

ABSTRACT

QUIA VERBUM EST DIBUR - KABBALAH FROM ASHKENAZ: EL'AZAR OF WORMS AND EGIDIO DA VITERBO

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This dissertation addresses the question of the importance and role of medieval Ashkenazi sources for Christian kabbalistic thought. This initial question is bound to a number of related aspects that touch the difficulties inherent in both defining Kabbalah, interpreting kabbalistic writings, and its related concepts, especially when focusing on both Jewish and Christian kabbalistic thought. In the course of this dissertation, it will be demonstrated that Rabbi El'azar ben Yehuda of Worms (ca. 1165–ca. 1238), as a main representative of the *Haside Ashkenaz*, and his opus magnum, *Sode Razayya* – which discusses all matter of the divine and the mundane sphere – can be designated as kabbalistic.

El'azar's self-image as Kabbalist is the result of a constructed myth which is discernible and takes part also in narrative patterns which at the same time reinforced the image of the Ḥasidic masters as wonder-workers. For this and other reasons, El'azar's work was a potentially interesting source for a Christian Kabbalist like Egidio da Viterbo (ca. 1469–1532). Due to the fact that this study focuses on both thinkers equally this thesis is divided into two main parts. The first part deals with the particular interest of Christian Kabbalists in the medieval Ashkenazi writings and with the network of intellectuals behind who eagerly purchased Hebrew writings (chap. 2). Besides the historical developments of early Christian Kabbalah at the dawn of the Renaissance the first part likewise pursues the question of whether the specific interest of Christian Kabbalists in the Hebrew sources allows a different approach towards a definition and understanding of both Kabbalah and Christian Kabbalah (chap. 3). Hereby, focus is laid on the kabbalistic writings of Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo who studied medieval Hebrew sources of Ashkenazi origin thoroughly (chap. 4), concluding that the Ashkenazi kabbalistic thought contributed to Egidio's own kabbalistic work. The second part is devoted to the history of medieval Ashkenazi Judaism and especially to the thought and impact of the *Haside Ashkenaz* (chap. 5). Particular attention is given to Rabbi El'azar of Worms whose speculative writings received attention from Egidio da Viterbo (chap. 6).

This thesis's structure is built upon the initial hypothesis according to which the speculative writings of El'azar of Worms belong to the larger corpus of kabbalistic writings that have been

studied by the early Christian Kabbalists. Such a claim demands a two-fold approach. Chapter one, thus, examines the circulation and distribution of Hebrew sources among Christian intellectuals by focusing on the presence of Ashkenazi sources in this context. From the analysis of the sources involved, it emerges that the Christian Kabbalists under focus did not much differentiate between the various Hebrew sources with respect to their origin and character in order to classify them as kabbalistic – in contrast to the later approach of scholars of Kabbalah. This leads to the assumption that a division of kabbalistic sources according to their contents layers rather fits the Christian Kabbalists' understanding than a division or classification according to their origins.

Chapter two, therefore, deals with the question of how to define Kabbalah and kabbalistic writings. This theoretical approach recurs *inter alia* to the division of Kabbalah into *Scientia Semot* and *Scientia Sephiroth* as it has been proposed by the so-called founder of Christian Kabbalah Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. This division can also be applied in order to characterise the study program of contemporaneous Christian Kabbalists like Egidio da Viterbo and, in turn, to describe Hebrew kabbalistic sources. This thesis shows that the Hebrew sources of Ashkenazi origin that were part of the larger corpus of Hebrew writings studied by Christian Kabbalists comply with a characterisation as *Scientia Semot*. Moreover, the analysis leads to the conclusion that the speculative writings of Rabbi El'azar of Worms feature specific characteristics that resemble a number of other Hebrew sources – independent of their respective geographical origins. Together they represent a trend in the Jewish tradition that heavily relies on the assumption of the distinctive role of the Hebrew letters and the divine names in terms of all matter of *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*.

Chapter three follows the tracks of such sources that can be assigned to this larger group of Hebrew writings and which express a distinctive view concerning the meaningful role of the Hebrew letters and names. The case study on Egidio da Viterbo and his engagement with El'azar of Worms's speculative oeuvre offers new insights concerning the role of Ashkenazi kabbalistic writings for particular trends in Christian Kabbalah. And with respect to what is said above this applies not only to the Ashkenazi writings in a geographical sense but also to those sources that testify to a similar approach. Further, the analysis of a number of manuscripts displaying Egidio's autograph leads to the conclusion that those Ashkenazi sources of concern in this study not only belong to a distinctive Hebrew tradition but also play an important role for Egidio's approach and understanding of Kabbalah.

Focusing equally on both thinkers and their works, chapter four proposes a comparative reading of the notion of the divine word by stating that the idea of the Hebrew language, inter

alia, as the language of divine creation and paradisiacal language – termed as *Dibur* and *Logos* – plays a fundamental role for both, El’azar and Egidio. *Sode Razayya* represents one important text within a larger corpus of Hebrew sources that focus on and emphasise a cosmology and cosmogony based on the idea of the Hebrew letters and the divine name(s) as the primordial creational force. Together with *Sefer Yeşira* – the most influential text in this context – this corpus of texts including other texts like *Sefer ha-Temunah* and *Sefer Razi’el* represents one conceptual stream within Judaism that demands a reassessment.

The fifth chapter which opens the second part of the thesis deals with the historical developments of Ashkenazi Judaism and the *Ḥaside Ashkenaz* during the Middle Ages by making special use of narrative patterns that come to the fore in the Ashkenazi heritage including legends and tales. The examination of Ashkenazi sources reveals how the borders between folkloristic, speculative, and traditional religious thought are blurred. Narrative patterns not only appear in the preserved legends and tales but also in speculative, kabbalistic, and theological and theosophical writings. As such they embody a specific self-image of the Ḥasidic masters as legitimate heirs of an ancient *translatio sapientiae* and at the same time convey a number of ideas, motifs, and topoi as they are present in those speculative, kabbalistic writings. Based on this assumption, chapter five aims at linking narrative and folkloristic forms of knowledge with the hitherto separated field of speculative, kabbalistic, theosophical knowledge.

Chapter six is wholly devoted to *Sode Razayya*, the main speculative work of El’azar of Worms. The work is presented in form of a systematic synopsis of all treatises contained in the compilation. Due to the primal focus of this thesis, also in the synopsis particular attention is paid to aspects that touch matters of the divine language, the divine word, and related aspects like the golem motif. The synopsis also takes account of those aspects of El’azar’s work that were of interest for Egidio da Viterbo and shows the reverberation in the cardinal’s thought and work.

At the bottom line, both parts of this dissertation focus on the central theme regarding the dimensions and meaning of the divine speech and the divine word respectively – a notion that is comprised in the Hebrew term *dibur* – was essential also for some Christian theologians and Kabbalists. For this reason, they became knowledgeable in the Hebrew language and similarly addressed its divinity. Especially Johannes Reuchlin and Egidio da Viterbo turned into masters of this particular field of the Jewish tradition and developed their own Christian Kabbalah in concord with Christian logos theology that is fundamentally based on the divine word – *verbum*.