

SHEILA A. SPECTOR

## THE ROLE OF THE *JEW* IN FRANCISCUS MERCURIUS VAN HELMONT'S *ADUMBRATIO KABBALAE CHRISTIANAE*

Historically, in Christian Europe, the *Jew* has performed the function of *other*, serving as the negative example by which the majority could define itself. By the seventeenth century, however, what might have been a relatively clear binary opposition had become very complicated. Most obviously, during the Thirty Years' War, when the Protestants and Catholics cast each other in the role of antagonist, the *Jew* by default became the enemy of an enemy, on occasion making him the putative, if not actual ally of either or both, depending on the sectarian attitude and doctrine under consideration at a given time. As if that weren't confusing enough, as a result of the Spanish policy of forced conversions in the sixteenth century, there were what Richard H. Popkin has called "Christian Jews" and "Jewish Christians," people with divided loyalties who mined each other's doctrine to support what became a kind of amalgamation between the two. Finally, there were the adherents of what was called the *prisca theologia*, who believed that there had existed a pure form of Christianity, dating back to Moses, which was supposed to have been suppressed by the original Church, beginning in the third century with Constantine. These people believed that through Kabbalism, popularly defined as the mysticism of the Jews, they could gain access to this tradition which could then be used as the means not only of uniting Catholics and Protestants, but of bringing along the Jews, as well, into a universal faith. While to us, their efforts seem salutary, they proved threatening to church officials who ascribed the desire to study ancient Jewish texts to "judaizing." Defined as "follow[ing] or adopt[ing] Jewish customs, religious practices or beliefs; [and] behav[ing] in a manner considered typical or characteristic of Jews" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), "judaizing" was deemed by the Inquisition a punishable offense. Thus, Christians who wished to explore the origins of their own faith ran the risk of arrest and imprisonment. Under the circumstances, true believers had no option but to develop a

strategy by which they might camouflage their interest in what amounted to unapproved Christian history. One way, the one I wish to discuss today, was to turn the accusation of “judaizing” against itself. Specifically, by presenting the material in the guise of a text ostensibly designed to convert the Jews, these seekers intended neither to convert Jews to Christianity nor Christians to Judaism, but, what was considered worse by religious authorities, their activities threatened to undermine orthodox doctrine and subvert religious institutions.

The particular case I will be discussing today is the *Adumbratio kabbalae christianae*, in English the *Sketch of Christian Kabbalism*, appended to the second volume of the *Kabbala denudata*, in English the *Kabbalah Unveiled*, a two-volume compendium published in Sulzbach between 1677 and 1684. Although the *Adumbratio* was published anonymously, it was written by Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont, the epitome of a free-thinking “Chrétien sans église,” Christian unaffiliated with any church. For those unfamiliar with van Helmont, I will first provide a brief biography, followed by an analysis of his version of Christianity, as influenced by Kabbalism.

One could say that it was almost inevitable that van Helmont – his dates are 1614 to 1698 – would become a Christian free-thinker. Born in Belgium, he was the son of Jean Baptiste van Helmont, a leading sixteenth-century Paracelsian whose interests extended beyond the conventional curriculum. Having been disappointed with his own university experience, Jean Baptiste home-schooled his son who, in addition to receiving a strong esoteric education, taught himself Latin and German by reading the New Testament in both languages. At his father’s death in 1644, Franciscus Mercurius, then thirty, began traveling throughout Europe, seeking the company of other enlightened thinkers, including followers of Jakob Böhme, Kabbalists, Collegiants and Quakers. In 1650, he was invited to Sulzbach by Duke Christian August to help resolve the conflict between Lutherans and Catholics in his territories. Although van Helmont pleased Emperor Leopold, who in 1658 awarded him a patent of nobility, his efforts threatened religious authorities, and in 1661, van Helmont was arrested by the Roman Inquisition on two charges: his supposed attempt to subvert the faith of Christian August; and “judaizing.” As Allison Coudert – the leading authority on van Helmont – points out:

The very things the Inquisitors most hated about van Helmont’s beliefs and behavior – his intellectual curiosity, especially when it came to religion, his tolerance, and his lack of class consciousness – were the most characteristic and memorable things about him. The Inquisitors view van Helmont’s tolerant outlook in the worst possible light, as a sign of his duplicity, amorality, and essential atheism. He is, in their opinion, a dangerous radical, whose ideas undermine the institutional authority and hierarchical relationships essential in any well-ordered society.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 47.

Among the preliminary charges, van Helmont was accused of asserting the existence of an innate gnostic faculty through which anyone could save himself. He also questioned the validity of Bible translations, insisting on the need to learn Hebrew if one wished to understand its true meaning. As Coudert notes, “the greatest threat arose from the liberal theology and ecumenism that characterized van Helmont’s thought.”<sup>2</sup> Among the formal charges that were finally lodged, the Inquisition accused van Helmont of denying the basic Catholic doctrines of Christ’s incarnation, passion and resurrection, and of interpreting them allegorically, rather than literally.<sup>3</sup> Van Helmont was imprisoned for a year and a half before, finally, being acquitted of the charges and released in 1663.

Around the time of his release from prison, van Helmont met Christian Knorr von Rosenroth – his dates are 1636 to 1689. A scholar and statesman in his own right, von Rosenroth collaborated with van Helmont on three books: Octavius Pisani’s *The Italian Lycurgus*; Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*; and the book van Helmont had begun working on while in prison [in German *Kurtzer Entwurff des eigenlichen Naturalphabets des heiligen Sprache*], in English, *Short Sketch of the Truly Natural Alphabet of the Holy Hebrew Language*. During that period, van Helmont introduced von Rosenroth to another friend of his, Gottfried Leibniz. Several years later, in 1670, van Helmont went to England, where he served as physician to Lady Anne Conway. While there, he met leading intellectuals of the day, including Henry More, Robert Boyle, George Keith, Henry Oldenburg, then Secretary of the Royal Society, and notably, philosopher John Locke. After Anne Conway’s death in 1679, van Helmont returned to the Continent.

Eventually, van Helmont went to Sulzbach, where he worked on the *Kabbala denudata* with von Rosenroth. In 1688, they were joined by Leibniz, and the three became close friends and collaborators. Leibniz is believed to have ghost-written van Helmont’s last book [*Quaedam praemeditatae et consideratae cogitationes super quattuor capita libri primi Moisis*], first published in Amsterdam in 1697, and then translated into English in 1701, as *Premeditate and Considerate Thoughts, on the Early Chapters of the Book of Genesis*. Van Helmont died in 1698.

Early on, van Helmont developed a core set of six esoteric beliefs that remained constant throughout his life. First, he accepted a correspondent view of the cosmos, based on the assumption of an organic whole in which all of the parts mirror and correspond to each other. Second, he viewed nature as being alive, with no essential difference between matter and spirit. Third, he saw the universe as constantly changing, with everything ultimately being regenerated to return to its prelapsarian state. Fourth, he considered human beings, who were created in God’s image, as participating in cosmic restoration. Fifth,

---

<sup>2</sup> Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 52.

through gnosis, he thought humans could access different levels of reality, even divine knowledge. Finally, sixth, he advocated the *prisca theologia* as the means by which the ecumenical vision of universal harmony could be achieved.<sup>4</sup>

These beliefs were consolidated through the kabbalistic myth. While we do not have van Helmont's specific source for his knowledge of Kabbalism, his early wanderings did take him to Amsterdam, at that time the site of various unorthodox traditions. We know he traveled among various free thinkers who created a kind of brotherhood of letters that transcended sectarianism. Moreover, when he first moved to the court of Christian August, he invited many of these thinkers to join him, a point of contention among those who reported him to the inquisition. Later on, he had access to the numerous kabbalistic treatises that von Rosenroth collected and had translated for the *Kabbala denudata*. Regardless of his source, his belief in Kabbalism to justify his unorthodox version of Christianity remained strong throughout his life.

Of the various strands of Kabbalism available to him, van Helmont was most influenced by the myth of sixteenth-century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria – his dates are 1534 to 1572. In his response to the Iberian expulsion at the end of the fifteenth century, Luria took a positive view. Structuring his myth in terms of a cycle of exile and return, Luria focused on three phases of existence. The first, which he called “Contraction,” described creation not *ex nihilo*, but through emanation, in which the Godhead put forth a series of divine lights through which the idea of creation could be actualized. The first completed entity was *Adam Kadmon*, primordial man, identified as Christ by Christian Kabbalists. He is balanced out by the last completed entity, *Adam Rishon*, biblical Adam. At the time of creation, biblical Adam was said to have been of enormous stature, containing within him all souls.

In the second phase, called the “Breaking of the Vessels,” an error occurred, yielding a cosmic crisis. The vessels into which the lights were emanated shattered, and the lights were contaminated by the shards of dross. Cosmically, the lower planes were affected, and our world, which had been intended to be purely spiritual, became corporeal. On the microcosmic level, Adam was reduced in size, and most of the souls broke away from him, becoming contaminated as well. This crisis precedes Adam's disobedience in Genesis. According to the myth, had Adam resisted his temptation, then the cosmos would have immediately reverted to its intended state. However, because he did not, we all must experience the entire cycle.

The third phase, Restoration, describes the process by which the cosmos can be restored to its originally intended function. On the macrocosmic level, *Adam Kadmon* is to separate out the shards so that the lights can rise again. Microcosmically, man is to purify the soul by fulfilling his religious obligations. Because no soul can complete this requirement in a single lifetime, each

---

<sup>4</sup> Summary from Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 20.

must undergo a series of revolutions in which it is successively purified, until it can come to rest in the Upper Eden. When all of the shards are separated, and when all of the souls are purified, then the cosmos will revert to its originally intended condition. The significant point here is that man's contribution is essential for cosmic restoration; in other words, God needs man to help compensate for an error He Himself committed.

In its original form, the myth was inimical to the basic tenets of Christianity. First of all, it posits the existence of a divine spark, the gnostic faculty through which the individual himself can gain access to higher spiritual planes, without the need for any form of intercession. Also, the belief in the preexistence of souls within Adam undermines the concept of original sin. After all, how would a just God hold man accountable for an error committed before his creation? Moreover, if men themselves actively contribute to cosmic restoration, then what need is there of Grace? Finally, if ultimately, the cosmos will be restored, then there can be no eternal hell. Thus, the myth confronted van Helmont with a challenge to his own Christian beliefs. Though he considered himself a non-sectarian, still he did believe in the *prisca theologia*, that there was a true form of Christianity that existed before the consolidation of the organized church, and that the pure form could be used to unify Christians and Jews. Therefore, he had to reconcile two opposing theologies. To that end, he wrote the *Adumbratio kabbalae christianae*, a point-by-point demonstration of how the two could be made compatible with each other.

In his treatise, van Helmont remains fairly close to Luria's original, with one major exception: he explicitly carves out a place for the Christian saviour. In general, Christian Kabbalists had already associated the kabbalistic *Adam Kadmon*, primordial man, with their Saviour. In particular, they considered the coincidence that in his active manifestation, *Adam Kadmon* was called the *Son*, as further proof of the Christian interpretation of Kabbalism. Going even further, in his christianization of the myth, van Helmont created a specific function for Christ by expanding Luria's three-phase structure into four. The first two phases of both systems remain consistent, Luria's Contraction being re-presented as van Helmont's Primordial Institution, and the Breaking of the Vessels as the State of Destitution. The difference is that van Helmont divides Luria's Restoration into two parts. The first, which he calls the Modern Constitution, focuses on the activities of man in the corporeal cosmos, especially in terms of transmigration. As previously mentioned, kabbalists believe that each soul is to undergo a series of incarnations in which it successively fulfills its obligations until it is purified. At that point, it comes to rest in the Upper Eden while awaiting the other souls to complete their own process of purification. When all are finished, then, the final phase, Supreme Restitution, will be initiated. As van Helmont's innovation, the final phase is devoted to the Christian saviour, who will confront the most stubborn of the shards, in a manner consistent with the Christian apocalypse.

The treatise itself is presented in the form of a dialogue between a Christian Philosopher, the epitome of the open-minded intellectual, and a Kabbalist, whose own religious affiliation is pointedly omitted. In the text, the Kabbalist explains the Lurianic myth, and the Christian Philosopher demonstrates how each point can be supported by a reference to the New Testament. The Christian Philosopher uses a Syriac version of the Bible, presumably because as a dialect of Aramaic, Syriac is not only closer to the language of Jesus, but predates the consolidation of the organized church. Still, there is one fundamental inconsistency: regardless of language, the New Testament would be dispositive only to someone who already believed in the New Testament.

Compounding the inconsistency is the conversionist overlay of the text. In the introduction, the Kabbalist challenges the Christian Philosopher:

You know, friend, even though nothing is more important than our conversion, it will be impossible as long as we differ in our methods and terminology for explaining dogma. Knowing this, I will explain our philosophical dogma that, as you are aware, are fairly obscure, to see if we cannot find some method that will make it possible for us to understand your doctrine better, or else to familiarize you with our way of explaining mysteries.<sup>5</sup>

Accepting the challenge, the apparently orthodox Christian Philosopher then explains his goal:

... which is nothing other than to illustrate God's infinite goodness and favorable inclination towards humanity, to exalt as much as possible the life of that person we call the Messiah, and to promote the sincere imitation of the cult of the pure God, and finally, to inspire followers of this hypothesis, which constitutes the most sublime study and action.<sup>6</sup>

At the end of the text, the Christian Philosopher seems to be satisfied with his defense of Christianity. As he concludes:

"And now, the little that we have said here should be sufficient for you. Its brevity is the only thing that can be censured without difficulty, while everything can be accommodated with your beliefs: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, etc. etc. (Ephesians 1:17-20)". Amen.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Helmont, *Sketch of Christian Kabbalism*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Helmont, *Sketch of Christian Kabbalism*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Helmont, *Sketch of Christian Kabbalism*, 161.

Like bookends, the first and last comments create a conversionist veneer for the *Adumbratio*, an attitude anticipated by the introductory epigraph:

I inquire, and never rest: nothing can limit the boundaries of my  
speech:

I conjecture: I strive: I compile: I test: I question:

I capture the Jews: if you have a better path to lead in that direction,  
I concede: In the search for salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, this will be the *only* explicit reference to the Jews until Chapter 7, where van Helmont includes Jewish scholarship, along with that of *all* other religions, to justify his belief in the preexistence of souls. Consequently, the epigraph and ambiguous first and last paragraphs seem deliberately to have been used to create the veneer of conversionism, a strategy designed to avoid the accusation of “judaizing.” Rather, van Helmont seems to have been more interested in converting Christians, not to Judaism, but to the *prisca theologia*. Thus, the fiction of Jewish conversion provided a convenient subterfuge for self-protection. Ultimately, as Jonathan I. Israel notes, “most non-Jews who preoccupied themselves with matters cabbalistic, including More and Knorr’s associate, the Flemish mystic Frans Mercurius van Helmont (1614–98), evinced no further interest in Judaism and principally saw cabbala as a mystical aid to the general reconciliation and reunification of Protestants, Catholics and Jews.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Jews as Jews were irrelevant to their enterprise.

## Summary

While the use of the Jews as scapegoats is well documented, less noted is how they have provided a pretext for exploring and writing about heterodoxical ideas that otherwise might cause problems for the author. A case in point is the *Adumbratio kabbalae christianae*, by seventeenth-century esoteric thinker Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont. Although ostensibly designed to convert the Jews, a close examination reveals that the text was intended to inform like-minded Christians about an esoteric mode of thought that, at the time, was repudiated by Church authorities.

**Keywords:** Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont, *Adumbratio kabbalae christianae*, Judaizing, Kabbalism, conversionism

<sup>8</sup> Helmont, *Sketch of Christian Kabbalism*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Israel, *European Jewry*, 230.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Coudert A.P., *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont* (Leiden – Boston: Brill 1998).
- Hanegraaff W.J., “Tradition,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et. al., 2 Vols) (Leiden – Boston: Brill 2005) 2: 1125–35.
- Helmont F.M. van., *Sketch of Christian Kabbalism* (trans. and ed. S.A. Spector) (Leiden – Boston: Brill 2012).
- Idel M., *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280–1510: A Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2011).
- Israel J.I., *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism: 1550–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1985).
- Jewish Christians and Christian Jews: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (eds. R.H. Popkin – G.M. Weiner) (Dordrecht – Boston – London: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1994).
- Kilcher A.G., “Knorr von Rosenroth, Christian,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et. al., 2 Vols) (Leiden – Boston: Brill 2005) 2: 670–71.
- Scholem G.G., *Kabbalah* (New York: Quadrangle 1974).
- Stuckrad K. von., *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden – Boston: Brill 2010).