

WIRSZUBSKI'S CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH IN CHRISTIAN
KABBALAH

by MOSHE IDEL

- 1) H. Wirszubski, *Three Chapters in the History of Christian Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: 1975).
ח' וירשובסקי, שלושה פרקים בתולדות הקבלה הנוצרית ירושלים: תשל"ה.
- 2) H. Wirszubski, *A Christian Kabbalist Reads the Torah* (Jerusalem: 1977).
ח' וירשובסקי, מקובל נוצרי קורא בתורה, ירושלים: תשל"ח.

The return to ancient literary sources which characterized Renaissance culture was represented in the intellectual life of the period by a positive re-evaluation of Platonic and Neo-Platonic traditions. The translations of Marsilio Ficino contain a great part of this ancient philosophical literature which in large measure determined the course of intellectual developments in the foremost centre of Renaissance creativity — that of Lorenzo de Medici in Florence. During the 1580's, there was a burgeoning of Christian Kabbalah in this same circle of scholars and artists which served as a companion stream of thought to a revived Neo-Platonism. A broad concern with ancient theology prompted several Renaissance scholars to turn to the Kabbalah, which they considered to be ancient Jewish theology. In the Kabbalah, as in other ancient writings then translated in Italy, they hoped to find reconfirmation of the mysteries of Christianity which in their appraisal lay concealed beneath various others traditions. Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), one of the foremost personalities in Lorenzo's scholarly circle, is the outstanding representative of this approach to ancient sources. At first, Pico participated in the Neo-Platonic trend of thought, but later widened his areas of interest to include other disciplines — Jewish and Arabic philosophy and Kabbalah in particular. The late Professor H. Wirszubski devoted a part of his scholarly investigations to Pico's encounter with Kabbalah.

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משה אידל, "שני ספרים בקבלה נוצרית משל פרופ' ח' וירשובסקי," מחוך אשכולות; שנחנן לתרבות הקלאסית ולמורשתה, סדרה חדשה, חוברת רביעית-חמישית (חוב' י"א-י"ב), תשל"ט-תש"מ, עמ' 98–103.

Scholars of the Renaissance period who seek to become familiar with the Kabbalah's contribution to Renaissance thought are confronted by one principal difficulty — to gain knowledge of the system of Kabbalah. Kabbalah has unique ways of thought which differ from philosophy so that one who is not trained in the subject will experience great difficulty in evaluating the Kabbalah's contribution to the formulation of Pico's thought.¹ Another difficulty awaiting scholars is the fact that those kabbalistic writings which Pico studied in Latin translation remain hidden away in manuscripts — unlike other source literature on Pico which has already been published. Thus, an entire area of Pico's sources remained a closed book to scholars, like a treasure stored up for its rightful owners to claim in the future. Wirszubski's main contribution to the study of Pico's thought was to open the gates of this treasure trove so that the material secreted there might be utilized to clarify Pico's ideas, as well as to decipher his enigmatic allusions.

As a first step, Wirszubski devoted several studies to the literary activity of Flavius Mithridates (Guillermo Raimondi di Moncada who, while still a professing Jew, was called Samuel Nissim Alfaraj of Sicily). Mithridates, an apostate Jew, received not only a broad Jewish education, including Kabbalah, but was also thoroughly learned in Christian theology. He taught Pico Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. He also translated a complete library of kabbalistic works from Hebrew into Latin. As Ficino before him, Mithridates succeeded in making his translations a focus of scholarly interest. Within the space of several years, this kabbalistic *corpus* in Latin became the intellectual heritage of many of the Renaissance men in Italy, Germany and France. Prior to Wirszubski, several studies had been devoted to the subject of Flavius Mithridates, but all were restricted to the extensive biographical details of his career.² This was not an oversight. Mithridates' original, and apparently single, work was unknown until G. Scholem discovered it, thus opening the way to a familiarity with Mithridates' own views. To a scholarly edition of this composition,³ Wirszubski added a lengthy and wide ranging essay, as well as analyzing Mithridates' approach. In

1. An outstanding example of the difficulties involved in understanding Pico's kabbalistic conceptions, is the lack of any particular discussion of the Kabbalah in an excellent two volume collection of studies on Pico, published in honour of the five hundredth anniversary of his birth. See: *L'opera e il pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nella storia dell'umanesimo; convegno internazionale, Mirandola, 15-18 settembre 1963*, (Firenze: Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, 1965).

2. As a result of the publication of H. Wirszubski's scholarly edition of Mithridates' sermon, Secret added several details relating to Mithridates' opinions in his article in the collection mentioned above (*Opera*, vol. 2, pp. 169-87.)

3. Flavius Mithridates, *Sermo de Passione Domini* (Jerusalem: 1963). In two published articles which appeared in Hebrew, Wirszubski presented most of the material found in the introduction to his edition of the sermon. These are: "The Christological Sermon of Flavius Mithridates", *Yitzhak F. Baer Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1961), pp. 191-206, and "Flavius Mithridates," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences* 1:3 (1966).

that introduction. Wirszubski demonstrated Mithridates' particular use of ancient, classical sources (such as Vergil's *Aeneas*), of Christian thought (St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure), and of Jewish sources. In this connection, it is appropriate to dwell upon Mithridates' method of presenting his ancient Jewish sources.

The sermon which Mithridates delivered before the Pope around Easter time in the year 1481 is not a kabbalistic one. The term Kabbalah was not specifically mentioned by the speaker. However, as Wirszubski proved (p. 28), in this sermon Mithridates set down an important principle upon which the entire structure of Christian Kabbalah was later built. Mithridates stated that there existed an ancient Jewish esoteric tradition which was not to be studied until after the age of forty. This tradition was included in what he called *Vetus Talmud* ("the Old Talmud"), which in Mithridates' opinion was written about the year 370 BCE. This Talmud contained allusions to the future mysteries of Christianity, such as the selling and crucifixion of Jesus. Mithridates' sermon contains no criticism of the "New Talmud", rather he praised the Christological allusions found in the "Old Talmud". It is here that the way was opened for Pico's Christian exegesis of ancient Jewish tradition — particularly of the Kabbalah. As stated previously, Mithridates did not claim that the "Old Talmud" was a kabbalistic *corpus*. Therefore, it is difficult to determine how the attribution of Christological allusions was transposed from the "Old Talmud" to the ancient Kabbalah. All the same, in his writings, Pico already mentions seventy books of Kabbalah written by Ezra (according to the fourth book of Ezra, ch. 14) which it was forbidden to study before the age of forty, and which can be found in Latin translation. Pico was thirsting to find the common Christian truth, hidden beneath the linguistic garb of diverse speculative systems. He was faced with the task of making a close study of Kabbalah in order to understand that ancient Jewish theology which resembled the Hermetic writings and Neo-Platonic philosophy in that it was but a cloak for Christianity (*ibid.*, pp. 25–28). Fortunately, there was someone who facilitated Pico's endeavour. That person was Mithridates. Wirszubski demonstrated that Mithridates had full command of the kabbalistic material which he translated. During his examination of these translations, and by comparing them with the original Hebrew works, Wirszubski discovered changes and additions to the primary material. These alterations of the Hebrew text gave the writings a Christian bias, and at times a magical connotation. Mithridates' Latin translation transformed the Kabbalah so that it became not only Pico's source of familiarity with the subject,⁴ but also an inspiration for Christian reinterpretation of kabbalistic conceptions. After this discovery, Wirszubski published a series of articles about these Latin translations and their connection to Pico's works. In an

4. This had previously been noted by G. Scholem in "Zur Geschichte der Anfänge der Christlichen Kabbalah," *Essays Presented to Leo Baeck* (London: 1954), p. 167.

article about the translation of *Sefer HaShorashim* of R. Joseph Ibn Waka Wirszubski demonstrated *inter alia* that one of Mithridates' interpolations changed a purely kabbalistic text into an allusion to the Trinity.⁵ Pico read the doctored translation of *Sefer HaShorashim* and concluded that in their writing the kabbalists alluded to the mystery of the Trinity. He expressed this opinion in a kabbalistic thesis which is of his own authorship (p. 354). While perusing the Latin translations, Wirszubski found marginal notations in Pico's own handwriting. In addition, Wirszubski also discovered a kabbalistic work translated by Mithridates from the Hebrew, the greater part of which has been lost to us in the original language.

This is a commentary by R. Abraham Abulafia to Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*. In a separate article⁶ devoted to this commentary, Wirszubski commented on the differences between the Latin translation and the extant Hebrew text. According to the translation, Abulafia was a direct disciple of Maimonides. Therefore, Abulafia's esoteric teaching became equated with the philosophy of Maimonides, rendering the latter a kabbalist. This transformation convinced Pico that Maimonides was a kabbalist who intentionally transmitted kabbalistic secrets in an outwardly rational terminology. Pico's knowledge of Kabbalah, as found in his utilization of kabbalistic sources, clearly reflects the influence of Mithridates' translations which were the most important, if not sole, source of Pico's familiarity with that subject. Mithridates' influence extended beyond the confines of Pico's writings. The sermons Mithridates delivered before the Pope were imitated by others in Italy. His interpretation of the Kabbalah was known in Germany already in Pico's time.⁷

In several other studies, Wirszubski endeavoured to analyze and systematize Pico's own thought on the Kabbalah. He placed Pico's famous *Theses* at the center of his research. This selection of the *Theses* as his main focus of study was not arbitrary. Although short in length, Pico's *Theses* contain a wealth of ideas, expressed in a terse, concentrated manner. Two orders of the *Theses* are devoted to kabbalistic topics. They represent Pico's chief contribution to the formulation of Christian Kabbalah. As previously mentioned, Pico considered the Kabbalah to be proof of Christianity's veracity. In addition, Pico integrated kabbalistic concepts within a series of *Theses*, founded upon Neo-Platonic principles. Here was an attempt to decipher the thought of the ancient philosophers with the aid of

5. "Giovanni Pico's Companion to Kabbalistic Symbolism" *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom Scholem* (Jerusalem: 1967), pp. 353-62.

6. "Liber Redemptions — An Early Version of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalistic Commentary on the *Guide to the Perplexed* in Latin Translation by Flavius Mithridates," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences* 3 (1969), pp. 135-49 (in Hebrew).

7. See *Sermo* (fn. 3 above), pp. 26, 75.

Kabbalah. In Wirszubski's interpretation, the Kabbalah exercised a double influence on Pico. On the one hand, Pico assimilated singularly kabbalistic ideas, giving them a new interpretation which at times rendered them compatible with Christian thought and at others enabled him to find parallels between kabbalistic concepts and Neo-Platonic ideas.

Pico also applied kabbalistic modes of thought such as the kabbalistic method of Scriptural exegesis by a combination of letters, to interpret non-kabbalistic texts in a Christological way. His adaptation of kabbalistic concepts is well exemplified by his treatment of the topic of "death by the divine kiss". Wirszubski demonstrated that Pico's discussion of the subject — a very influential source for subsequent Renaissance theories of love — was based upon material that Pico found in Mithridates' translations. These included a passage from the Torah commentary by the kabbalist R. Menaḥem Recanati translated by Mithridates especially for Pico,⁸ which the latter copied practically verbatim, as well as an adaptation of Mithridates' interpolations in his translation of R. Levi ben Gerson's (Gersonides) commentary on Job.⁹ Pico's literary contemporaries adopted the motif of "death by the divine kiss" not only because of its kabbalistic origin but also because the idea was compatible with concept of love current in Renaissance thought and literature. More significantly, Pico used kabbalistic ideas as a key to elucidate the enigmatic "words" of Zoroaster, alluded to in several of the *Theses*. Only by explication of the kabbalistic allusions found in these "Zoroastrian" theses — as Wirszubski inferred — can these theses be understood.¹⁰ No less important was Pico's use of kabbalistic symbolism to substantiate Jesus' rank as the 'Son of God', and as the Divine Wisdom.¹¹ He also interpreted the Scriptural names of God which the Kabbalah ascribed to the three uppermost *Sefirot* as references to the Christian Trinity. In Wirszubski's view, kabbalistic symbolism became the outstanding feature of Pico's proof of Christianity's truth, and remained so in the writings of those Christians who followed in Pico's path.¹²

Pico's application of kabbalistic methods of exegesis to non-kabbalistic texts is demonstrated in his interpretation of Scripture and substantiation of the parallel between certain religious and philosophical ideas. In a detailed, lengthy explication, Wirszubski exemplified two instances in which Pico used an exegetical

8. H. Wirszubski, *Three Chapters in the History of Christian Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: 1975), pp. 17–21.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Wirszubski devoted a separate study to this translation which contains important comments by Pico himself. See "Giovanni Pico's Book of Job." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 32 (1969), pp. 171–99.

10. See fn. 8 above, *Three Chapters*, pp. 28–38.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

12. *A Christian Kabbalist Reads the Torah* (Jerusalem: 1977), p. 38.

method whereby the letters of a given Hebrew word are associated in different ways to yield a variety of meanings. Both concern the first word of the Hebrew Bible, *Bereshit* ("In the beginning..." — Gen. 1:1), the Hebrew letters *Beth, Resh, Aleph, Shin, Yod, Tav*. While a kabbalistic exegete who wanted to employ this technique of interpretation might have divided the word *Bereshit* into the letters *Beth, Resh, Yud, Taf*, — *B'rit*, which form a word for Covenant, and the letters, *Aleph, Shin*, for the word *Esh* (fire). Pico combined the letters *Aleph* and *Beth* to form the word *Aleph-Bet, Ab*. (father), and combined *Beth* with *Resh* to form the word *Bar* (son). These words may also be derived from the letters of the word *Bereshit*. For Pico this was proof that the Torah commences¹³ with an allusion to Christian truth.

In a second, more complicated example, Wirszubski showed how Pico integrated kabbalistic techniques of letter combination with Neo-Platonic conceptions in support of Trinitarian dogma.¹⁴ In Kabbalah, the letter *Beth* symbolizes the *Sefirah- Hokhmah* (wisdom). The letter *Beth*, joined to the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the *Aleph*, forms the word *Ab* (father). The word *Ben* (son), is formed when the letter *Beth* is joined to the letter *Nun*, the middle letter of the Hebrew alphabet, including the letters, *Mem, Nun, Tzaddeh, Peh* and *Kaf*, doubled by their final radicals. The letter *Beth*, taken together with the last two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the *Shin* and the *Tav*, forms the word *Shabbat* (Sabbath). In Pico's view the various relationships of the letter *Beth* to the other letters of the alphabet represent the Trinity as well as the three basic processes, described by the Neo-Platonist philosopher, Proclus. In Pico's thought, the father is *mansio* — the eternal, the son is *processio*, and the Sabbath is *reversio*.¹⁴ Because Pico adopted this system of letter combination, Wirszubski considered him to be the founder of a new Christian Kabbalah. Pico not only interpreted Jewish sources in a Christological manner, but also applied kabbalistic techniques of exegesis to non-kabbalistic sources. Pico's *Theses* gave birth to Christian Kabbalah: "an independent, mystical discipline" (p. 22).

Wirszubski devoted a special article to another stage of the Kabbalah's entry into the Christian sphere. Wirszubski found a commentary on the kabbalistic theses of Pico in the manuscript collection of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. Careful examination of the introduction to the commentary revealed that its author was none other than a well known author of Christian Kabbalah, Francesco Giorgio of Venice. Wirszubski also characterized the ideas implicit in Giorgio's interpretation of Pico's kabbalistic theses.¹⁵ Giorgio of

13. See fn. 8 above. *Three Chapters*, pp. 23–27, 53–55; *A Christian Kabbalist* (see fn. 12 above), p. 37f.

14. *A Christian Kabbalist* (see fn. 12 above), p. 16f.

15. "Francesco Giorgio's Commentary on Giovanni Pico's Kabbalistic Theses," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974), pp. 145–46.

Venice attempted to explain the *Theses* by referring to classical kabbalistic texts such as the *Zohar* and *Shaarei Orah*. However, as these works were not counted among Pico's kabbalistic sources, Giorgio missed the mark and in most cases read his own interpretations into the *Theses*. Wirszubski uncovered another important fact when he found that a better known interpretation, Archangelo de Burgonuovo's *Commentary on Pico's Theses*, was merely a plagiarism of Giorgio's work (pp. 146–48).

The preceding summary is based upon a series of studies by Wirszubski. His principal aim was to elucidate Pico's kabbalistic sources and their influence upon his thought. In most cases these were preparatory studies, cornerstones for Wirszubski's comprehensive treatment of Pico's encounter with Jewish mysticism and its influence upon him. This great work, completed shortly before the author's death, was praised by Gershom Scholem as "an exemplary work of scholarship."¹⁶ However, even prior to its publication, one may state that Wirszubski's research set a new standard for scholarship on Pico. In place of bland comments and the use of outdated reference works about the Kabbalah, there now stand before us unequivocal interpretations, based upon the discovery of direct sources of influence. As a result, we will have a better understanding of the integration of the Kabbalah into Renaissance thought — and the Kabbalah's conversion into one of the most important sources of Jewish influence upon general culture during those centuries.

The adaptation of kabbalistic methods of exegesis by Christians suggested an outstanding feature of Kabbalah. Kabbalistic symbols possess a unique vitality, a plasticity which may conform to many structures of thought. These symbols might be enlisted in support of Christianity, as they had been in the past for Judaism. The system of kabbalistic exegesis, based upon letter combinations, was compatible with Jewish thought and remained so because of the "religious inhibitions of the Jewish kabbalist."¹⁷ In the absence of those inhibitions, this system of interpretation was likely to reverse direction, and undermine the traditional Jewish understanding of the Torah. Most Jews ignored the ambivalent quality inherent in the kabbalistic symbol. Only later, with the crisis brought on by Sabbateanism, did this phenomenon reappear with great forcefulness.

Wirszubski dedicated most of his research to the topics, Christian Kabbalah and Sabbateanism. Was the choice of these subjects a mere coincidence? Keeping in mind that Wirszubski was also preoccupied by the writings of Spinoza, we can make a general characterization of the focus of his research. He devoted his energies and talents to a painstaking, thoughtful study of the three principal variations on Jewish theology which went beyond the confines of Judaism.

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16. See the memorial booklet, *In Memoriam Hayyim Wirszubski* (Jerusalem: 1978), p. 11.

17. *Three Chapters* (see fn. 8 above), p. 29.