

## The Tarot, the ten Sephirot, the twenty-two Hebrew letters and paths on the Tree of Life

The picture of a Tree of Life has to be an archetype in the human mind because from ancient times it appears in myths, legends and paintings from all around the world. It's very easy to visualise.

Its origin as a geometrical symbol in Kabbalah is veiled in mystery.

Simo Parpola at the University of Helsinki writes:

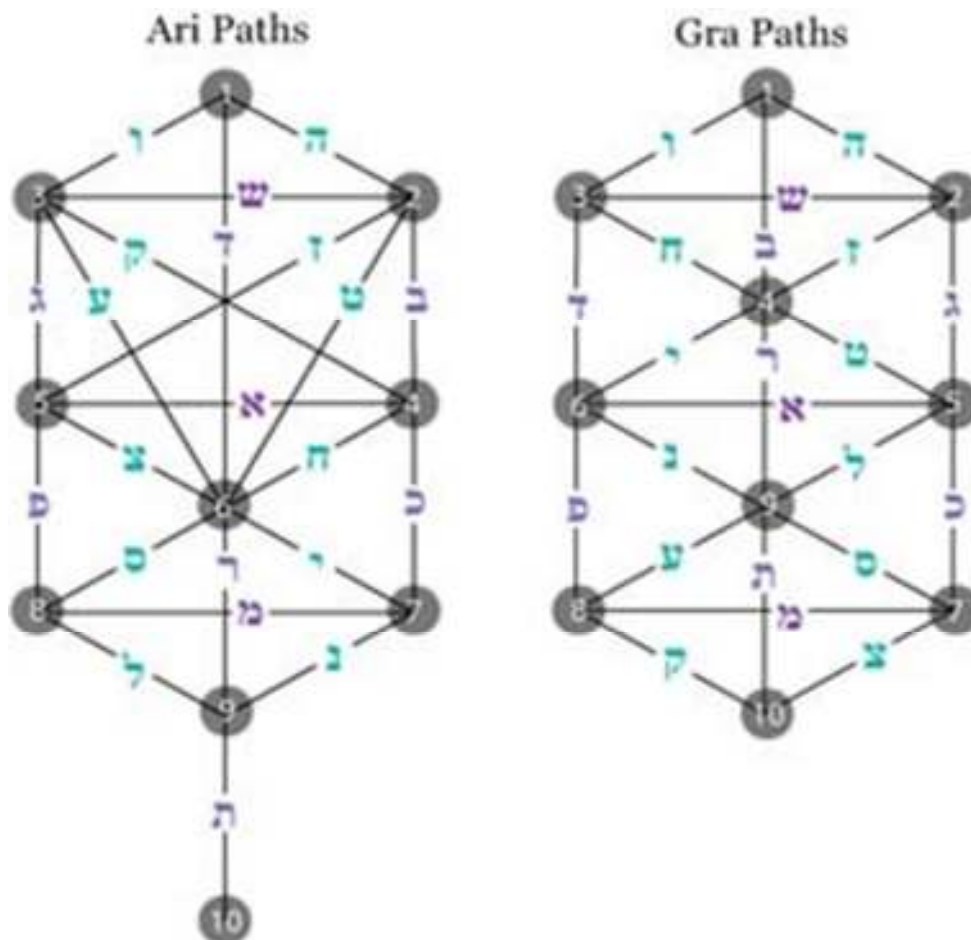
*1 "A stylized tree with obvious religious significance already occurs as an art motif in fourth-millennium Mesopotamia, and, by the second millennium B.C., it is found everywhere within the orbit of the ancient Near Eastern oikumene, including Egypt, Greece, and the Indus civilization."*



*Slab B-23 of the throne room of Ashurnasirpal II. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum*

Around the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalists in Israel and Spain used the Tree of Life as a meditation symbol, a mandala, to represent the philosophical ideas presented in the classics of the Sepher Yetzirah, the Sepher Ha-Bahir and the Zohar.

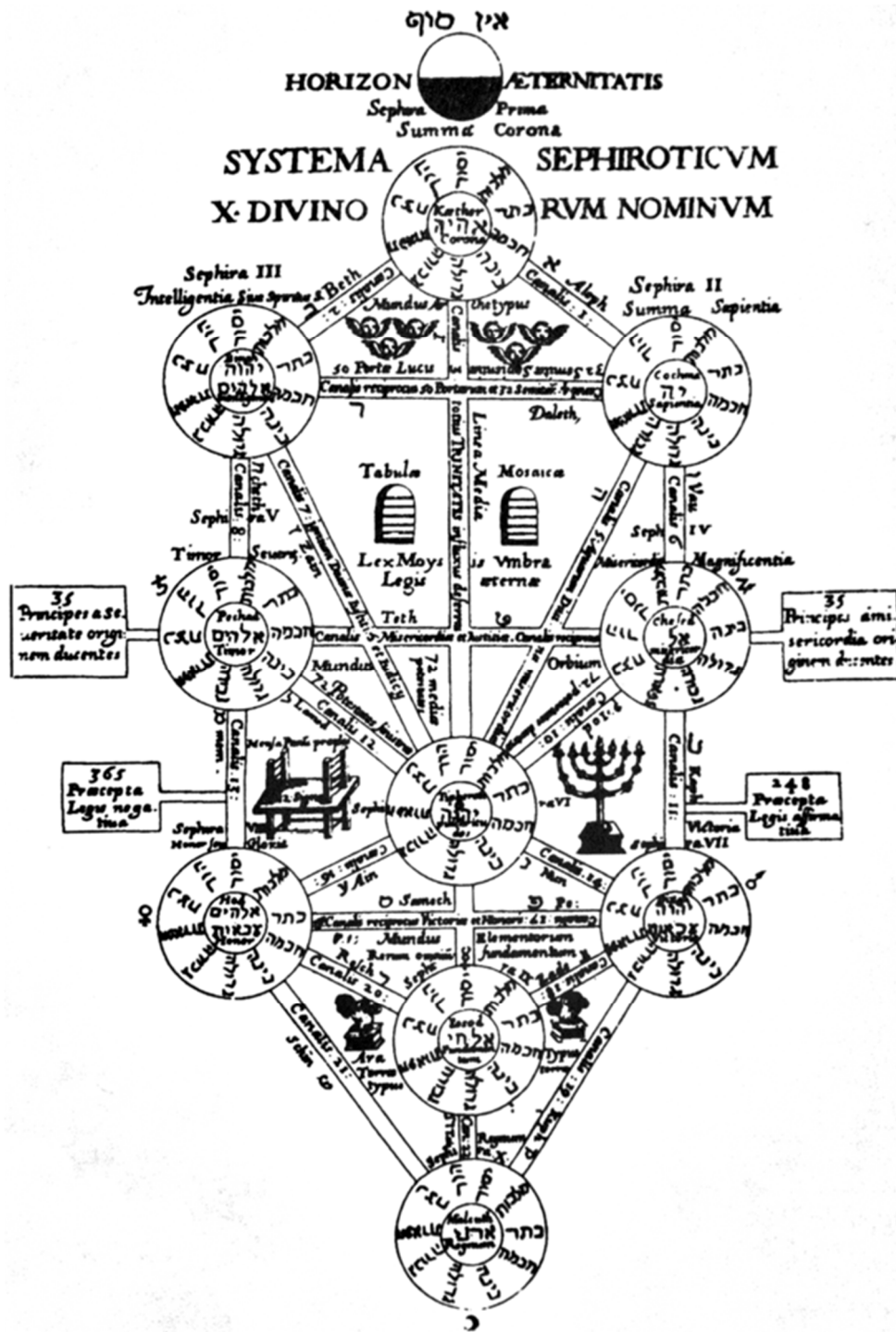
The Tree designed by the Ari (**Isaac Luria**, 1534-1572) only has one path connected to Malkhut, and two paths connecting Gevurah to Chokhmah and Chesed to Binah. The twenty-two Hebrew letters are arranged on the paths very neatly so that the three mother letters are on the three horizontal paths, the seven double letters occupy the seven vertical paths and the twelve simple letters occupy the twelve diagonal paths. Moreover, the ten sephirot are given titles and positioned in hierarchical order on the Tree.



<https://cdacruz.files.wordpress.com/2009/10/smalltrees.jpg>

Later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Elijah ben Solomon Zalman – **Gra** – designed a Tree of Life which resembled a double cube to show paradise, the world before “*The Fall*”. It is also a visual aid to his own version of the Sepher Yetzirah.

However, the most well-known version of the Tree of Life today is one that possibly comes from a magical tradition, which was first brought to light in 1652 by the scholar **Athanasius Kircher** (1602-1680) in his “*Oedipus Aegyptiacus*”. This Tree of Life might be an adaptation of one of the versions created by the Kabbalist **Moses ben Cordovero** (1522-1570), who Isaac Luria considered to be his teacher, or as some say Kircher's version of the Tree was taken from of a hidden oral Western tradition that originated in classical Greece and which was adopted later by the Jewish Kabbalists. This is the most popular version used today and the numbering of the twenty-two paths and correspondences to the Hebrew letters are identical with those of the Golden Dawn.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kircher\\_Tree\\_of\\_Life.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kircher_Tree_of_Life.png)

In the **Sepher Yetzirah**, where we first learn of the ten Sephiroth and the twenty-two paths, there are no diagrams at all. The origins of the Sepher Yetzirah are unknown, it is believed by some to have been written as early as 100 BCE but the text is quoted as late as the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. There are five important versions of the classic, the shortest being 1300 words and the longest 2500 words.

All of the above different arrangements of the ten sephirot and the twenty-two paths on the Tree of Life have merit in their own right as methods to examine scriptures, to train the mind to contemplate, to enable us to question and examine who we are and where we are in an objective manner. Abstract diagrams serve as creative blueprints of the world we live in and act like windows to the celestial world.

In chapter one<sup>1</sup> we read:

*“In thirty two miraculous paths of Wisdom, God... the Dweller at the End of Time, whose Name is Blessed, decreed and created his World in three volumes, in number, narrative and letters. There are ten Sephirot from No-thing and twenty two fundamental letters...”*

The ten Sephirot are described in terms of five polarities: *Beginning and End, Good and Evil, Height and Depth, East and West, North and South.*

Later Kabbalists in their writings gave titles to the sephirot and tried to associate these five polarities with moral qualities in line with the teachings of the **Sepher Ha Bahir** – written in parts, in Babylonia and Provence between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century, and also the Zohar, a multi volumed commentary on the Old Testament, which appeared in Spain in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century and which is said to have been the work of the Kabbalist **Moses de Leon**.

The sephirot and the twenty-two paths are miraculous in the sense that they are simultaneously not of this world and yet part of it .

The most common titles given to the ten sephirot are:

1) Keter, The Crown, 2) Chokmah, Wisdom, 3) Binah, Understanding, 4) Chesed (or Gedulah), Mercy, Love, Righteousness 5) Gevurah (or Geburah or Din or Pachad ), fear, Judgement, Power, Might, Severity 6) Tipheret, Beauty, Peace, Truth 7) Netzach, Victory, Beauty Triumphant, Eternity, 8) Hod, Splendour, Glory, Reverberation- 9) Yesod, Foundation 10) Malkhut, the Kingdom, The Presence.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century an additional unnumbered Sephirah, Da'at – Knowledge – was added.

The scholar Gershom Scholem writes about Da'at in his book “*Kabbalah*”:

*“This addition arose from the desire to see each group of three Sephiroth as a unit comprising opposing attributes and as a synthesis to finally resolve them”.*

In Brian Lancaster's book “*Kabbalah*” we read:

*“Keter is the recondite Will of the En Sof (limitless essence of God). As such, it initiates the sequence. However, it does not itself fully enter into the sefirotic realm of emanation; once the*

*sequence is initiated by the divine Will, Keter withdraws into the infinite perfection of the transcendent realm. It is for this reason that human consciousness can never attain direct contact with Keter. Human consciousness simply has no means of access to that sphere. The highest spiritual state is one in which we gain intimate knowledge (Da'at) that a transcendent source lies behind all things."*

Once the first spark of creation is lit by the One, Keter withdraws into its primordial origins of the limitless light of No-thing, and Da'at swaps position with Keter to complete the unity of the ten Sephirot. (or else there would be nine, or eleven sephirot.) The three sephirot after Keter are given the noble titles found in the scriptures:

*"By wisdom a house is built; with understanding it is established; and with knowledge are its rooms filled with all precious and pleasant riches." Proverbs 24:3*

Since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, with the cross-fertilisation of sciences and philosophies from all corners of the world, more and more associations have accrued around the ten Sephirot and the twenty-two paths. The hierarchical structure of Tree of Life is excellent in revealing how the underlying principles in any system are interconnected, and how energy in processes can be stepped up or down. The student is encouraged though meditation on the symbol to build an inner vehicle founded on sound moral precepts. So it is beneficial to use the Tree of Life as a framework to examine and test the world and in so doing one is affirming both creator and creation. In the Sepher Yetzirah, Chapter 1 Verse 3. it reads:

*" There are ten Sephirot out of No-Thing, ten not nine, ten not eleven. Understand in Wisdom, be Wise in understanding them, test them out and search into them, be certain of their meaning. You will place the Creator of Form on a sure Foundation. "*

Here are two different logical methods for associating the twenty-two paths and letters to the ten Sephirot. The first from the creators of **Galgal**, and the second from the **Golden Dawn**.

*Galgal, the Master Game* with commentaries by Eddie Prevost and Cherry Gilchrist (Scot o' the Covert,1972). This was revised and re-published in 2002 as *The Tree of Life Oracle* by Cherry Gilchrist and Gila Zur (Eddison Sadd Editions).

In the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter, 5<sup>th</sup> verse of the Sepher Yetzirah we read:

*“Ten Sephirot out of No-Thing, have the appearance of lightning, their completion is without end, his speech is in them as they rush out and return, at His command like a storm wind they follow one another, and before his throne they humble themselves.”*

“Galgal” means Wheel or whirlwind. The *Galgal* method proposes that the sephirot and the twenty-two paths are forever being created in cycles as the “lightning flash” rushes back and forth from Kether to Malkhut. For the Tree to be complete at every stage, as each new sephirah is touched by the lightning flash, all paths to it from the previous sephirot are also completed in hierarchical order. Every time a new path is created it is assigned a new letter in the traditional order of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and this journey continues until all 22 letters have made their appearance.

Here is my description of the *Galgal* method of numbering the twenty-two letters and paths, and I also include its meanings to the letters in brackets. I believe these meanings were derived by a process of meditation and free-association on the spelling of the Hebrew letters themselves. So, for instance the first letter *Aleph* means one but also one thousand. Thus, it can mean a unit that can *multiply* itself a thousand fold. The meaning of the letter *Bet* is obvious, spelled: Bet, Yod, Tav it usually means home or *house*. *Dalet*, spelled here as its predecessor, the Phoenician letter *Daleh*, is spelled: Dalet, Lamed, Heh, meaning poor, or someone who is dependent on others, and so the meaning given is *Depend*. There is a hidden reference in the 20<sup>th</sup> verse of the *Sepher Ha Bahir* <sup>2</sup> where it writes:

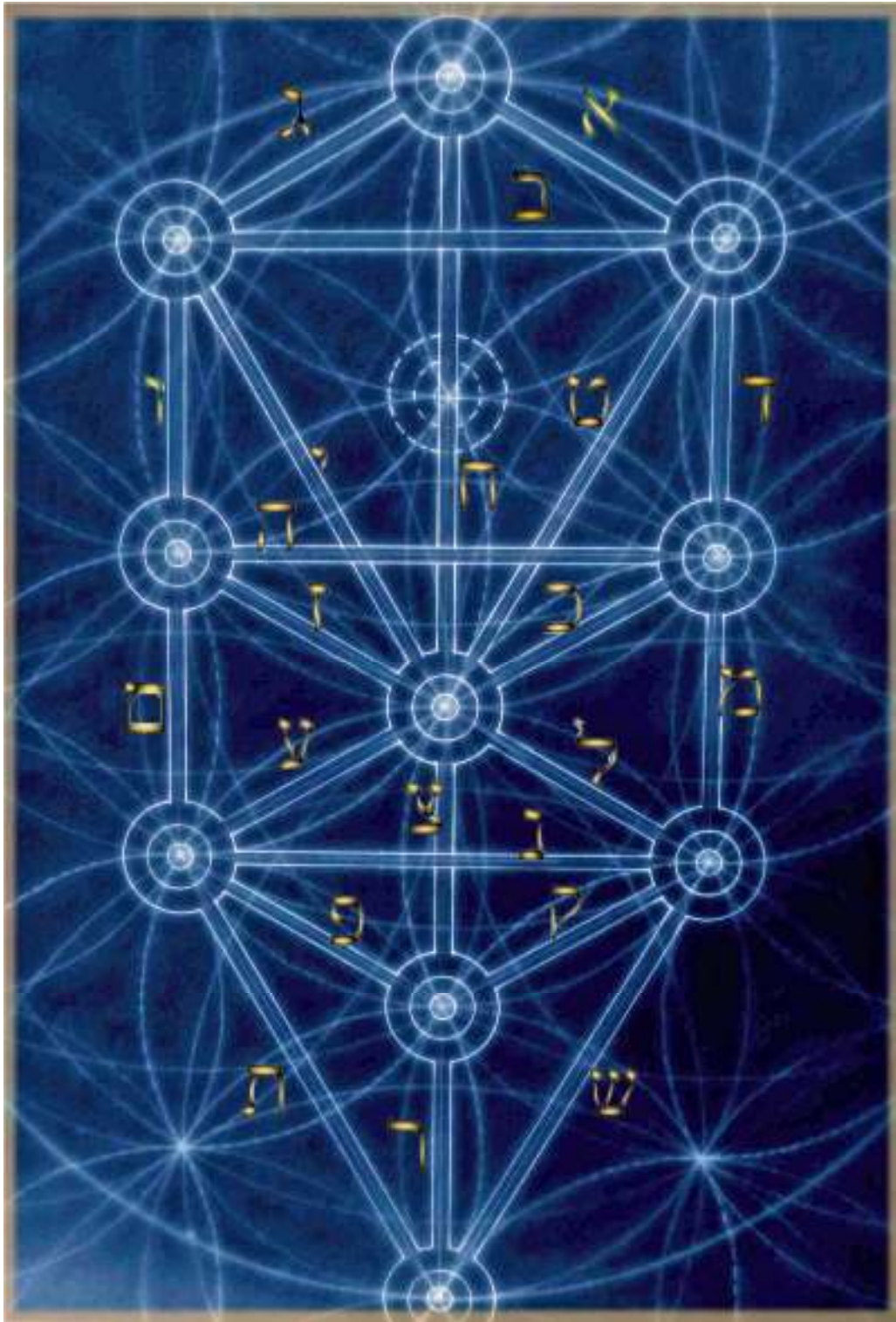
*“... His students asked him about the letter Dalet and he answered: This reminds me of ten Kings who are in one place and they are all rich but one of them, rich though he is, is poor by comparison with the rest.”*

Beginning at Keter the lightning flash carries the Logos to Chokhmah and the 1<sup>st</sup> path is completed, **Aleph** (*Multiply*).

It then continues from Chokhmah to Binah, forming the 2<sup>nd</sup> path and 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, **Beth** (*House*). At Binah the 3<sup>rd</sup> path from Binah to Keter is completed and so is the 3<sup>rd</sup> letter, **Gimel** (*Complete*).

The lightning flash from Binah continues its journey across the abyss and Da'at to Chesed, at which point the 4<sup>th</sup> path between Chokhmah and Chesed is formed, as is the 4<sup>th</sup> letter, **Dalet** (*Depend*).

It continues from Chesed to Gevurah forming the 5<sup>th</sup> path and the 5<sup>th</sup> letter, **Heh** (*Being*). As soon as Gevurah is touched the 6<sup>th</sup> path between Binah and Gevurah is formed, and the 6<sup>th</sup> letter, **Vav** (*Secure*).



*Tree of Life drawn by Odysseus*

From Gevurah to Tiphereth the 7<sup>th</sup> path and 7<sup>th</sup> letter, **Zayin** (*Listen*) is formed. As soon as Tipheret is touched the paths to the previous sephirot are also formed in hierarchical order: The 8<sup>th</sup> path from Keter to Tipheret is filled by the 8<sup>th</sup> letter, **Chet** (*Fear*), the 9<sup>th</sup> path from Chokhmah to Tipheret carries the 9<sup>th</sup> letter, **Tet** (*Draft*), and the 10<sup>th</sup> path from Binah to Tipheret contains the 10<sup>th</sup> letter, **Yod** (*Direct*). The 11<sup>th</sup> path is completed between Chesed and Tipheret, and the 11<sup>th</sup>

letter **Kaf** (*Incline*) is born.

The lightning flash continues from Tipheret to Netzach forming the 12<sup>th</sup> path and 12<sup>th</sup> letter, **Lamed** (*Learn*). As Netzach is touched the 13<sup>th</sup> path between Chesed and Netzach is completed, the 13<sup>th</sup> letter, **Mem** (*Flow*).

The lightning flash moves from Netzach to Hod creating the 14 path and 14<sup>th</sup> letter, **Nun** (*Growth & Decay*). As soon as Hod is touched the 15<sup>th</sup> path from Gevurah to Hod is completed and the 15<sup>th</sup> letter is assigned to it, **Samech** (*Support*). Also, the 16th path from Tipheret to Hod is assigned to the 16<sup>th</sup> letter letter, **Ayin** (*Study*).

The lightning flash continues from Hod to Yesod forming the 17<sup>th</sup> path and the 17<sup>th</sup> letter, **Peh** (*Name*). As Yesod is awoken the 18<sup>th</sup> path from Tipheret to Yesod is completed, the 18<sup>th</sup> letter **Tsaddi** (*Integrity*). Also, the 19<sup>th</sup> path from Netzach to Yesod is completed as is the 19<sup>th</sup> letter, **Qoph** (*Reproduce*).

Finally, from Yesod the lighting flash touches down on Malkhut the last sephirah, and the 20<sup>th</sup> path and 20<sup>th</sup> letter, **Resh** (*Initiate*) is born. The Path from Netzach to Malkhut completes the 21<sup>st</sup> path and 21<sup>st</sup> letter, **Shin** (*Repeat*), and the last 22<sup>nd</sup> path and 22<sup>nd</sup> letter, **Tav** (*Impress*) are completed from Hod to Malkhut.

The creators of Galgal also associated the twenty-two Tarot trumps with the twenty-two letters and paths. These correspondences appear in Zev ben Shimon Halevi's "Tree of Life".

The traditional numbering of the Marseilles Tarot is followed until the 16<sup>th</sup> path when on the 17<sup>th</sup> path between Hod and Yesod the 0 card of the Fool is associated with the Hebrew letter Peh. This makes sense if one considers that someone who can't keep silent and is afflicted by incessant mindless chatter depletes his energy foolishly.

In the following table I include astrological correspondences to the 22 paths as shown in the Sepher Yetzirah, as well as alternative titles to the major arcana cards of the Tarot:



**1<sup>st</sup> path, Magician 1, Aleph (Multiply), Kether-Chokhmah, Air**  
2<sup>nd</sup>, High Priestess, 2, Beth (House), *Chokhmah-Binah*, Moon  
**3<sup>rd</sup>, Empress, 3, Gimel (Complete), Binah-Kether, Mars**  
4<sup>th</sup>, Emperor, 4, Dalet (Depend), *Chokhmah-Chesed*, Sun  
**5<sup>th</sup>, (Hierophant, 5, Heh (Being), Chesed-Gevurah, Aries**  
6<sup>th</sup>, Lovers, 6, Vav (Secure), *Binah-Gevurah*, Taurus  
**7<sup>th</sup>, Chariot, 7, Zayin (Listen), Gevurah to Tiphereth, Gemini**  
8<sup>th</sup>, Justice, 8, Chet (Fear), *Keter-Tipheret*, Cancer  
**9<sup>th</sup>, Hermit, 9, Tet (Draft), Chokhmah-Tipheret, Leo**  
10<sup>th</sup>, The wheel of Fortune, 10, Yod (Direct), *Binah-Tipheret*, Virgo  
**11<sup>th</sup>, Strength, 11, Kaf (Incline), Chesed-Tipheret, Venus**  
12<sup>th</sup>, The Hanged Man, 12, Lamed (Learn), *Tipheret-Netzach*, Libra  
**13<sup>th</sup>, Death, 13, Mem (Flow), Chesed-Netzach, Water**  
14<sup>th</sup>, Temperance, 14, Nun (Growth & Decay), *Netzach-Hod*, Scorpio  
**15<sup>th</sup>, The Devil, 15, Samech (Support), Gevurah-Hod, Sagittarius**  
16<sup>th</sup>, The Tower, 16, Ayin (Study), *Tipheret-Hod*, Capricorn  
**17<sup>th</sup>, Fool, 0, Peh (Name), Hod-Yesod, Mercury**  
18<sup>th</sup>, Star, 17, Tsaddi (Integrity), *Tipheret-Yesod*, Aquarius  
**19<sup>th</sup>, Moon, 18, Qoph (Reproduce), Netzach-Yesod Pisces**  
20<sup>th</sup>, Sun, 19, Resh (Initiate), *Yesod-Malkuth*, Saturn  
**21<sup>st</sup>, Last Judgement, 20, Shin (Repeat), Netzach-Malkhut, Fire**  
22<sup>nd</sup>, The World, 21, Tav (Impress), *Hod-Malkhut* Jupiter

## The Golden Dawn attributions of letters and the Tarot to the paths

A reliable historical account of how the Tarot and the Kabbalah were originally linked can be found in “*A History of the Occult Tarot*” by R.Decker & M. Dummett is. In chapter 4 we read:

*“The first to propose an attribution of Hebrew letters to trumps had been the comte de Mellet, the author of an essay on the Tarot printed by Court de Gebelin after his own essay on the subject, in his Monde primitif, Vol.VIII, of 1781...”*

Later, **Éliphas Lévi** (born Alphonse Louis Constant; 1810 –1875) was the first to develop a working system that associates the Tarot with the twenty-two Hebrew letters, using correspondences of the Sepher Yetzirah. He placed the 0 card of the Fool between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> cards. These correspondences were then adopted by the Englishman **Frederick Holland** (1854-1917) who went on to create his own Tarot deck. Instead of pictures he drew Hebrew letters surrounded by inscriptions in English. Frederick Holland then showed Mathers Éliphas Lévi's correspondences and pictures to **Mathers** – one of the founders of the Golden Dawn – These were then adopted but also altered by Mathers and this is how the Golden Dawn Tarot deck was born. It in turn influenced the ubiquitous Tarot decks of **A.E. Wait** and **Alistair Crowley**.

The Kircher and Golden Dawn method of associating the twenty-two letters and paths is described by Donald Tyson's in his *Millennium Magic* in the chapter “*Twenty-two Doors*”. The logic is that one proceeds from the higher to the lower sephirah from the highest to the lowest angle whilst moving from right to left.

The first 10 paths represent the sephirot and so the paths are numbered from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 32<sup>nd</sup> .

Starting at Keter, the 11<sup>th</sup> path is from Keter to Chokhmah, the 12<sup>th</sup> path is from Keter to Binah, the 13<sup>th</sup> path is from Keter to Tipheret.

Having finished all the paths from Keter we start at the next sephirah, Chokhmah. The 14<sup>th</sup> path is from Chokhmah to Binah, the 15<sup>th</sup> is to the sephirah with the next highest angle, Tipheret, and the 16<sup>th</sup> path is to Chesed.

The emanations move to the next sephirah Binah. The 17<sup>th</sup> path is the one with the highest angle from Binah to Tiphereth, and the 18<sup>th</sup> is to Gevurah.

From Chesed the 19<sup>th</sup> path is to Gevurah, the 20<sup>th</sup> is the diagonal path to Tiphereth and the 21<sup>st</sup> path is to Netzach.

From Gevurah the highest angle is the diagonal 22<sup>nd</sup> path to Tiphereth and the 23<sup>th</sup> path is vertically

down to Hod.

From Tipheret the 24<sup>th</sup> new path is to Netzach which is to the right, the 25<sup>th</sup> path is downwards to Yesod and the 26<sup>th</sup> is diagonally to the left to Hod.

(This in fact is an anomaly, because just as in the case of Keter, the highest angle from Tiphereth after Netzach is the path to Hod, So, strictly speaking paths 25 and 26 should have been swapped.)

The emanations continue to the next Sephirah which is Netzach. The 27<sup>h</sup> path with the highest angle is from Netzach to Hod, the 28<sup>th</sup> path is to Yesod and the 29<sup>th</sup> path is to Malkhut.

From Hod the 30<sup>th</sup> path is to Yesod and the 31<sup>st</sup> path is to Malkhut.

Finally the 32<sup>nd</sup> path is from Yesod to Malkhut.

Despite the described flaw this is probably the most accepted and used system today.

The Golden Dawn Tarot cards are numbered in the traditional manner but there is one major change. Whereas in the Marseilles deck the 8<sup>th</sup> card is Justice and the 11<sup>th</sup> is Strength, in the Golden Dawn system these two cards are swapped around. The reason is that the Golden Dawn associated the Tarot cards with astrological principles, and it made sense for the card Justice to be associated with the sign Libra, and the card Strength seemed a good companion to the sign Leo. Also, the 0 card, the Fool, was placed on the 11<sup>th</sup> path between Keter and Chokhmah and associated with the 1<sup>st</sup> Hebrew letter Aleph. The rest of the trumps then follow in the sequence of the remaining 21 Hebrew letters. The paths, names, astrological attributes and letters are as follows:



11<sup>th</sup> Fool, 0, Element of Air, Aleph *Kether-Chokhmah*  
12<sup>th</sup> Magician, 1, Saturn, Beth, *Binah-Kether*  
13<sup>th</sup> High Priestess, 2, Moon, Gimel, *Keter-Tipheret*  
14<sup>th</sup> Empress, 3, Venus, Dalet, *Chokhmah-Binah*  
15<sup>th</sup> Emperor, 4, Aries, Heh, *Chokhmah-Tipheret*  
16<sup>th</sup> Hierophant, 5, Taurus, Vav, *Chokhmah-Chesed*  
17<sup>th</sup> Lovers, 6, Gemini, Zayin, *Binah-Tipheret*,  
18<sup>th</sup> Chariot, 7, Cancer, Cheth, *Binah-Gevurah*,  
19<sup>th</sup> Strength, 8, Leo, Tet, *Chesed-Gevurah*  
20<sup>th</sup> Hermit, 9, Virgo, Yod, *Chesed-Tipheret*  
21<sup>th</sup> Wheel of Fortune, 10, Caph, Jupiter, *Chesed-Netzach*  
22<sup>th</sup> Justice, 11, Lamed, Libra, *Gevurah-Tiphereth*  
23<sup>th</sup> Hanged Man, 12, Mem, Water, *Gevurah-Hod*  
24<sup>th</sup> Death, 13, Nun, Scorpio, *Tipheret-Netzach*  
25<sup>th</sup> Temperance, 14, Samech, Sagittarius, *Tipheret-Yesod*  
26<sup>th</sup> Devil, 15, Ayin, Capricorn, *Tipheret-Hod*  
27<sup>th</sup> Tower, 16, Peh, Mars, *Netzach-Hod*  
28<sup>th</sup> Star, 17, Tzaddi, Aquarius, *Netzach-Yesod*  
29<sup>th</sup> Moon, 18, Qoph, Pisces, *Netzach-Malkhut*  
30<sup>th</sup> Sun, 19, Resh, Sun, *Hod-Yesod*  
31<sup>st</sup> Last Judgement, 20, Shin, Fire, *Hod-Malkhut*  
32<sup>nd</sup> World, 21, Tav, Saturn, *Yesod-Malkuth*

I have described various meaningful associations of various occult traditions created over many

centuries with regards to the Tree of Life. Remember, there were two trees in the garden of Eden: *The Tree of Life* and *The Tree of Knowledge*, of which Adam and Eve ate. It can all be very confusing to the ordinary mind. However, this is not a problem at all to one's *Real Mind* within. That I believe is the aim of contemplating such symbols: to awaken within us the link to a hidden separate reality that is all encompassing, a place from where all paradox is resolved. As the Greek philosopher and engineer Archimedes once said in praise of his invention of levers:

*“Give me a place to stand and I'll be able to move the earth” – Δῶς μοι πᾶ στῶ καὶ τὰν γᾶν κινάσω –*

Thus, it is possible to lift oneself up by one's own bootstraps.

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[www.meditator.org](http://www.meditator.org)

<sup>1</sup> THE ASSYRIAN TREE OF LIFE: TRACING THE ORIGINS OF JEWISH MONOTHEISM AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY\*

SIMO PARPOLA, University of Helsinki

All references to the classics are from:

<sup>2</sup> Sepher Yetzirah and Sepher Ha Bahir – The Book of Enlightenment – translation by W.G. Davies and G.Zur