

Sheila A. Spector, ed., trans. Francis Mercury van Helmont's *Sketch of Christian Kabbalism*. Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2012. viii + 178 pp. ISBN: 9789004226555. €99 / \$132.

The important scholarship of Alison Coudert on Franciscus Mercurius Van Helmont (1614–1699) has contributed to a revival of interest in this intriguing figure. Well respected by John Locke, Gottfried Leibniz and Anne Conway, F. M. Van Helmont had a complex profile: like his more famous father Jan Baptist (1579–1641) he was a passionate alchemist and physician but, unlike him, he had a sustained and deep understanding of Jewish Kabbalah. He was also impressively erudite: despite complaining that his father did not teach him Latin, F.M. Van Helmont managed not only to master this language, but also Hebrew and Syriac. His talent for languages is proven in a book called *Adumbratio Kabbalae Christianae*, where he cites from the Hebrew Kabbalah and the Syriac New Testament.

This little work, which first appeared as an anonymous appendix to Christian Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbala Denudata*, is the subject of an English translation by Sheila A. Spector. The Latin title is rendered here as *Sketch of Christian Kabbalism*, a title which already raises some questions. Why does Spector prefer the modern-sounding and unusual word “Kabbalism” to the much more customary “Kabbalah” or, as in the original text, “Kabbala”? The transformation of “Kabbalah” into an “-ism” makes it sound like a modern religious movement, if not a separate religion from Judaism.

The translation in itself is generally acceptable, though there are some issues, mainly caused by Spector's choice not to translate Biblical passages but render them according to the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible. This modern version does not always match well with the Latin Vulgate Bible Van Helmont used. Consequently, the translation lacks the subtlety of Van Helmont's interpretation of the Latin text. For instance, at page 42, Van Helmont cites Genesis 1:1 as “*Per Principium (i.e. Messiam,) creavit Deus coelum & terram,*” which Spector translates as “In the beginning God (i.e. the Messiah) created the heavens and the earth.” (44) The intention of Franciscus is clearly lost here, since what he says is that the Principle (*Beresbit*) is the Messiah, not that God is the Messiah (which makes little sense). At page 46, Spector also uses ESV to translate “*Primus homo terrenus de terra: Secundus Homo Dominus (sive:*

Tetragrammaton) de coelo” as “The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven [as the bone of the Tetragrammaton].” Yet Van Helmont’s interpolation on the Tetragrammaton refers to God (“*Dominus*”) not to “heaven.” Calling heaven “the bone of the Tetragrammaton” is not warranted by the text. Other translation choices are also disputable: for instance, at page 44, Franciscus calls the first Adam “*cogitatio suprema*”; this should have more appropriately been translated as “supreme thought” rather than “supreme knowledge” as Spector renders it (45). Such examples suggest that the English translation should always be compared with the original Latin.

In addition to the translation, Spector also provides an introduction, which offers a helpful explanation of Lurianic Kabbalah but can be misleading. First, Spector misrepresents Van Helmont as a “theologian” (2); in fact, in the period “theology” was a higher degree that was acquired after the liberal arts (three-year) degree. Yet Van Helmont never attended university. He was more of a self-trained virtuoso that in *Adumbratio* styled himself as a “Christian philosopher.”

More problematically, Spector claims that Van Helmont’s primary intention in *Adumbratio* was not to convert Jews to Christianity but “to attract Christians to Kabbalism.” (19) Leaving aside for a moment the issue of what this “Kabbalism” might be, F.M. Van Helmont is outspoken that the purpose of his work is to serve for the conversion of Jews. Why doubt this intent? Spector is basing her conclusion on rather questionable speculation: according to her, Van Helmont would have been aware that “only those Jews who had already decided to convert would initiate a dialogue by inviting a Christian to undermine Judaism.” (19) Moreover, she assumes that Van Helmont would have equally known that an aggregate of passages of the New Testament would never have converted a Jew.

Spector seems to be projecting modern presumptions on Van Helmont. First of all, her assertions are not sufficiently grounded in any in-depth understanding of the Flemish virtuoso’s character. For instance, what makes her think that he would have had such a clear perspective on how a conversion would or would not be achieved? What evidence supports her argument that Franciscus would have been so devious as to write a book that claims to convert Jews in order to, in fact, “convert” Christians? Secondly, Spector does not seem to have studied the issue of conversion in the period at any depth. In fact, she assumes without any evidence that a Kabbalist would never have engaged with Christian arguments in the period.

Apparently unconcerned with historical fact, Spector goes even further with her suppositions. Van Helmont, she tells us, rejected organised Christianity,

and believed in a form of gnosis “that obviated the need for intercession by any religious institutions.” Not only this, but Van Helmont actually thought that the Kabbalistic Zohar “would have at least as much historical authority as the Greek New Testament.” (20) All these stark statements culminate with the affirmations that Van Helmont wanted to replace Church doctrine with Lurianic Kabbalism and that in *Adumbratio* he deceitfully “superimposes a veneer of Christianity over Lurianism.” The evidence for these radical assertions? Spector gives no citations; we are supposed to take them at face value. If we did not know Van Helmont lived in the 17th century, we could conceive of him as a non-Christian worshipper of a new religion called “Lurianism” or “Kabbalism.” He could be perceived as an early modern Madonna joining the New-Age Kabbalah Centre. In reality, historical evidence shows that, while proffering unorthodox doctrines such as the transmigration of souls, Van Helmont saw himself as a Christian thinker. Nominally Catholic, Van Helmont did not wish to attach himself to any Christian sect, but felt closest to the Quaker movement.

It is fairly clear that history does not play a role in Spector’s analysis. In fact, her arguments depend on purely textual analysis. Yet they too are unconvincing because they are grounded in the aforementioned assumptions. For instance, Spector claims that the last two lines of the introductory epigraph are “deliberately incoherent” or that the Christian philosopher’s reference to “that person we call the Messiah” is an “abstract vocabulary” that can be interpreted ambiguously (21–22). This is forcing the text in ways that are not warranted at all; for me, as an early modern scholar, there is nothing particularly ambiguous or incoherent about Franciscus’s statements. In fact, they strike me as much clearer than those of his father, Jan Baptist, whose Latin is complex and abstruse. Yet no one has accused Jan Baptist of wishing to convert anyone away from Catholicism (his proffered religion).

Moreover, a quick examination of the book shows that it is mainly comprised of an exposition of the “Christian philosopher,” who is clearly an alter-ego of Franciscus himself. Yet it seems somewhat absurd that Franciscus would cast himself as a “Christian philosopher” without actually identifying as one, as Spector suggests. That Franciscus’s statements on behalf of Christianity are insincere seems an equally far-fetched claim.

In fact, the tenuous position of Spector’s argument is such that it leads to rather strange and self-contradictory arguments. For instance, she claims that in one section “Van Helmont abandons his pretext of converting Jews,” (23) yet in another he “resumes his evangelical pose.” (24) We are not told why he would

be so inconsistent. More surprisingly, the last phrases of the essay seem to completely abandon her previous arguments on behalf of Van Helmont's "fake conversion intent" and of his hidden "Lurianism." Spector now admits that Franciscus "insists that Jewish conversion is a necessary component of restoration." She also states that Van Helmont was a Christian "in the sense that he believed Jesus Christ to be the Son of God and the Messiah." (25) Thus an essay on how Van Helmont wished to direct Christians to "Kabbalism" ends by admitting that these claims are incorrect.

Clearly, Franciscus was a heterodox Christian. Yet there is no in-text evidence that he wanted to destroy "Church doctrine" and replace it with "Lurianism." After all, the primary Christian doctrine is the New Testament, and *Adumbratio* spends an inordinate amount of text approvingly discussing its precepts. Although Van Helmont's sympathies leaned toward the Lurianic Kabbalah, this did not mean that he did not believe in Christ and the New Testament. We can conclude that Van Helmont's inclination toward the Lurianic Kabbalah was not dissimilar to Jacob Boehme's theosophical speculation. Like Boehme and others of the era, Franciscus looked for esoteric explanations of Biblical truths, seeking to complement the Bible's exoteric doctrine with what he saw as an esoteric complement transmitted by word of mouth. This was not an uncommon belief at the time, and did not make Franciscus less Christian or less intent on converting Jews. Rather, it is more likely that he thought that by revealing the concordance between Christianity and Lurianic Kabbalah educated Jews would see that the Messiah was really Christ.

Spector should be commended for bringing Van Helmont's text on Christian Kabbalah to a wider audience. The reader is advised to read Spector's book as a primary source, using the English translation as an aid tool for the original Latin. Spector's introduction to Lurianic Kabbalah will also prove helpful; however, in order to properly understand the intentions of the text and the figure of F.M. Van Helmont one should still refer to the works of Alison Coudert.

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