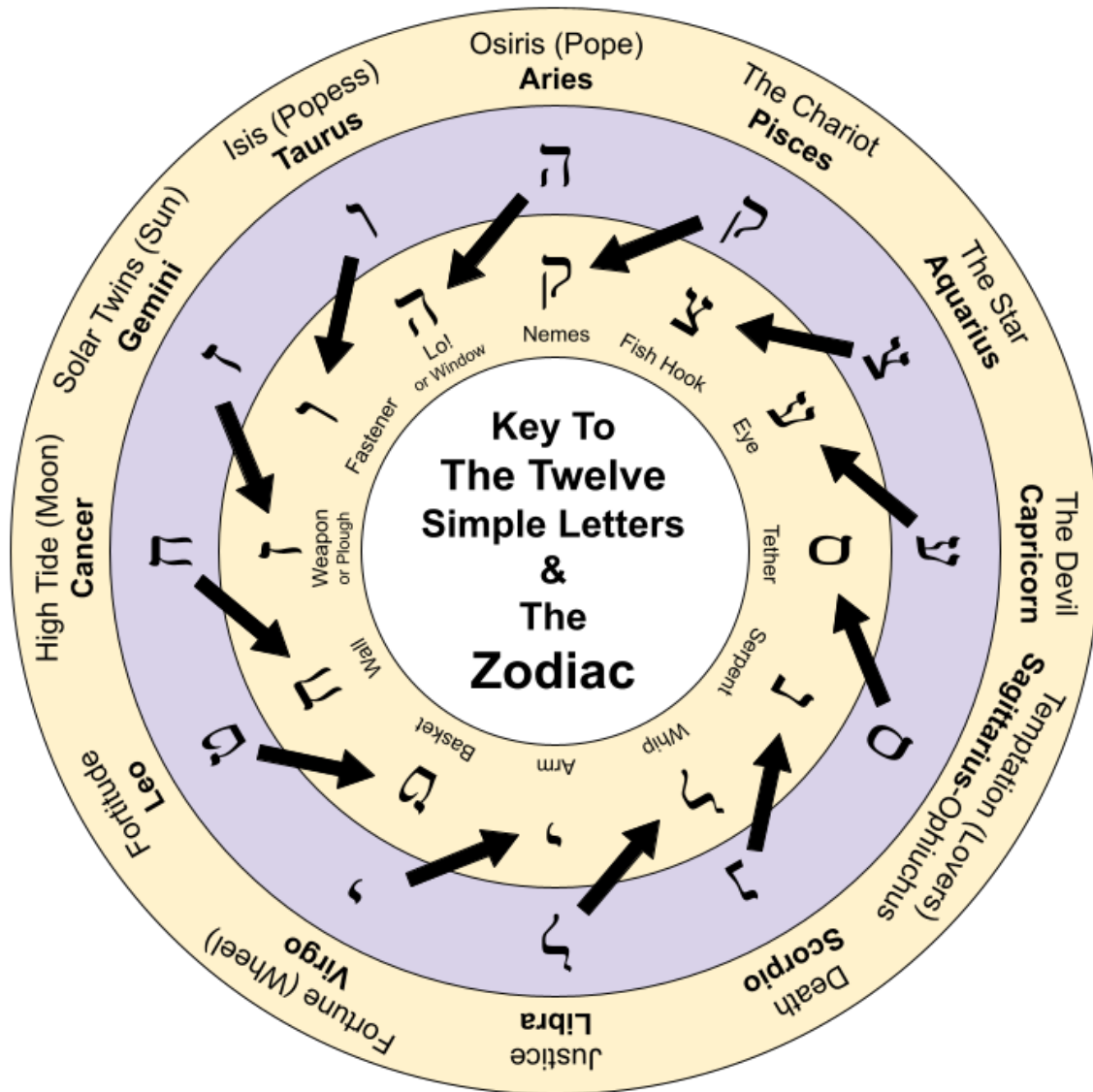
Letter	Pictogram	Surface Level Findings	Sefer Yetzirah
Vav	Fastener	Pisces or <b>Gemini</b> ?	Taurus
Zeyin	Weapon	<b>Cancer</b>	Gemini
Khet	Wall	<b>Leo</b>	Cancer
Tet	Basket	<b>Virgo</b>	Leo
Yod	Arm	—	Virgo
Lamed	Whip	<b>Scorpio</b>	Libra
Nun	Snake	<b>Sagittarius</b> (Ophiuchus)	Scorpio
Samekh	Tether	Pisces, Gemini, or <b>Capricorn</b> ?	Sagittarius
Eyin	Eye	—	Capricorn
Tsadi	Fish-Hook	<b>Pisces</b>	Aquarius
Quf	Nemes	<b>Aries</b>	Pisces
He	Lo!	—	Aries

What's going on here? Each one of our findings, or in the case of multiple possibilities, at least one of our potential matches, is shifted off by exactly one position from those given in *Sefer Yetzirah*!

Whatever the reason for this phenomena, it at least allows us to easily fill in the blanks. The Arm (Yod) of Justice is Libra, the Star in the night sky twinkles like an eye, and Isis, the High Priestess, cries out “Lo!” to warn us. The Popess fulfills the role of a Prophetess or Fortune Teller. (It seems imperative that I should mention Fortune Telling at least once in such an in-depth analysis of Tarot.)

I propose that each letter contains the energy which is given to the next in sequence. In this way, *Sefer Yetzirah* has encoded the actual Wheel of the Zodiac, complete with its proper circular movement, and not merely provided us with its twelve component pieces. See Figure 2, the Key to the Twelve Simple Letters and the Zodiac.

**Figure 2. Key to the Twelve Simple Letters and the Zodiac.**



Let us return again now to the double letters and planets and see if the same principle can be applied. (I've moved the Bet and Gimel to the bottom, to simplify arrow-drawing.)

**Table 5. Surface Letter Association of Double Letters Compared to Sefer Yetzirah.**

Letter	Pictogram	Surface Level Finding	Sefer Yetzirah
Dalet	Door		Mars
Kaf	Palm		Sun
Pe	Mouth		Venus
Resh	Head	Mars	Mercury
Tav	Mark	Sun	Moon
<b>Bet</b>	<b>House</b>	Venus	<b>Saturn</b>
Gimel	Foot	Mercury	Jupiter

We once again find a shift, this time, a reverse shift by three positions.

By extension, the remaining relations would be Dalet (Door) to the Moon, Kaf (Palm) to Saturn, and Pe (Mouth) to Jupiter.

It is easy to imagine the Hand of Time (Saturn) and the Voice of Thunder (Jupiter.)

Unfortunately, the Door and the Moon do not conjure up any familiar colloquial expression.

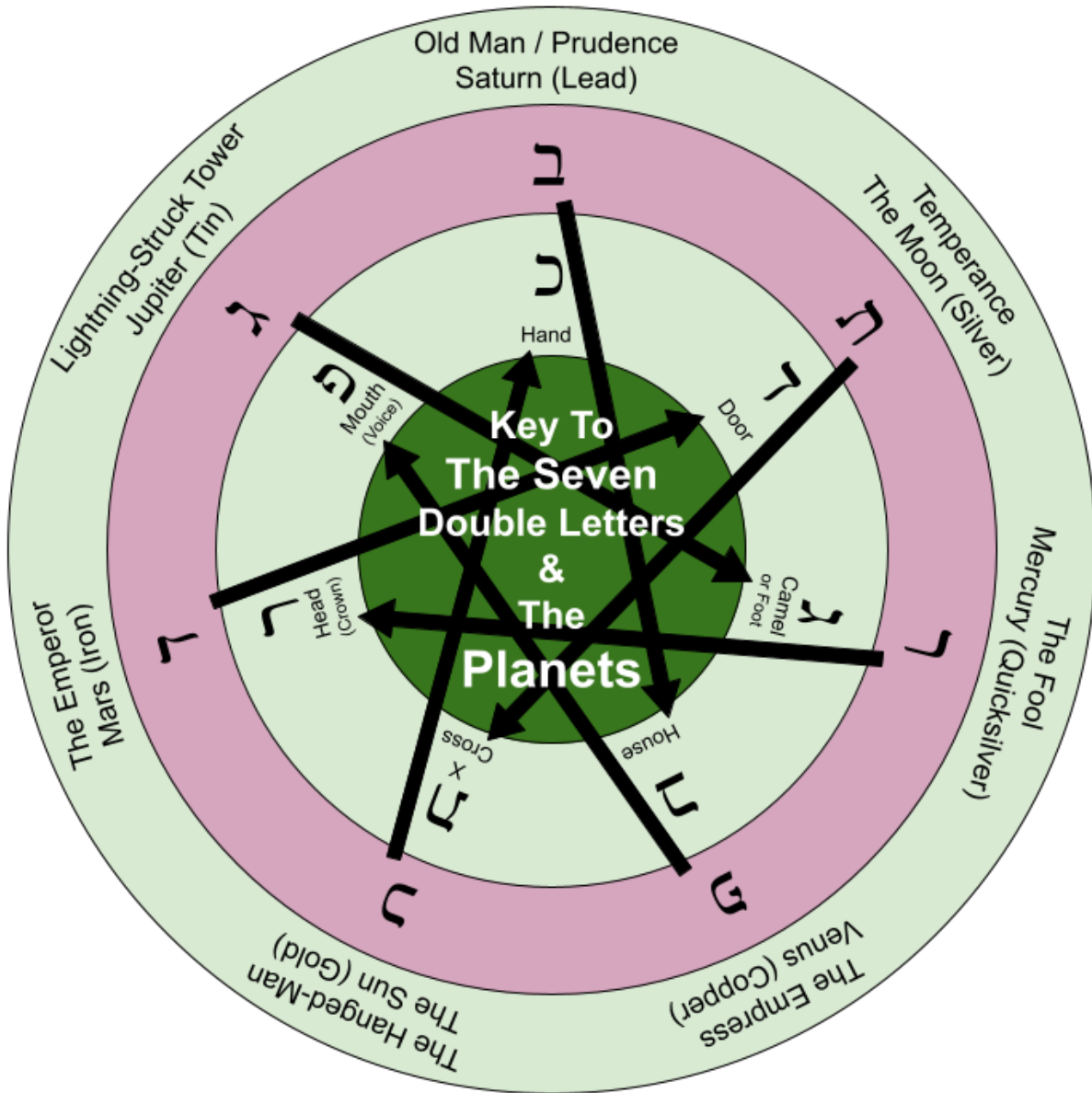
Why is the table shifted in reverse by three positions? The answer is simple. If we start on Saturn, and compare to the Alchemical Metals from Table 2, we will find that Saturn, Lead, Bet (House) points to Venus=Copper, Pe (Mouth) points to Jupiter=Tin, Gimel (Foot) points to Mercury=Quicksilver, Resh (Head) points to Mars=Iron, Dalet (Door) points to the Moon=Silver, Tav (Mark) points to the Sun=Gold, Kaf (Palm) which points us back to Saturn and returns us to the beginning of the cycle.

As a side note, this sequence of metals from Lead to Gold is the reversed sequence of the days of the week.

See our progress in Figure 3, the Key to the Seven Double Letters and the Planets.



**Figure 3. The Key to the Seven Double Letters and the Planets.**



Now that we have established wheels, or cycles, for the simple letters and the double letters, a natural question to ask is whether the mother letters also have a cycle? My answer is that they do not. The mother letters represent themselves, and *Sefer Yetzirah* directly associates them to the elements. The strong association of Water and Mem is nearly indisputable. I would like to draw a comparison, here, however, to the three principal Alchemical elements of Sulfur, Mercury, and Salt. Like *Sefer Yetzirah*, Alchemy is focused primarily on interactions of three elements rather than the systems of four or five elements more commonly found in Western Occultism.

**Alchemical Sulphur** is seen as the active male principle. It is hot, dry, and associated with Fire, the Sun, and Man.

**Alchemical Mercury** is seen as a passive female principle. It is cold, moist, and associated with Water, the Moon, and Woman.

**Alchemical Salt** is a substance of impure, coarse physicality. Through the interactions between Sulphur and Mercury, it is broken down, purified and reformed in an attempt to obtain “pure Salt.”

This pure Salt may have constituted the Philosopher’s Stone, or at least the key to obtaining the Philosopher’s Stone, which was the legendary substance capable of turning base metals into gold, equivalent to the Elixir of Life.

The processes of Alchemy are commonly given as lists of either Seven or Twelve processes. The Three Elements and Seven processes are classically depicted in the Azoth drawing published by German alchemist Basil Valentine in 1659, shown in Figure 4. You will observe that the star shape in this drawing calls attention to our shift-by-three sequence.

Comparing these seven processes to our list of planets, and comparing a common list of the twelve Alchemical processes to our Zodiac, along with the letters and pictograms from which they receive their properties, may offer additional insights. These comparisons are given in Table 6 and Table 7.

**Figure 4. Azoth, Basil Valentine (1659)**



The text just outside the illustrated seven processes reads “Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem,” or in English, “Visit the Interior of the Earth, Rectify, and Discover the Hidden Stone.” The acronym of this phrase is VITRIOL, the Alchemical name for Sulfuric Acid. Vitriol was an important substance in Alchemy, and symbolized the Great Work because it would react with nearly anything except Gold.

**Table 6. The Planets and The Seven Alchemical Processes from the Azoth Illustration.**

Own Letter	Source	Source Pictogram	Planet	Next Process	Card
Bet	Kaf	Hand	Saturn	V / Calcination	The Old Man / Prudence
Gimel	Pe	Mouth	Jupiter	I / Dissolution	The Lightning-Struck Tower
Dalet	Resh	Head	Mars	T / Sublimation	The Emperor
Kaf	Tav	Mark	Sun	R / Conjunction	The Hanged-Man
Pe	Bet	House	Venus	I / Fermentation	The Empress
Resh	Gimel	Camel	Mercury	O / Distillation	The Fool
Tav	Dalet	Door	Moon	L / Coagulation	Temperance

**Table 7. The Zodiac and The Twelve Alchemical Processes.**

Own Letter	Source Letter	Source Pictogram	Zodiac Sign	Process	Card
He	Quf	Nemes	Aries	Calcination	Osiris (Pope)
Vav	He	Lo! Window	Taurus	Congelation	Isis (Popess)
Zeyin	Vav	Fastener	Gemini	Fixation	Solar Twins (Sun)
Khet	Zeyin	Weapon	Cancer	Dissolution	High Tide (Moon)
Tet	Khet	Wall	Leo	Digestion	Fortitude (Strength)
Yod	Tet	Basket	Virgo	Distillation	Fortune (Wheel)
Lamed	Yod	Arm	Libra	Sublimation	Justice
Nun	Lamed	Whip	Scorpio	Separation	Death
Samekh	Nun	Snake	Sagittarius	Ceration	Temptation (Lovers)
Eyin	Samekh	Tether	Capricorn	Fermentation	The Devil
Tsadi	Eyin	Eye	Aquarius	Multiplication	The Star
Quf	Tsadi	Fish-Hook	Pisces	Projection	The Chariot

In these tables, I find many pleasing alignments between the Alchemical Processes and the Signs, Planets, and Pictograms, which leads me to feel largely satisfied with the conclusions reached up to this point. I will give but one example: The process of Dissolution, which is a watery method breaking something apart, is associated with Cancer, which is a water-dwelling creature with claws to tear things apart. This sign is associated with High Tide (formerly The Moon), which features two towers. Dissolution is further associated with the Lightning-Struck Tower, which is a tower being broken apart during a storm of rain or hail.

It almost verges on the point of miraculous that the ancient pictograms of the earliest human alphabet can in any way contain within them, when simply placed in the alphabetical order of received tradition (and combined with the ideas of mother letters and double letters), the orders of the months in their natural sequence, as represented by the signs of the Zodiac, and the perceived order of the Planets, from furthest away to nearest, and the sequence by which we count the days of the week. Is this a mere coincidence, or an intentional arrangement? How much did the writer of *Sefer Yetzirah* know of the pictograms from which their alphabet had sprung, and were they cognizant of the apparent misalignment between the letters and the Zodiacal and Planetary, the tension from which yields these beautiful cyclic representations?

The fact that the cycles of the Zodiac signs and the Metals are both best represented by “Wheels within Wheels” is quite appropriate, as Merkavah (meaning Chariot), is a form of early Jewish mysticism which predates Kabbalah. It is based on visions like those found in the first Chapter of Ezekiel, and is concerned with ascent through the heavenly palaces, or ascent to the throne of God. Merkavah mysticism and Alchemy both represent similar forms of ascent.

*This concludes Part II.*

*Look for: Part III - The Tree.*

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