

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

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One of the perennial issues in Spinoza scholarship is whether or not our understanding of Spinoza's philosophy can be facilitated by considering it in a Jewish intellectual context. Some recent authors have denied that there is any interesting or illuminating relationship between Spinoza's metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy and those themes in medieval Jewish philosophy. Other scholars have insisted, quite plausibly, that many of Spinoza's more opaque views—such as his account of the eternity of the mind in part 5 of the *Ethics*—cannot possibly be understood except in the light of what earlier Jewish rationalists, such as Maimonides and Gersonides, had to say about the immortality of the soul. What is somewhat ironic about this debate is that, in Spinoza's own time and the century following his death, it was taken for granted that his philosophy was a Jewish philosophy. It was regarded, however, primarily as an offshoot of Jewish mysticism. At the end of the seventeenth century, for example, it was not uncommon to see Spinoza's philosophy—especially the *Ethics*—as deeply imbued with kabbalistic themes. In the eighteenth-century, Jacques Basnage, in his grand *Histoire des Juifs, depuis Jesus Christ jusqu'à présent* (1705), included Spinoza in his discussion of Kabbalah, which he sees as the source of his "obscure and mystical" ideas. Later that century, Solomon Maimon asserted that "kabbalah is nothing but extended Spinozism."

While a good deal of work has been done not to replace but to supplement Cartesian and Hobbesian readings of Spinoza with a Maimonidean framework, there remains much to be said about Spinoza's relationship to nonrationalist medieval and early modern Jewish thinkers. I, for one, do not see any mysticism in Spinoza; he is an archrationalist who had nothing kind to say about Kabbalah. In chapter 9 of his *Theological-Political Treatise*, he says that "I have read and moreover known some Kabbalistic triflers, at whose follies I was astonished beyond description." However, this does not mean that there is nothing to be gained by reading Spinoza in the light of kabbalistic writers, if only to see what he might preserve and what he critically rejects. And for this reason, Miquel Beltrán's study is a welcome addition to the literature. His focus is on the metaphysical and theological elements of the *Ethics* and their relationship to the writings of the Spanish kabbalist Abraham Cohen de Herrera (1570–1635).

Herrera was in Amsterdam from 1620 to 1632, and manuscript copies of his *La Casa de la Divinidad* and *Puerto del Cielo* can be found in the Ets Haim Library of the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam. Herrera's works were never published in their author's or Spinoza's lifetimes, and so Beltrán's case for an influence on Spinoza must be based on the circulation of these manuscripts and/or their ideas among Amsterdam's Sephardim. In fact, there was a Hebrew translation by Isaac Aboab da

Fonseca, one of that community's rabbis, in 1655. But Spinoza never mentions Herrera or his writings, and we have no idea whether or not he ever read him. As he tries to explain why Herrera's works did not make it into print in Amsterdam, a center for Jewish publishing in Europe, Beltrán says that "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 Mortera" (8). However, there were some Kabbalah enthusiasts among the Amsterdam Portuguese Jews, especially Rabbi Aboab. There was also Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, who owned his own printing press and published whatever he wanted.

After a long, dense introduction that does not, in fact, really introduce either Herrera or his works, Beltrán turns to a number of philosophical themes in which he finds the influence of Herrera on Spinoza. Most revolve around the nature of substance and its causal relationship to the "modes" that (to use a kabbalistic term) "emanate" from it, as well as God as *causa sui* and the attributes that constitute its essence and the *amor Dei intellectualis* with which Spinoza's *Ethics* culminates. Beltrán argues, in contrast with other studies of an influence of Herrera upon Spinoza that tend to focus on Spinoza's earliest writings, that there is a discernable trace of Herrera's "syncretism of kabbalah and philosophy" in the *Ethics*.

The topic is, of course, fascinating, and Beltrán is an expert and erudite guide to Herrera's writings. Does he prove his case? I, for one, remain skeptical, but that does not diminish the interest in the inquiry or the skill with which it is carried out (although Beltrán spends too much time engaging with the secondary literature). However, the book is not especially well written, and there are a number of typographical errors and, more frustratingly, infelicities in the English (e.g., we're told that modes "inherit in God," when what is meant is "inhere in God") and a serious and confusing overuse of commas. For the price that the publisher Brill charges for this book, one would expect a better edited and more well-executed final product.

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God in the Enlightenment. William J. Bulman and Robert G. Ingram, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. xiv + 322 pp. \$34.95.

William J. Bulman is an ambitious, coming historian. He advocates nothing less than a new "general framework" for a "balanced reconsideration of God in the Enlightenment" (4), an objective toward which, in fact, many scholars have been working for quite some time, not least Dale K. Van Kley, whose sparkling afterword has a different tempo to Bulman's no less acute but densely textured (some might say chewy) introductory essay. Bulman wants the Enlightenment to be decoupled from Spinoza (and from Jonathan Israel) and located more directly in relationship to the Reformation, to