

LEIBNIZ AND THE KABBALAH

ALLISON P. COUDERT

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I began thinking about this book twenty-five years ago when I was fortunate enough to be a graduate student at the Warburg Institute with Frances Yates and D. P. Walker as my tutors. Their profound erudition, combined with their kindness to a student who had never heard of Renaissance occultism, much less the Kabbalah, provided the foundation for this book. The actual book would never have been written, however, without the support and encouragement of Richard H. Popkin. It is with deep appreciation and profound gratitude that I dedicate this book to him.

A Preliminary Note on the Kabbalah

Because the Kabbalah, and especially the Lurianic Kabbalah, is so central to the arguments presented in this monograph, the reader should have some idea of its history and basic doctrines. In what follows I give a rudimentary sketch, referring the reader to the studies of Gershom Scholem, Ernst Benz, and Moshe Idel, cited in the bibliography, for a comprehensive treatment of the subject.

The Kabbalah is the commonly used term for the mystical teachings of Judaism, especially for those originating after the twelfth century. The Kabbalah was considered to be the esoteric and unwritten aspect of the divine revelation granted to Moses on Mt. Sinai, while the Bible was simply the written and exoteric portion of this same revelation. The word itself means “that which is received” or “tradition,” and it was generally believed that the Kabbalah had passed orally from one generation to the next until the time of Esdras when it was finally written down. The Kabbalah’s reputed divine origin led many Jews as well as Christians to view it as the purest source of divine wisdom. They consequently scrutinized kabbalistic writings with especial care, expecting to find in it the incontrovertible word of God.

The two major sources of kabbalistic thought available to Christians before the seventeenth century were the *Sefer Yezirah*, or *Book of Formation*, written some time between the third and sixth century C. E. and translated by Christian Kabbalists during the Renaissance, and the *Zohar*, [*The book of*] *Splendor*, which was believed to have been written by Simeon ben Yohai in the second century C. E., although it was actually a late thirteenth century forgery. The *Sefer Yezirah* envisioned creation in terms of divine speech and the manipulation of the Hebrew letters, which are described as the “gates” or “roots” from which all things were formed. The *Zohar* is a collection of treatises dealing with a wide range of topics, such as the creation, divine revelation, biblical interpretation, physiognomy and chiromancy, the soul, the world to come, the significance of the commandments, the mysteries of the Hebrew language, and redemption.

In the sixteenth century a new form of Kabbalah appeared, the Lurianic Kabbalah, derived from the teachings of Isaac Luria, who was born in Jerusalem of German parents in 1534 and died an acclaimed “zaddik,” or holy man, in 1572. Luria spent a quiet life and three very important years at Safed surrounded by a group of devoted followers who eagerly accepted the astonishingly novel twists he gave to kabbalistic thought.

Luria delighted in allegories, enigmas, and mysteries, which makes his thought obscure and open to a wide variety of interpretations. He embraced an essentially gnostic and neoplatonic view of creation in terms of the emanation of divine light or the articulation of divine speech. Luria accepted the gnostic idea that souls were sparks of light trapped and exiled in the material realm; but he postulated an end to this exile when all souls would be redeemed, together with their material “husks,” and return to their pristine perfection through the process of reincarnation. Luria was an animist. There was nothing dead and devoid of soul in the Lurianic universe. Souls were in everything, including stones, and every soul would become better and better until finally freed from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

The doctrines of reincarnation (*gilgul*) and universal salvation, or restoration (*tikkun*), are the two most important aspects of Luria’s thought and the basis for an impregnable theodicy. By attributing the inequalities and misfortunes of life to the faults of previous existences, Luria reaffirmed a belief in God’s goodness and justice. Human beings were responsible for their own sin and suffering; but God was merciful and granted every soul the necessary time to complete the arduous process of redemption. A fundamental axiom of the Lurianic Kabbalah was that human beings were entirely responsible for redeeming themselves and the fallen world. As a result of human actions in the form of *tikkunim* (positive redemptive acts) every individual contributed to the restoration of the world to its original perfection. This idea was utterly at odds with the orthodox Christian belief in original sin, predestination, and the essential redemptive role of Christ. Although such a positive view of man was heretical and smacked of Pelagianism, one of the major arguments presented in this monograph is that this optimistic philosophy of universal salvation found its way into Leibniz’s mature theodicy.

The roots of the Kabbala, especially in its Lurianic form, lay in those strands of ancient Gnosticism which conceived of creation in terms of an emanation from the God-head and salvation in terms of the return of all created things to their original perfection in the God-head. There are therefore many similarities between the Kabbalah and Neoplatonism, which also absorbed gnostic elements. These gnostic elements, especially the implicit monism entailed in emanationism, were, however, antithetical to the orthodox Jewish and Christian view that there is an unbridgeable gulf between God

and his creatures. Consequently, the Kabbalists could be, and were, accused of teaching the heretical doctrine of pantheism as well as that of perfectionism. As I will suggest, Leibniz himself was not immune from the same charges. However much he tried to guard against it, his monadology exhibits the kind of spiritual monism characteristic of some forms of Gnosticism in general and the Lurianic Kabbalah in particular.

It is the purpose of this book to argue that for all its complexities the Lurianic Kabbalah had a significant influence on Leibniz's thought. In making this argument I am profoundly indebted to the work of Gershom Scholem, whose analysis of the Kabbalah is the starting point for anyone interested in the subject. The work of Moshe Idel is also invaluable for understanding essential elements of kabbalistic thought, especially its roots in Gnosticism and ties to Neoplatonism.

LEIBNIZ AND VAN HELMONT: A CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

- 1667 Leibniz reads van Helmont's *Alphabeti vere naturalis Hebraici brevissima Delineatio* and his translation of Octavius Pisani's *Lycurgus Italicus* (p. 5).
- 1671 Leibniz meets van Helmont, who introduces him to von Rosenroth (p. 6).
- 1672 15/25 February – Leibniz writes to Johann Friedrich Schütz von Holzhausen, asking about van Helmont's whereabouts (p. 6).
21 December – Leibniz writes to Johann Christian Boineburg, mentioning that van Helmont is in England (p. 165, n. 140).
- 1676 February – Von Rosenroth sends Leibniz two works of Robert Boyle (p. 6).
- 1679 December – Leibniz and van Helmont meet while visiting the Palatine Princess Elizabeth, Abbess of Herford, at Herford (pp. 6, 36).
- 1680 November – In a letter Leibniz says he does not think van Helmont possesses the secret of transmutation (p. 7).
- 1681 Leibniz writes to Landgraf Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels, mentioning van Helmont's conversion to Quakerism (p. 7).
- 1687–8 31 December to 1 February – Leibniz stays with von Rosenroth in Sulzbach (p. 41). Leibniz's notes of their meeting (pp. 46–47).

- 1688 10/20 January – Leibniz writes to Landgraf Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels, praising von Rosenroth’s erudition and describing his work on the Kabbalah (p. 47).
 24? April – Leibniz praises von Rosenroth in a letter to Gerhard Molanus (p. 47).
 September – Leibniz describes von Rosenroth and his work in a letter to Hiob Ludolph. He would like to establish a correspondence between Ludolph and von Rosenroth (p. 48).
- 1692 25 January – Leibniz writes to Loubère describing von Rosenroth as “perhaps the cleverest man in Europe concerning knowledge of the most esoteric matters of the Jews.” He mentions a magical square which von Rosenroth showed him.
 2 June – Leibniz refers to the square in another letter to Loubère (p. 42).
- 1693 Leibniz writes *De L’Horizon de la Doctrine Humaine*, denying the possibility of progress past a certain point (p. 112).
- 1693?–4 Leibniz writes two critiques of van Helmont’s *Seder Olam* (p. 68ff.).
- 1694 Van Helmont visits Hanover. In September Leibniz writes a long memorandum for Sophie, the Electress of Hanover, about van Helmont’s philosophy (p. 58ff.).
- 1694–96? Stimulated by van Helmont’s ideas, Leibniz writes three memoranda on whether or not progress is infinite (p. 126ff.).
- 1696 During March and April van Helmont visits Hanover and meets with Leibniz and the Electress every morning at nine o’clock to discuss his philosophy (pp. 38, 80). He then leaves to visit Sophie’s daughter, the Electress of Brandenburg-Prussia, Sophie Charlotte, in Berlin (pp. 49–50).
 7/17 March – Leibniz writes to Thomas Burnett, describing his morning meetings with van Helmont (p. 38).
 20 March – Leibniz describes these same meetings in a letter to Adam Kochanski (p. 38).
 March – Leibniz writes to van Helmont after his departure from Hanover, sending him a letter from the younger von Rosenroth with the request that on his return to Hanover van Helmont stop in Wolfenbüttel to meet Duke Anton Ulric (pp. 49–50).
 March – Leibniz writes a summary of what van Helmont

had said to him and Sophie during their morning meetings (p. 80ff.).

7 April – Van Helmont writes to Sophie (p. 50).

9 June – Leibniz praises von Rosenroth's translation of Boethius' poetry and describes his role in republishing van Helmont's and von Rosenroth's translation of Boethius (p. 64).

11 July – Hermann von der Hardt writes to Leibniz, praising van Helmont (p. 70).

July – Van Helmont returns to Hanover. Leibniz discusses Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* with van Helmont and writes his first criticisms of Locke, which he sends to Thomas Burnett (p. 150).

August-September – Van Helmont visits Hanover and has many conversations with Leibniz and the Duchess of Hanover (p. 57ff.).

August-September – Leibniz keeps a journal in which he describes his meetings with van Helmont and their discussions about van Helmont's philosophy and mechanical inventions (p. 58ff.).

September – Leibniz writes a memorandum about van Helmont's opinions for Sophie, which she sent on to her niece, Elizabeth Charlotte, the Duchess of Orleans (p. 65).

September – Leibniz writes a preface for van Helmont's and von Rosenroth's translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. At van Helmont's request Leibniz arranges to have the work republished (p. 64).

October – Van Helmont writes to Sophie, describing his meeting with Sophie's daughter, the Electress of Brandenburg-Prussia, and his arrival at his cousin's near Ter Borg (p. 50).

October – Van Helmont writes to Leibniz asking his help in publishing various of his and von Rosenroth's writings (p. 68).

18 October – Leibniz replies, mentioning some objections that Sophie and her niece, the Duchess of Orleans, have about van Helmont's theory of transmigration (p. 69).

1 December – Sophie receives a letter from Abbé de Lessing asking her to persuade van Helmont to send one of his miraculous medicines to a certain Princess to Chimay (p. 51).

4/14 December – On Sophie's instructions, Leibniz writes to van Helmont about the Princess de Chimay's request (p. 52).

December – Van Helmont writes to Sophie about the medicine (p. 52).

- 10 December – Leibniz writes Morell, expressing his admiration for van Helmont’s humanitarianism (p. 9).
- 1697 Leibniz writes van Helmont’s last book, *Quaedam praemeditatae & consideratae Cogitationes super Quatuor Priora Capita Libri Moysis Genesis nominati (Thoughts on Genesis)* (pp. 12, 31, 84).
1/11 March – Van Helmont writes to Leibniz describing a process of distillation and a method for making large mirrors (p. 66).
Leibniz sends Erik Benzelius to visit van Helmont (p. 70).
9 May – Leibniz writes to Sophie Charlotte, Electress of Brandenburg-Prussia, about van Helmont’s translation of Boethius and divine justice (p. 130).
- 1698 18/28 October – Leibniz writes van Helmont, encouraging him to write down his ideas. He looks forward to van Helmont’s return to Hanover in the spring (p. 71).
29 September – Leibniz writes to André Morell, mentioning van Helmont’s *Thoughts on Genesis* (p. 84).
27 December – Leibniz writes to van Helmont’s cousin, Mme. de Merode, expressing his sorrow at the news of van Helmont’s death. He encloses the epitaph he wrote for van Helmont at her request and asks her to preserve van Helmont’s papers (p. 71).
- 1699 27 April – Leibniz writes to the Electress of Brandenburg-Prussia about van Helmont (p. 74).
28 June – Mme. de Merode writes to Leibniz about van Helmont’s papers (p. 73).
25 August – Leibniz replies to Mme. de Merode, saying that he would like to have van Helmont’s memoirs published as well as a catalogue of his books and inventions (p. 74).
- 1701 Leibniz denies that events are bound to repeat themselves and argues instead that progress is inevitable (p. 113).
Leibniz writes a favorable review of Johann Wilhelm Petersen’s book advocating universal salvation, in which he mentions Lady Conway and van Helmont (p. 116).
- 1706 Leibniz defends the Kabbalah and von Rosenroth in his reflections on J. G. Wachter’s *Elucidarius Cabalisticus Recondita Hebraeorum Philosophia* (p. 75).
Leibniz sketches a plan for Petersen’s long poem advocating

universal salvation, *Uranias seu opera Dei magna carmine heroico celebrata* (p. 115).

- 1711 Leibniz defends van Helmont in a review of Shaftsbury's *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (p. 40).
Leibniz helps Petersen in the actual writing of *Uranias* (p. 116).
- 1715 Leibniz writes two fragmentary treatises advocating universal salvation, the first entitled *Universal Restitution*, the second entitled simply *Restitution* (p. 114).