## *Ha-ilan ha-gadol* (The Great Tree) - attributed to Rabbi Meir Poppers

The Great Tree (hereafter, GT) is a lengthy diagrammatic kabbalistic rotulus. As noted, the *ilan* is attributed to R. Meir Poppers, one of the great kabbalists of the seventeenth century. Vertical scrolls in this family of manuscripts are known to us from early eighteenth century Europe; it is possible that they were created even earlier. GT was first printed in Warsaw in 1865 in the form of a roll made of pages glued one after another (see 028.011.001). In 1893, it was published in Warsaw in a second edition, this time with additions and formatted as a regular book, with the frames of the *ilan* presented in individual sequential pages. The second edition was considerably bowdlerized, particularly graphically: all anthropomorphic elements in the diagrams were removed.

It appears that R. Meir Poppers did not create the GTas we know it today. However, in his writings he mentions an *ilan* that he constructed for his students in Krakow:

And as he wrote, “*Keter* was made from Him”, etc. In this homily, the Rabbi did not lengthily expound; below you shall see minute details and know that all this is one stature (*shiur komah,* lit. measurement of the height) clothing *Adam Kadmon* (Primordial Adam) as discussed below. *Concerning the ilan which I constructed for my friends abroad, I presented all the details which were permissible for me to draw*, and below we shall write the order of his enclothement.

(R. Meir Poppers, *Or Zaruah*, Jerusalem 1985/5746, p. 12, emphasis added)

Poppers indeed fashioned an *ilan*, but, as we shall see, not the one associated today with his name.

What do we see when we open a typical manuscript or the first printed edition of the GT?[[1]](#footnote-1) The rotulus opens with a series of four geometrical diagrams, built primarily of circles and squares. Several schematic yet suggestively anthropomorphic heads follow, filled with worded labels. In a significant number of such long scrolls, tables crammed full of text follow these “heads.” These, in turn, are followed by an illustration reminiscent of a rainbow over a spring – though in fact the arched lines that give the impression of spring water are meant to signify the side-curls (*peyot*) of *Arikh*, the divine countenance (*partzuf*) represted. It is important to note that is not *Arikh*’s first appearance in the *ilan*; with this frame, we witness the first instance of repetition – the same topography mapped a second time. This section of the *ilan* also introduces the familiar arboreal schema for the first time. After an initial arboreal representation of the *partzuf*, the *ilan* continues with a section in which the familiar denary form of the sefirotic tree is multiplied to the left and right of the vertical axis in a cloning process which fills the parchment with small, interconnected *ilanot*. Toward the end of typical exemplars, we find intermittent circle-spheres which represent the lower worlds, as well as additional arboreal diagrams labeled as *ilanot* of the *heikhalot* [palaces], the firmaments, the celestial orbs, and even the demonic realm. A bird’s-eye view thus reveals visually distinct sections with relative ease. The graphic singularity of each section has a simple reason: each was created and developed independently until the compiler(s) of the GT deemed them fit to be incorporated into an inclusive *ilan*, to be called “the Great Tree of R. Meir Poppers.”

Thus, from the graphical description alone, we can see that the GT is a hybridic artifact constructed of several sub-*ilanot*, each of which has an independent coherence. The overlap of the divine topography visualized in these components results in something of a zig-zag redundancy in the emanatory sequence.

In his writings, Poppers adhered to the kabbalistic tradition to which he belonged; that of R. Hayyim Vital. In contrast, in its first four frames, the GT embraces an additional Lurianic tradition, that of Israel Sarug (16th-17th centuries). Sarug came to Europe in the mid-sixteenth century, disseminating his own version of Lurianic Kabbalah. Sarug’s rendition of Lurianic Kabbalah differed from the interpretation of R. Isaac Luria’s other students – especially Vital’s. Sarug’s version of Lurianic Kabbalah spread across Europe and was integrated into many Italian and Ashkenazic kabbalistic works. Among the works that followed the tradition of Sarug was *Emeq ha-melekh* (Valley of the King, Amsterdam 1648) written by the Frankfurt am Main kabbalist, R. Naftali Hertz Bacharach. Two modest diagrams and cosmogonic discourses inspired by Sarug in *Emeq ha-melekh* were the foundation upon which the first four frames of the GT were designed.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Their designer was none other than Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636-1689). Knorr wrote a book – or perhaps what would be more accurately called a learning library – entitled *Kabbalah Denudata* (The Kabbalah Unveiled), wherein he provided Christians with the tools and texts necessary, in his eyes, to embark on the study of Jewish Kabbalah. The first volume of the book provides most of the tools: a bibliography and comprehensive lexicon of the Kabbalah. This kabbalistic toolbox concludes with an unprecedented comprehensive presentation of kabbalistic diagrams – five *ilanot* presented over sixteen *figurae* (as engravings that combine graphics and texts) on fold-out pages. Each is accompanied by Latin translations of the Hebrew captions within the diagrams, although for practical reasons a few engravings replace Hebrew captions with letters or numbers keyed to the Latin. Four out of the five *ilanot* featured in this appendix must have been acquired by Knorr in the years preceding the publication of *Kabbalah denudata.* Their inclusion in this 1677 work testifies to their existence and form at that time. This is no small matter given the fact that most *ilanot* bear no colophon and are notoriously hard to date with precision.

To these acquired *ilanot*, Knorr added a new sequence of diagrams, figures 8-12, based on chapters in *Emeq ha-melekh,* a book with which he was very familiar, and from which he translated an extensive amount of material into Latin in the second, text-oriented volume of *Kabbalah denudata*. These diagrams constitute Knorr’s original visualization of Sarug’s unique cosmogonic doctrine. Although their visual language is distinctive, there is nothing obviously Christian about them – at least not in figures 8-11, with their schematic geometric forms and Hebrew captions. Figure 12, however, presented a profile-view of the bearded head of Adam Kadmon (“the second,” for reasons relating to Saruqian theory) in a figurative manner that would surely have raised Jewish eyebrows.[[3]](#footnote-3) Within a short time, Knorr’s diagrams—with the exception of the last, figure 12—found their way into the hybridic Great Tree *ilanot*. Thus, the GT opens with the series of diagrams designed by a Christian kabbalist, based on Sarug’s Kabbalah as it appears in *Emeq ha-melekh*.

Its Christian connection aside, this Sarugian cosmogonic sequence would have been out of place in an *ilan* designed by Poppers, who repeatedly declared his exclusive loyalty to Vital’s version of Lurianism. As we will describe in more detail in what follows, the opening sequence is followed by an *ilan* likely based on Popper’s original, which is in turn followed by an *ilan* likely based on one designed by his teacher (beginning with the rainbow-spring-like image). In Knorr’s diagrammatic appendix, each of these was presented independently, as he found them. In the GT rotuli, however, they are spliced together to form a hybridic, if occasionally redundant, rehearsal of emanation from top to bottom.

In summary: the GT is constructed of several components, each one an independent kabbalistic *ilan* extant decades before they were joined together. It would seem that this integration resulted originally from the attempt of an anonymous kabbalist to create a single structure out of the ensemble of components that had come into his hands. This was hardly the idiosyncratic action of a lone kabbalist, however, as the great variation in GT rotuli attests. The relatively shorter Lurianic rotuli of the mid-seventeenth century were evidently viewed as modular components that could be mixed and matched quite freely. It would seem that the attribution of the hybridic GT *ilanot* to Poppers followed the 1782 Koretz printing of his *Etz Hayyim*. The association was not entirely unwarranted, given his role in crafting a central and in fact ubiquitous component within such rotuli, but likely represents even more the attempt to validate and authorize what was something of an outlier artifact in Jewish circles.

The standard structure of the GT includes:

<add a divided diagram of the GT on the page margin>

1. The title of the *ilan*

There are a several different versions of this *ilan*’s title. The manuscript that served as the basis for the first printed edition (028.011.003) opens with the word *ilan* in large, hollowed square letters filled with delicate cross-hatching adorned with three floral decorations. It reads:

The great *ilan* composed by the rabbi, the kabbalist, the holy lamp, our teacher the rabbi R. Meir Katz Poppers, may the memory of the righteous and holy be for everlasting life, one of the cubs of the AR”I, may the memory of the righteous be for everlasting life. [It is] in small signs (*simanim ketanim*), to know with wisdom, and to be for a memorial/mnemonic, and one will be able to climb the latter the top of which reaches heaven, comprising all of the writings of the ARIZ”L. And the enlightened with understand.

1. The four upper diagrams

The four upper diagrams depict the beginning of *atzilut* (emanation) according to R. Israel Sarug’s kabbalistic tradition. This tradition is visualized differently in various *ilanot* manuscript families. In most versions of the GT, the upper part of the *ilan* is based, as we have seen, on diagrams first presented in *Kabbalah denudata* (figures 8-11).

The books of Israel Sarug describe the dawn of creation (i.e. *atzilut*) as the formation of the letters of the Hebrew language, beginning with the letter *yod*, in the form of a point. This point begins to move, forming a line from which a plane emerges. Using this motion, many letters are created. The letters are interwoven, creating a square “garment” (*malbush*) of 231 paired letter combinations. Drawings of such squares may be seen in *Emeq ha-melekh* and in a few *ilanot* such as the *Tree of the Gates of Eden* (*Ilan sha’arei Gan Eden*) (028.012.0004). The rest of the emanation proceeds from this primordial garment, but as it is full of letters, this process must begin by creating the space required. In order to create this empty space, the garment “folds” in two, with its lower part rising up and folding into the upper part. In the lower part, empty space is thus created. When the letters from the upper part enter it, the lower worlds are formed. The need to vacate the divine space for the purpose of creating the worlds is a motif not unique to this kabbalistic tradition, and exists in R. Hayyim Vital’s tradition as well. The difference is primarily in the imagery used by these two kabbalists, Saruq and Vital, to describe this auto-withdrawal.

Sketches drawn according to the Sarugian tradition appear in several *ilanot*: the various versions of the GT; the *Tree of the Gates of Eden* (028.012.004), and the *Tree of Holiness* (*ha-ilan shel ha-kedusha*). Each of these *ilanot* presents a unique visualization of this primordial cosmogonic phase. The different visualizations undoubtedly reflect the fact that each was inspired by particular Saruqian texts as well as the inevitable distinctiveness of the graphical imagination of each of their creators.

The emanatory sequence visualized in the GT may be broken down into the following frames:

Frame 1: “The Executor/Master of the (Primordial) Will, Who is Absolute Darkness, Hidded from the Eye of All Living; the Light of *Ein Sof* emanated by the Master of the Will by means of the Impression (*roshem*); the World of the Garment, from the Impression [created by] the evacuation of space for the worlds – being the first world (and circle) of the infinite worlds.”

Frame 2: “The world of the Garment (*‘olam ha-malbush*) at the time of its folding its clothing (*levush*) in half; and this is the first evacuation (*tzimtzum)* of empty space called Primordial Aether (*Avir kadmon*).”

Frame 3: “The world of folded Garment; Hidden Primordial Adam encompassing the Brilliance (*tehiru*); and they are ten circles and ten aethers.”

Frame 4: “Hidden Primordial Adam; the World of Chaos; the lower seven that shattered.”

1. *Adam Kadmon* (Primordial Adam) and the countenances (*partzufim*).

This section of the GT is inspired by the descriptions of the Godhead central to Lurianic cosmogony, which in turn were inspired by the most esoteric sections of the Zohar – the so-called *Idrot*. According to these teachings, the divine differentiates for the first time as *Adam Kadmon* (Primordial Adam), from whom/which subsequently emanate a series of progressively attenuated dimensions of divinity – the countenances. These latter include *Arikh Anpin* (Long Face/Patient), *Abba* (Father), *Imma* (Mother), Jacob, Rachel, *Ze’ir Anpin* (Small Face/Impatient), and more. This section of the *ilan* typically represented Adam Kadmon and the subsequent emanated countenances anthropomorphically, as schematically suggestive faces. Although indeed anthropomorphic representation is typical in this section of the *ilan*, including such unusually representational specimens as those crafted by the Iraqi kabbalist R. Sasson Shandukh, misgivings are also implicitly evident. So, for example, we find the use of geometric and arboreal schemata to represent thecountenances and their bodies.

When examining these types of representations in the variety of *ilanot* available to us, the countenancesmay be categorized into several models. The most prevalent can be found in all exemplars of the GT in the Gross Collection. In these, *Adam Kadmon* is represented at the top of the second section of the *ilan*. Underneath are the countenances of *Arikh Anpin* and *Ze’ir Anpin,* all drawn as schematized faces. Their dependent countenances are positioned immediately below, but their “data” is presented in tabular form. After completing the presentation of these countenances, the composer of the scroll spliced on yet another *ilan*. This one begins with *Arikh Anpin*, followed (again) by the face of *Ze’ir Anpin* and its dependent countenances. This time, the latter are depicted using the arboreal schema, i.e. as miniature tree diagrams. The combination of these two *ilanot* create a comprehensive *ilan* that inevitably contains more kabbalistic information than either of them present on their own. Because they were not integrated, however, we find a kind of topographical redundancy in the hybridic rotulus. A few *ilanot* allow us to infer the awareness of the scribe-compiler who tried to minimize repetition by omitting sections of the upper *ilan*. See, for example, 028.012.022.

The upper *ilan,* which anthropomorphically represents *Adam Kadmon*, should likely be attributed to R. Meir Popper (or to his students). In it, we find his unique terminology in the abundant captions inscribed within the schema. For this reason, we refer to it“The Poppers *Ilan.*” It is found on its own in MS Oxford-Oppenheim 128 (18047), in Knorr’s *Kabbalah Denudata* (figures 1 through 7), and in the Gross Collection in MS 028.012.015. R. Yaakov Tzemach was likely responsible for the lower *ilan*. The attribution to Tzemach is based on the fact that he, like Poppers, wrote that he created a large *ilan* in which he presented the countenances (apparently without a drawing of *Adam Kadmon*). This description fits the lower *ilan*, which is certainly one of the early Lurianic *ilanot*. This *ilan* appears independently in the library of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York MS 436, and carries the rare colophon that dates it to 1663.[[4]](#footnote-4) It appeared a few years later, also as a distinct *ilan*, in Knorr’s *Kabbalah Denudata* (figures 13 and 14).

The title that appears at the beginning of this section of the *ilan* is: “The Infinite One, Blessed be He, who has no God above him, a crown upon the head of the Holy One Blessed be He, the beginning of the Will of the King”. This title, by referring to the Infinite (who has none above Him!), provides further evidence that in its original form this section was an independent *ilan*, and was integrated into the hybrid/composite *ilan* only at a later stage.

Frames 5-8: These constitute the *ilan* that we believe should be attributed to R. Meir Poppers.

Frame 5: Under the title, the image of *Adam Kadmon*, beside which a text that questions the location of the *parsa* – the intradivine partition.

Frame 6: The image of the countenanceof *Arikh Anpin*.

Frame 7: A table containing the details of the relationship between the countenanceof *Arikh Anpin* and the other countenances.

Frame 8: A sketch of the countenanceof *Ze’ir Anpin*.

Frame 9: A description of the countenancesfrom *Arikh Anpin* until *Ze’ir Anpin* as well as the dependent countenances.

Frame 10: The *ilan* that we believe should be attributed to R. Yaakov Tzemach.

At the bottom of this section, a caption clarifies that the world of Emanation (*olam ha-atzilut*) was represented until this point, and going forward, the lower created worlds will be represented: “The ground of *Atzilut* as my footstool, all twelvecountenances in unity, and from there it divides and becomes the three worlds of *Beriah* (Creation), *Yetzirah* (Formation), and ‘*Asiyah* (Action) - one beneath the other in the *heikhalot,* and one master of them all.”

1. The worlds of *Beriah Yetzirah ‘Asiyah*

*Beriah, Yetzirah, and ‘Asiyah* are the three created worlds beneath the world of *Atzilut*. The fourfold partition of the worlds in Lurianism was drawn from medieval Kabbalah. In this section of the *ilan,* each of the lower worlds is presented in the form of a classic denary arboreal diagram. The captions accompanying these drawings explain the differences between each world. There are relatively large discrepancies among the different manuscripts of the *ilan* in their descriptions of the lower worlds, perhaps reflecting Luria’s relatively minimal interest in them. Luria’s primary interest and innovation was in mapping the upper realms of emanation and in providing guidance for their reparation through human action. The modest and largely derivative treatment of *Beriah, Yetzirah,* and ‘*Asiyah* in the Lurianic literature left the creators of *ilanot* with a fair degree of interpretive independence. The lower realms, particularly ‘*Asiyah* with its celestial and earthy components, also enjoyed a developed repertoire of historical iconography, drawn from astronomical and natural philosophical traditions. One final observation is also in order: as the partition into four worlds constituted a legacy from a pre-Lurianic Kabbalah, different earlier traditions could be and were in fact incorporated in *ilanot* with considerable variation. Examples of such variation include the different descriptions of *heikhalot* in the world of *Beriah*, as well as descriptions of the connections between the Tree of Holiness (*ilan ha-kedusha*) and the Trees of Impurity (*ilanot ha-tumah*).

Frame 10: The world of *Beriah* represented using the arboreal schema. Within the diagram are inscribed names of God and the various *heikhalot* that constitute this world.

Frame 11: The world of *Yetzirah,* it too represented using the arboreal schema. Within the diagram are inscribed the names of the angels connected to eachof the sefirot.

Frame 12: The world of ‘*Asiyah*. Occasionally, representations of the different elements of the mundane world are included. In some *ilanot*, the world of ‘*Asiyah* does not appear. When it does, it is visually depicted in one of two schemata: as concentric circles, the celestial orbs of the astronomic tradition, or as an arboreal diagram with the names of the orbs inscribed in the medallions normally associated with the sefirot.

In short, a great variety of GT *ilanot* exists; many are to be found in the Gross Collection alone. In what follows, each of the Gross Collection GT exemplars will be described, and each of its modular components noted. In the interest of economy, we will note only the differences between the various manuscripts and the first edition of the printed *ilan* (028.011.001) and its manuscript source, as detailed above.

One final note: the GT is the only *ilan* to have been printed by Jews until the present day, first as a paper roll, and subsequently as a book. It seems that even before its publication it was exceedingly popular. Even *ilanot* that do not belong to this family of manuscripts, such as the Tree of Holiness (*ilan shel ha-kedusha*) (028.012.005), were directly influenced by and based on its structure.

1. We refer here to the most widespread GTthat served as a foundation for the above-mentioned publications. But as we shall see later, already at the start of the eighteenth century *ilanot* rollswere constructed that begin with circular diagrams based on a diagrammatic tradition originating in the illustrations of R. Hayyim Vital and Yaakov Tzemach. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For another impressive *ilan* visualization of material from *Emek ha-melekh,* see Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich (Cod. hebr. 446 & Cod. hebr. 447, <https://goo.gl/mQi1EE>). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although no Jewish *ilanot* represented Adam Kadmon or the subsequent countenances of the divine with a figurative accuracy that compares with Knorr’s figure 12, a few uniqum *ilanot* offer hardly less bold andromorphic representations, e.g., Shanduch (below) and Hammerschlag (Munich BSB 450). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 795253 in the *ilanot* database. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)