

The Influence of Abraham Cohen de Herrera's Kabbalah on Spinoza's Metaphysics

The Iberian Religious World

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The Influence of Abraham Cohen de Herrera's Kabbalah on Spinoza's Metaphysics

By

Miquel Beltrán



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List of Abbreviations

Citation Conventions for The Works of Spinoza

CG	Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae (Spinoza Opera, volume I (SO 1, 283–403) 1, 2, 3, etc. = Caput I, II, III, etc. Subsections of the chapter, if necessary with the corresponding subtitle, therewith Ann = Annotations.
CM	Appendix, continens cogitate metaphysica (SO 1, 231–281) 1, 2 = Pars I, II /1, /2, /3 = Caput I, II, III, etc. no 1, no 2, no 3, etc. = Subsection numbers in some chapters
E	Ethica more geometrico demonstrata (SO 2, 41–308) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 = Pars I, II etc.
Praef	Praefatio
P1, P2 etc.	Propositio I, II etc.
I	Introductio (ahead of the Definitiones, etc.)
A	Appendix, for Pars IV: A1, A2 Appendix, Caput I, II
L1, L2, etc	Lemma I, II etc.
AD1, AD2 etc.	Affectuum Definitiones I, II etc.
D1, D2 etc.	Demonstratio 1, 2 etc.
C1, C2 etc.	Corrolarium I, II etc.
S1, S2 etc.	Scholium I, II etc.
Ax1, 2 etc.	Axioma I, II etc.
Defi, 2 etc.	Definitio I, II etc.
Post 1, 2 etc.	Postulatum I, II etc.
Ex1, 2 etc.	Explicatio I, II etc.
Ep	Epistolae (SO 4, 1–336) 1, 2, 3 = Letter numbers (according to Gebhardt numbering)
KV	Korte Verhandeling
KS	Korte Schetz
I	Introductio 1, 2 = Eerste, Tweede Deel /1, /2, /3 etc. = Caput I, II, III etc.
Z1, Z2	Eerste, tweede Zamensprekening No 1, 2, 3 etc. = numbers internal to individual chapters
A	Appendix
Ax1,, 2, 3 etc.	Axioma 1, 2, 3 etc.

P1, 2, 3 etc.	Propositio I, II, III etc.
D	Demonstratio
C	Corrolatium
VMZ	Van de menschelyke Ziel
PPC	Renati Des Cartes Principorum Philosophiae Pars I ... (SO 1, 123–230) 1, 2, 3 = Pars I, II, III
Praef	Praefatio
Prol	Prolegomenon

All Other Logograms as for the Ethica

TIE	Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione (SO 1, 1–40)
Adm	Admonitio ad lectorem
TP	Tractatus politicus (SO 3, 269–360)
Praef	Auctoris epistola ad Amicum.... 1, 2, 3 etc. = Caput I, II, III etc.
TTP	Tractatus theologico-politicus (SO 3, 1–267) 1, 2, 3 = Caput I, II, III etc.
Adn	Adnotatio I, II, III etc.

Within the chapter by page and paragraph according to Gebhardt edition.

Introduction

In Amsterdam, between 1620 and 1632, Abraham Cohen de Herrera (*Philosopho, Theologo y Cabalista*,¹ as he defined himself in an *Approbation* found in the first volume of Menasseh Ben Israel's *Conciliador*) wrote the only two treatises of Jewish Kabbalah originally produced in Spanish:² *The House of Divinity*³ and *Gate of Heaven*.⁴ The latter in particular can be considered a prime example of the attempts to enhance the association between Kabbalah and philosophy, which peaked during the Renaissance. These attempts focused on the universalization of its mysteries, which was assumed would be achievable by means

- 1 Yosha, Nissim, "The Impact of Renaissance Writings on 17th Century Kabbalist Herrera", *Accademia. Revue de la Société Marsile Ficine* 3 (2001): 113–129, considered that such an order emphasizes the priority of the philosophical aspects of Kabbalah, since such titles "indicate their valuation of the hierarchy of the different grades of truth". Here 114. Despite Yosha, a careful reading of *La Casa de la Divinidad* allows us to suspect that Herrera only professes this prevalence timidly.
- 2 About the work and life of this singular author, the book by Melnick, Ralph, *From Polemic to Apologetics. Jewish-Christian Rapprochement in 17th Century Amsterdam*. Van Gorcum, Assen, the Netherlands, 1981, should be consulted. Also Niewöhner, Franz, "Abraham Cohen de Herrera in Hamburg", *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte* 35 (1983): 163–167. Cfr. also Yossa, Nissim, "Abraham Cohen de Herrera. An Outstanding Exponent of *Prisca Theologia* in Early Seventeenth Century Amsterdam" in *Dutch Jewish History*, ed. J. Michman, Assen, Gorcum, 1993, 117–126, Krabbenhoft, Kenneth, "Structure and Meaning of Herrera's *Puerta del Cielo*", *Studia Rosenthaliana* 16 (1982): 1–20; and Necker, Gerold, *Humanistische Kabbala im Barock. Leben und Werk des Abraham Cohen de Herrera*. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2011.
- 3 There are two manuscripts of *La Casa de la Divinidad*. The first one is in the Ets Haim Library, in the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam (EH 48 A20), copied by Samuel Abaz George, complete, in seven books. The second one, incomplete, is in the Jewish National and Hebrew University Library Varia, 106 (Jerusalén). It reaches Book six, which is also incomplete.
- 4 There are four manuscripts of *Puerta del Cielo* in the original Spanish. The one examined and used here, chosen also by Krabbenhoft and Saccaro Battisti in their respective translations into English and Italian of the work, is that conserved at the Royal Library at the Hague 131 C 10, of which we do not know the authorship. It is complete, in ten books, with summary and table of contents. Another three manuscripts have survived: Two of them are located in the Ets Haim-Livraria Montezinos library of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam (Ets Haim 148 A 16, copied by Samuel David Curiel in 1675 (it is complete as well) and Ets Haim ES 48 B 19, copied by Samuel Abaz George in 1740, of which books eight, nine and ten are missing). A fourth manuscript, in the Library of the Columbia University in New York (x 86 H 42 Q), of anonymous author, also lacks books eight, nine, and ten. In any case, here we cite the Krabbenhoft's translation: Cohen de Herrera, Abraham, *Gate of Heaven*. Translation, Introduction and Notes by Kenneth Krabbenhoft, Leiden, Brill, 2002.

of philosophical reasoning. Thus, Herrera would be the epitome of the recurring effort to reveal, through the authority of a *prisca theologia*, the most hidden truth concerning the divine infinity and the procession of the emanated beings. This approach was based on the fact that philosophy, contributes to the search for the highest principle. Examining the nature of the Neoplatonic One – beyond essence and existence – could allow for the understanding of the Kabbalah's ultimate Infinity. Of course, a very different terminology is used in the Kabbalah to describe what the philosophers interpret as Neoplatonic hypostasis; emanation was the manifestation of the hidden God, as well as a mark of His all-encompassing presence and vastness.

In *The House of Divinity*, Herrera confesses that he sets out towards philosophy looking for relief from the difficulties of mystical contemplation:

weary of the sovereign contemplations of Kabbalistic and theological mysticism, I turn to the humble arguments of human philosophical thought, through them refreshing myself until I am able to return to my exalted purpose with renewed spirit and increased strength.⁵

Herrera claims that, compared to Kabbalah and theology, philosophy is a more accessible discipline. In further passages, however, he also warns of the dangers involved in using philosophy. From a philosophical perspective, it is tantamount to a consummate mistake, even a blasphemy, to attribute contradictory properties to the First Cause. Conversely, Kabbalah holds that this is possible. In the introduction to his *Summary of Logic or Dialectics* [*Epítome y Compendio de la Logica o Dialectica*],⁶ published during his lifetime, Herrera declares that his aim is to provide an instrument to facilitate the understanding of Kabbalistic writings, and to present a didactic analysis of its contents, which he defines as identical to those found in Plato's *Philebus*. The possibility that Herrera wrote his work in Spanish not because of his inexperience with Hebrew, neither for apologetic reasons, but instead to easily attract the members of the Portuguese community to the mysteries of Lurianic Kabbalah, should be seriously taken into account. The connection between philosophy and Kabbalah was, thus, highly convenient. Herrera turned unashamedly to Plato's texts, (the *Parmenides*, and others of his *Dialogues and Letters*), Aristotle, and early Neoplatonism, and even to treatises of Scholastic and Neo-Scholastic

⁵ *La Casa de la Divinidad*, Book v, Chapter 9, here 186.

⁶ The book was reprinted a few years ago: Cohen de Herrera, Abraham, *Epítome y Compendio de la Logica o Dialectica*, ed. Giuseppa Saccaro Battista del Buffa. Cooperativa Libreria Universitaria Editrice Bologna, 2002.

theology, as well as to the Kabbalah and to the Christian thought of the Renaissance. Ficino is the most quoted author in *Gate of Heaven*. Unlike other thinkers, such as Spinoza himself, who hide the most remarkable influences perceivable in their work, Herrera seems to want to show this dependence. He particularly focuses on the integration of certain philosophical formulations in the Kabbalah, as argued by his predecessors. On the other hand, it is astonishing that Herrera does not name several Jewish thinkers of the Italian Renaissance that he probably knew, who foreshadowed him in arguing for the connection between philosophy and Kabbalah.

In any case, Herrera describes himself as a disciple of Israel Sarug,⁷ who, in turn, devoted himself to spreading the new teachings of Isaac Luria around Italy. In a seminal study, Altmann⁸ indicates that the purpose and scope of *Gate of Heaven* are already proclaimed in the title of the work: “a light by which to enter into the full content and meaning of the Kabbalah, the mysteries and insights of which are within reach of human understanding.”⁹ As he points out, Herrera’s aim was to broaden the field of human intellect, circumscribed to what it could grasp from the divine mysteries.

Altmann proceeds to give a catalogue of authorities cited by Herrera, from Hermes Trismegistus to Numenius, from Plato to Avicenna, from Maimonides to Suárez. Besides, pertaining to the philosophy of the Italian Renaissance, quotations of texts by Scaligero, Patrizi and Cardano among others, fill the pages of *Gate of Heaven*, and Ficino’s *Theologia Platonica* is there profusely cited, along with other works by this same author, which Altmann does not mention.¹⁰

7 Herrera and Sarug met for the first time in Ragusa (the current Dubrovnik), an encounter that would be decisive for the subsequent intellectual journey of the author of *Gate of Heaven*.

8 Altmann, Alexander, “Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key: Abraham Cohen Herrera’s *Puerta del Cielo*”, in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus. Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1987, 1–37, wrote regarding his relationship: “(Herrera) unreservedly credited Sarug’s reputation as a direct disciple of Isaac Luria and ... attached particular importance to this circumstances. In this trust he was confirmed by the consensus of opinion among Italian Kabbalists, including Menahem Azariah da Fano, the most prominent disciple of Sarug’s,” here 4.

9 Altmann’ translation of the title goes as follows: “and light to enter in the capacity and intelligence of the Kabbalah, and whose mysteries and contemplation have arrived to the human understanding.”

10 He forgets, particularly, about the *Commentary on the Parmenides* by Ficino, work on which Herrera will establish the convenience of a negative theology as the highest approach to the One. A canonical translation into English of the Commentary has been recently published: Ficino, Marsilio, *Commentaries on Plato: Parmenides*. Two Volumes, trans. Maude Vanhauelen. Cambridge, The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2012.

Herrera takes also from Pico della Mirandola the conception of Kabbalah as an oral wisdom transmitted by tradition, that both of them date back to Moses, and that can also be found in Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica*, "Herrera actually followed a view that had been espoused also by Jewish Kabbalists. Pico himself may have borrowed it from Flavius Mithridates' Latin version (*Liber redemptionis*) of Abraham Abulafia's *Commentary on Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed*."¹¹ Nonetheless, with regard to the purpose of the author of *Gate of Heaven*, Altmann concludes the following: "Herrera was too much of a genuine philosopher to believe in the possibility of a fusion of the two realms, and he was too much of a genuine Kabbalist to wish for it. While he acknowledges the legitimacy of both disciplines ... and precisely on that account he owes each a separate loyalty."¹² Altmann reveals how Sarug, conversely, seems to have professed that Kabbalah and Platonism are essentially the same, and that they only differ in terminology. With respect to Herrera, "what he attempted in his (*Gate of Heaven*) was the closest possible approximation of Platonism and Kabbalah, not a total identification."¹³ Yosha, in turn, argued:

Herrera adopted the *prisca theologia* theory formulated by Marsilio Ficino and his followers, a theory that remained prominent until the seventeenth Century.¹⁴ According to this view, all faiths, pagan and monotheistic, share a common ancient truth whose validity transcends all generations. Ficino also asserted, in his *De religione Christiana* and in *Theologia Platonica* that the ancient theologians owed their wisdom to the Hebrew Scriptures, which passed in on to Plato. Plato's disciples over the centuries – Numenius, Philo, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus – interpreted him in the light of the Christian truths of the Gospels and Apostles.¹⁵

¹¹ Altmann, Alexander, "Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key ...," 7.

¹² Altmann, Alexander, "Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key ...," 9.

¹³ Altmann, Alexander, "Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key ...," 10.

¹⁴ One of the most important considerations that we will maintain here is that Spinoza shared, in a kind of peculiar and half-veiled way, this vindication of a *prisca theologia* in which the ancient Hebrews would have agreed on the teachings of Christ and Paul, and also with earlier philosophers, as may be proved through the reading of an important fragment of Ep73 that we will quote later on in the main text. About this notion, see Lelli, Fabrizio, "Prisca Theologia and Docta Religio: The Boundaries of Rational Knowledge in Jewish and Christian Humanist Thought", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 91 (2000): 53–99.

¹⁵ Yosha, Nissim, "The Impact of Renaissance Writings ...," 120.

For Yosha, it is obvious that “Herrera was the founder of the metaphoric interpretation school of Lurianic Kabbalah.”¹⁶

Herrera’s almost obsessive appeal to countless philosophical arguments, in order to validate the truth of Kabbalah, led him to be accused of a lack of originality. However, with these many veiled and unveiled references he tries to consolidate a highly accurate system of hierarchies, sometimes distancing himself from the main influences in Luria’s teaching. This makes *Gate of Heaven* a unique piece of work, the zenith in the search for a syncretism between philosophy and Kabbalah. Thus, it is also the pinnacle of one of the three main attempts of reconciliation between them.

Huss describes all of these, and concerning the first one, that of identity, he states:

According to the first model, Kabbalah and Philosophy represent essentially the same body of knowledge. The difference between them is semantic; different terms refer to the same entities and concepts. These semantic differences are, according to some Kabbalist, a consequence of the different source of this information and their transmission.¹⁷

This idea can be traced back to the 13th century, to Azriel of Gerona, the Jewish kabbalist most cited by Herrera in *Gate of Heaven*:

The words of the wisdom of the Torah, and the words of the Philosophers follow the same route, and there is no difference between them, but a difference in terminology. That is because the Philosophers did not give the appropriate names to the various parts (of reality). On the other hand, the Sages of truth (i.e., the Kabbalists), who received (their knowledge) from the prophets, who in turn, received from the mouth of God, know to distinguish properly between the different parts (of reality) and to name everything appropriately according to its potential and its action.¹⁸

Azriel asserted that Neoplatonic considerations, concerning the emanation of the hypostasis, are essentially identical to the Kabbalistic doctrine of divine

16 Yosha, Nissim, “The Impact of Renaissance Writings ...”, 123.

17 Huss, Boaz, “Mysticism versus Philosophy in Kabbalistic Literature”, *Micrologus* 9 (2011): 125–135, here 125.

18 *Commentary on Talmudic Aggadoth* by Rabbi Azriel of Gerona. Ed. I. Tishby. Jerusalem, 1943. (in Hebrew). Here, 51.

powers. Huss considers probable that other Kabbalists of the Gerona's circle held this same view on the assimilation between philosophy and Kabbalah, but neither Nahmanides and his disciples, nor the group of Castilian mystics who wrote the *Zohar* can be named in this regard. Huss also points out that this identity was also argued by some Kabbalists, like R. Moses Botarel, who in his *Commentary on Séfer Yeşirah*, wrote at the beginning of the 15th century, dared to affirm that the sacred Torah could even be called pure philosophy. According to R. Avigdor Kara, the words of Saadia, Halevi and Maimonides have their origins in the same sources as those of the Kabbalists. For his part, R. Moses Isserles¹⁹ highlighted that the sefirot are attributes of action, and this is in agreement with what some of the philosophers postulate. The only dispute concerns their conceptualization, insofar as the Kabbalists call them sefirot or divine names, and the philosophers refer to them as God's attributes and actions. But it was in the Kabbalistic schools of the Italian Renaissance and the early Baroque, where this equivalence was vindicated with more powerful arguments. Thus, at the beginning of the 16th century, R. David Messer Leon wrote, "Plato is called the divine philosopher, for one who studies his books closely will find there great and tremendous secrets and all their opinions are those of the masters of true Kabbalah."²⁰ The affinity between *prisca theologia* and Kabbalah was also argued by R. Yohanan Alemanno.²¹ According to him, Plato believed in a doctrine very much akin to the one maintained later by the Kabbalists, concerning the nature of the sefirot. An ancient Hebraic wisdom was the Kabbalah for Isaac Abravanel and his son, Leone Ebreo. Both suspected that Plato rewrote, in his *Dialogues*, Hebrew teachings concerning God – and

19 *Torat Ha-Olah*.

20 See Idel, Moshe, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretation of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance", in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. D.B. Ruderman. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1992. Tirosh-Rothschild, Hava, *Between Worlds: the Life and World of Rabbi David ben Judah Messer Leon*. State University of New York Press, 1991. See also Tirosh-Rothschild, Hava, "Sefirot as the Essence of God in the Writings of David Messer Leon", *ASJ Review* 7–8 (1982–83): 409–425.

21 See Lelli, Fabrizio, "Un collaboratore ebreo di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola – Yohanan Alemanno", *Vivens Homo* 5 (1994): 401–430. Idel, Moshe, "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance", in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn E. Goodman. Albany, State University of New York Press 1992, 319–351. See also Novak, C. "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1982): 125–147; Von Stuckrad, Kocku, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities*. Leiden, Brill, 2010, and also Idel, Moshe, "The Anthropology of Yohanan Alemanno: Sources and Influences", *Topoi* 7 (1988): 201–220.

that he studied this secret theology in Egypt. In his turn, R. Joseph Del Medigo noticed that the position of Plato is almost the same as the one of the sages of Israel, and that on these issues it is as he had put the words of the Kabbalists in his mouth. Del Medigo did not appear surprised that this could happen, as long as he maintains that the Greeks inherited their philosophical knowledge from the Jewish worldview.

In Italy, R. Israel Sarug claimed that there is no difference between philosophy and Kabbalah, a view refused by Leon of Modena in his *Ari Nohem*. Given its fundamental importance to the understanding of of Herrera's works, which he confesses on several occasions – as mentioned before – given that he learned the Kabbalistic mysteries from Sarug's teaching, it is interesting to dwell on the doctrine that the latter professed. As Dweck has pointed out, "Sarug was not only a propagandist for Lurianic Kabbalah and a foreigner who pandered to the Venetian Jewish establishment. He was also one of the principal figures who identified Kabbalah with philosophy. Modena recounts: "I too heard from the mouth of the sage, Israel Sarug, the most eminent student of the *Ari*,²² of blessed memory, who used to say that there was no difference between philosophy and Kabbalah. Everything he learned from Kabbalah, he would explain in a philosopher manner."²³ Dweck remarks as well: "Modena argued that the parallels between Kabbalah and philosophy, in particular Platonic philosophy, were of relatively recent origin. Kabbalists in the late middle ages had searched for parallels to their ideas among the writings of Platonic philosophers. Modena located the origin of this type of reasoning in late medieval Iberia and suggested that it occurred as a partial reaction to the emergence of Maimonides' thought. Sarug [...] and other kabbalists who argued for the identification ... had numerous predecessors. While Modena did not mention specific people, modern scholars have identified Isaac ibn Latif, Joseph ibn Wakar, Samuel ibn Motot, Hasdai Crescas, and Isaac Arama as late medieval Iberian thinkers who sought to combine Kabbalah and philosophy in some form."²⁴

But "in spite of a mutual acquaintance with Sarug, Modena does not appear to have been aware of Abraham Cohen de Herrera,"²⁵ perhaps because he did not wrote his Kabbalistic work until he had settled in Amsterdam, a fact that may explain that Modena does not even mention his name. In any case, at this

22 Ari, in Hebrew, lion. It is the acronym for *Adoeinu Rabbeinu Isaac* (our master, rabbi, Isaac)

23 Dweck, Yaacob, *The Scandal of Kabbalah. Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011, here 139.

24 Dweck, Yaacob, *The Scandal of Kabbalah ...*, 140–141.

25 Dweck, Yaacob, *The Scandal of Kabbalah ...*, 141, footnote.

point it is important to take into account an observation by Bonfil,²⁶ according to which it is implausible that Sarug elucubrated on the conciliation between philosophy and Kabbalah in Palestine, whilst he was a disciple of Luria. Perhaps his sudden contact with the atmosphere of syncretism that he found in Italy sparked in him a zeal for this close affinity, in order to attract a larger number of disciples to his doctrine. Huss also points out that “the dominance of the ‘identity’ model of Kabbalah and Philosophy amongst Italian Kabbalists [...] can be explained by the Renaissance culture to which they belonged. The notions of *Philosophia Perennis* and *Prisca Theologia* were adopted by Jewish Italian scholars and applied to their Kabbalistic traditions.”²⁷ Thus, Hughes may be right that “like Renaissance luminaries such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, (Herrera) also read particularistically, showing how all thought ultimately attested, in one way or another, to a particular set of truths claims, in his case those of the Kabbalah.”²⁸

With respect to the non-publication of Herrera’s Kabbalistic works in Spanish, Saccaro Del Buffa has argued that “though the Jewish community of Amsterdam esteemed Herrera for his wisdom and knowledge, he seems to have been less famous than other scholars of the same religion like Menasseh ben Israel, Saul Morteira, Elia Del Medigo ... who moved to the capital of the Netherlands at the beginning of the 17th century. In fact, while the others published various works during their lifetime, Herrera waited and hoped in vain to see his main Kabbalistic books, *Puerta del Cielo* and *La Casa de la Divinidad*, in print, which he had already completed when he was writing the *Epitome y Compendio de la Logica o Dialectica*, as the author himself states in the Prologue (of this last work).”²⁹ This fact could be explained by the widely extended animadversion to Kabbalah in the bosom of the Amsterdam Jewish community, especially showed by Saul Levi Morteira, himself an early disciple of Modena in Venice, along with his many conservative followers.

Herrera adopted the idea, maintained by some Christian philosophers and Kabbalists, of the Hebrew origin of true ancient wisdom. He avoided, however,

26 Bonfil, Robert, *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*. Oxford, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1990.

27 Huss, Boaz, “Mysticism versus Philosophy ...,” *Micrologus* 9 (2001): 125–135.

28 Hughes, Aaron W., “The Reception of Yehuda Abravanel among Conversos in the 17th Century: A Case Study of Abraham Kohen de Herrera”, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* XIV (2008): 461–475, here 461.

29 Saccaro del Buffa, Giuseppa, “Neoplatonism, Eclecticism and Method in the Logical Works of the Kabbalist Abraham Cohen Herrera.” Introduction to her own edition of Cohen Herrera, Abraham, *Epitome y Compendio de la Logica y Dialectica*, 2002, xiii–xxxix.

to take into account the links established by Ficino between Platonic wisdom and Christian faith, and strived to iterate that the last one is even closer to Hebrew mysticism than the teachings of Plato. Philosophy, ascertained Herrera, is merely an instrument that enables ascension to attain the highest secrets. In Book Seven of *the House of Divinity*, Herrera openly confesses

to inform about the philosophical subjects ... especially from the metaphysical and the divine ones, which are like doors and stairs to enter and climb to the news of sovereign truth of our Kabbalistic theology, and interest our philosophers in Plato's doctrine, that among humans is the closest to the Hebrew, and so much that with little change it can transform, as provided maintenance, into our truth, almost our substance.³⁰

Pico della Mirandola (called by Herrera 'phoenix of his time') undertook attempts to propitiate the harmony between these diverging doctrines. This was above all what could foster the stubborn inclination towards their syncretism, shown by Herrera, and what allowed him to intergrate Cordovero's speculations declaring at the same time his predilection for Lurianic Kabbalah. As Yosha remarked, Herrera's aim was, "to carry out an arduous intellectual effort to enlighten Luria's thought through Cordovero's conceptions",³¹ something that, as Shatil³² has recently proved, his master Sarug had already intended to do.

Idel pointed out that "in Renaissance Italy, Jewish thought developed in a way that had not precedence in the intellectual history of Judaism".³³ The fluid exchange of ideas regarding, in particular, the origin of creation, and in general, the attempt to establish a worldview in accordance with the spirit of the times, was undertaken by the most learned Christian thinkers in Italy, during those centuries, and the fact that in the past the metaphysical disquisitions of the Jews had been widely permeated by Greek or Arab thought, cannot take us to forget that Jewish thinkers were also nurtured by Scholastic ideas. Sermoneta³⁴ proved that a large portion of the book *The Soul's Rewards*, by Hillel of Verona,

30 Cohen de Herrera, Abraham, *La Casa de la Divinidad*, 1731, here 326.

31 Yosha, Nissim, "The Impact of Renaissance Writings on 17th Century ...", 122.

32 Shatil, Sharron, "The Kabbalah of R. Israel Sarug: A Lurianic-Cordoverian Encounter," *Review of Rabbinical Judaism* 14 (2011): 158–187.

33 Idel, Moshe, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance", in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard Dov Cooperman, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983, 186–242, here 186.

34 Sermoneta, Giuseppe, *R. Hillel ben Shmuel ben Eleazar of Verona and His Philosophical Thought*, Ph. D. diss., Hebrew, 1961.

is but a translation of some of Thomas Aquinas's work, which influence is perceptible among other Jewish thinkers in Italy, and in Spain, as Pines remarked.³⁵

Jews had a decisive influence on the configuration of the modern Christian world, and Hebrew sages and thinkers served as an example for some of the great Renaissance men. Pico della Mirandola, Giles of Viterbo, and Johannes Reuchlin, among others, received Hebrew language teaching and training, not only to learn the language itself, but especially to investigate the secrets and mysticism of the Kabbalah.

The influence, then, worked both ways; this has contributed to the fact that the development of Kabbalah in Italy differed from that in Medieval Spain. To some extent, the mythic aspects were abandoned, insofar as they had been substituted by a tending to speculation, since mystics were more interested, in Iberian lands, in elucidating the role and nature of the commandments in a theosophical sense. The necessity of conceiving the unity and simplicity of the divine realm was emphasized in Italy, affirming also that it was possible to attain that domain by means of intellection, so that the theurgical aspects of the preceding Kabbalah were mitigated, or at least, they gradually tended to lose their pre-eminence. Spanish Kabbalistic treatises arrived to Italy between the 15th and 16th century. They had been safeguarded by Hispanic thinkers who felt to have inherited the task of preserving or compiling a corpus of mystical knowledge whose origins went back to the 13th century. But after their arrival to Italy, not everybody there was able to understand them accurately, not only because of the highly speculative language that fills most of this literature, but also because it was forged in a spiritual and geographical context highly different, by small groups of Jewish exegetes that insisted on using, moreover, a terminology that complicated in part the return to the sources to which these innovations were traced back to. The problem of understanding these treatises was, perhaps, greater in Italy, since those who struggled to undertake this task had to face the reticence and even the hostility of a previous generation of intellectuals, well versed in metaphysical disquisitions proceeding from Medieval Jewish philosophy, and even those who, as Yohanan Alemanno, David Messer Leon or Abraham de Balmes, wanted to grasp the inner meaning of these texts, but had already build up their intellectual nature

35 Pines, Schlomo, "Scholasticism after Thomas Aquinas and the Teachings of Hasdai Crescas and His Predecessors", *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 1, 1967, 1–51. Idel reminds us that when the inverse influence took place, as for instance the one exercised by Maimonides' work on Thomas Aquinas, or that of ibn Gabirol on Franciscan theology, it always worked through writings, it was never orally expanded.