Egidio da Viterbo's Book on Hebrew Letters: *Christian Kabbalah in Papal Rome**

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Egidio da Viterbo (1469–1532) wrote his Book on Hebrew Letters (Libellus de litteris hebraicis) *in 1517 to persuade Pope Leo X to reform the Roman alphabet. Behind this concrete, if farfetched, proposal was a millenarian theology that Egidio revealed by introducing his Christian readers to Kabbalah, whose first Christian advocate, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, had done his pioneering work only a few decades before. Inspired by Pico and by Johann Reuchlin, Egidio also absorbed the Platonism of Marsilio Ficino, applying it in the* Libellus *to a Kabbalist analysis of the* Aeneid, *which he reads as a prophecy of papal victory over the Jews at the end of time, while also seeing Pope Leo as a modern-day Etruscan. But the main source of Egidio's apocalyptic theology is a medieval Hebrew book, the* Sefer ha-Temunah, *which in Italy was new to Jews at the time Egidio read it.*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE POPE'S NEW ALPHABET

In 1517 the general of the Order of Augustinian Friars asked the pope to order a reform of language, to alter the script used to write Latin, Italian, and most other Western vernaculars. The pope was Leo X, whose reign would soon end with Christian unity shattering in the early Reformation. The general was Egidio da Viterbo, who would soon be a cardinal and had long been a power in the Roman Church: a forceful leader, a brilliant scholar, and, since Savonarola's execution in 1498, the most powerful preacher of his day. Meddling with the alphabet is unusual, even for a pope: Egidio explains his remarkable request in the first part of his *Book on Hebrew Letters*, addressed to Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, the pope's cousin, but meant for Leo himself.[1]

Egidio explains that letters are important because the Creator used them to record sacred history in the Bible. Their power is plain to see in the

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[1]*Lib.*, fol. 1: this abbreviation (*Lib.*) indicates Egidio's *Libellus*, cited here in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV) MS Lat. 5808, fols. 1ᵛ–50ᵛ, which was also the basis of the pioneering edition by François Secret in Egidio da Viterbo, 1959, 1:23–55. *Lib.* α indicates a second manuscript, *Libellus de litteris hebraicis*, BAV MS Lat. 3146, fols. 1ʳ–26ᵛ. Our numbering of the text, done for a new edition, is close to Secret's, which reflects the pagination of the manuscript. Our reading of the text assumes improvements of Secret's edition to be described in our edition. For Egidio's life and works, see O'Malley; and Martin. For the larger context of Egidio's language reform, see Stein Kokin, 2006, 372–92.

enigmatic names of God that scripture records.[2] The philosopher Plato, the ancient theologians, and Dionysius the Areopagite have interpreted the divine names, but the insights of those pagan and Christian sages are now surpassed by Kabbalah, an equally venerable Jewish tradition discovered for the Christian world by Giovanni Pico, Johann Reuchlin, and Paolo Ricci. In the secret books of Kabbalah these scholars have found keys to unlock the mysteries of sacred names.[3] And scripture itself contains clues to what the letters hide: the acrostics of the Bible and the Sibylline oracles present poetic prophecies alphabetically. By heading verses with single Hebrew letters, Jeremiah, David, and Solomon highlight the unity of each character, complete in itself. Egyptian hieroglyphs also capture the divine unity in this way — naturally enough, since the Egyptian and Hebrew tongues have common roots in the primordial speech of the Chaldees.[4]

Egidio insists that when learned Christians read the Bible aloud and ignore these facts, they make themselves ridiculous even to Jewish children. Especially foolish are mistakes made by mispronouncing the letters breathed into holy writ by the Holy Spirit. These written signs baffle Christians because only Jews know how to make the sounds that they represent. They are sacred letters that set Hebrew apart from profane Greek and Latin, concealing theological mysteries hidden in them by God to encode the Trinity itself: only Hebrew letters are adequate in this way for theology.[5]

The inventors of writing, even among the gentiles, realized that writing must be fit for all its uses, holy and unholy. According to Egidio, the old Chaldean script was complete in this way. But when it traveled to distant Greece and Rome, the alphabet lost some of its original capabilities, of which only traces remain in the scripts now used by Christians.[6] The Greek

[2] *Lib.*, fol. 3.

[3] Ibid., fols. 1–3; Plato, 1963–95, *Philebus* 18B; Plato, *Cratylus* 388D–390E, 400B–409A; Secret, 44–72, 87–99; O'Malley, 74–76, 98; Martin, 164–65; Rummel, 14–25; Black.

[4] *Lib.*, fol. 2; Lamentations 1–4; Psalms 9–10, 25, 34, 37, 111–12, 119, 145; Proverbs 31:10–31; Ephesians 1:21, 3:15; Pliny, 1938–62, *Natural History* 7.192–93; Josephus, 1955, *Antiquities* 1.2.69–71, 8.167–68; Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.11–12; Eusebius, 1954–56, *Preparation for the Gospel* 10.11.27; Augustine, 1841–49, *On the City of God* 18.23; Ambrose, 1845–48, *Exposition of Psalm 118*; *Sybilline Oracles*, 1902, 8.217–22; *Corpus Hermeticum*, 1972, 16.1–2; Iamblichus, 1966, *Mysteries* 1.1.4, 6.7.249, 7.1.249–2.251, 5.257–59, 8.1.260–61; [Dionysius the Areopagite], 2009, *Divine Names* 592A, 596A; Polydore Vergil, 1.6; O'Malley, 92; Holdenreid, 62–63; Idel, 2004.

[5] *Lib.*, fols. 4–5; John 14:26; Jerome, 1845–46, *Commentary on Titus* 3.9; Augustine, *On the Trinity* 7.1; Midrash, Song of Songs 1:9; Aquinas, 1882, *Summa Theologiae* I[a] 28.1, 37.2; *Sefer ha-Zohar* (hereafter *Zohar*), 1956–57, 1:31b, 2:175b; O'Malley, 78.

[6] *Lib.*, fol. 5; Plato, *Republic* 497B; Pliny, *Natural History* 7.192; Polydore Vergil, 1.6.3–4, 12.

upsilon (Υ), for example, as seen by the Pythagoreans, is a branching tree or path that represents both human life, with its divided choices, and the triune God. And *upsilon* is a shadow of the Hebrew *tsade* (צ).[7] This pagan awareness of the letters, this attention to their deeper meaning, should be exemplary for the pope, whose duty it is to restore the integrity of the holy tongue.[8] The pontiff will recall, so Egidio assumes, that God exalted the letters by using them to inscribe signs of the covenant in the names of the patriarchs. With the letters *yod* and *he* from his own holiest name, the unutterable Tetragrammaton, God turned the barren Sarai and Abram into Sarah and Abraham, the parents of Isaac and the chosen people. Such miracles show that a pope who takes up the cause of letters will not be wasting time with philological technicalities.[9]

As for Egidio, his studies have persuaded him that the Hebrew letters, because they are also numerals, constitute a cipher that conceals the greatest mystery of all, "the most supremely sacred, the most secret and the most worthy of being known by pious minds."[10] Deciphering the arithmetic of letters opens the biblical text to deep and accurate exegesis, despite its apparent disorder. From the Talmud Egidio has learned that "anything hidden in these omens of scripture, anything recondite . . . [and] secretly contained in the arcane books of Kabbalah . . . is very fully discussed, questioned and tracked down." In the pages of scripture, where nothing is accidental, every feature of the script itself — including the shapes of the letters and their parts — is a hermeneutic clue, which is why nothing may be altered when the text is copied. The only competent theologians are the Jews who grasp this principle.[11]

In the face of this scandal, neglect of religion is the obtuse and perverse behavior of Christians. The price to be paid is clear from the Church's troubled history in Italy, as Egidio recounts it: "after oppression by so many barbarians, so many wars and so much carnage . . . for so many centuries," Italy found relief only when the pope's family brought peace, prosperity, and a renewal of learning in the time of Lorenzo de' Medici. Those happy days

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[7] *Lib.*, fols. 6, 46; Genesis 2:9; Psalm 92:12; Song of Songs 2:3, 8:5; Virgil, 1969, *Aeneid* 6.124–47; Servius, 1961, at Virg. *A* 6.136; Persius, 1992, 3.56; Quintilian, 2001, *Education* 1.4.7–8; Eustathius, 1971–79, *Commentaries* 3.279.

[8] *Lib.*, fol. 6.

[9] Ibid., fol. 7; Genesis 25:27; Leviticus 27:34, 42; Revelation 22:2; Jerome, *Letter* 107.6; Midrash, Genesis 47:1; *Zohar* 1:96a, 117b, 119a; 2:126b; Pico, 23.

[10] *Lib.*, fol. 7; Exodus 12:37; Aulus Gellius, 1968, 1.15.10; Babylonian Talmud, *Qiddushin* 30a; *Zohar* 1:2b.

[11] *Lib.*, fols. 8–9; Deuteronomy 4:2, 5:22; Isaiah 33:18; Ezekiel 12:28; Song of Songs 7:3; Ruth 3:7; Matthew 5:18; Revelation 22:19; Babylonian Talmud, *Ḥagigah* 15b, *Sanhedrin* 106b, *Menaḥot* 29b; Midrash, Song of Songs 7:7–8; *Zohar* 1:6a; 2:102a, 218b; O'Malley, 81.

might have revived the study of letters, but the Magnifico died, new invaders came from the north, and the Turks still threaten from the east, all of which shows that God is angry.[12]

God's wrath justly threatens Christians whose skimpy secular learning only aggravates their total neglect of scripture and their complete ignorance of the language whose script the Holy Spirit sanctifies by breathing through its letters. This negligence is culpable, flouting not only the advice of pagan and Christian sages, but also the Gospels, where the Spirit protects some words of the sacred tongue by not letting them be turned into outlandish Greek or Latin. The Spirit, in Egidio's view, "did not permit certain secret words in the New Law to be translated into a tongue that was foreign, alien, and, in some sense, barbarous, though not even in this way were they preserved without corruption — like *sabaoth, hosanna, Eli Eli, halleluiah* and many others of this sort."[13] These words, given special standing by the Holy Spirit, should encourage Pope Leo to tend the sacred text carefully and thereby honor the Spirit's example. To this end, the pope's cousin, Cardinal Giulio, should advise him to heed God's anger and take the steps needed for reform. Clearly this was the intent of Providence in selecting a pope with exactly those virtues suited to the current crisis: Leo is especially well equipped to save scripture from Christian neglect and to revive religion through a new instauration of language.[14]

But the crisis that Egidio senses is grave. So abysmal is Christian ignorance that the faithful cannot properly pronounce the name of Jesus when they pray aloud. The remedy is the Hebrew alphabet, which contains the letters unknown to Christians that spell the divine names. Even though this alphabet of two dozen or so signs can be learned quickly, many will be too lazy to try. But there is a simpler solution, within the pope's power as vicar of Christ, supreme pontiff, and bishop of Rome: to augment the Roman alphabet with just those few Hebrew letters needed to express the sounds represented on the sacred page. "Let him add at least two or three letters to the Latin ones," Egidio asks, "so that we can write, read and understand what is divine: ע ח ה *he, heth, ain.*" Since many others, starting in pagan antiquity, had made adjustments to the alphabet, why should the

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[12]*Lib.*, fols. 9–10.

[13]Ibid., fols. 11–12; Isaiah 1:22; Matthew 21:9, 15; 27:46; Romans 9:29; Revelation 19:1–6; Plato, *Laws* 899D; Suetonius, 1860, *Pratum* 163; Iamblichus, *Mysteries* 7.5.259; Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis*; Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* 2.11; O'Malley, 81–82.

[14]*Lib.*, fols. 12–13; Isaiah 1:22; Matthew 21:9, 15; 27:46; Romans 9:29; Revelation 19:1–6; O'Malley, 142–43.

pope do less than godless heathens? Even the feckless Emperor Claudius had added three letters, as Egidio surely knew.[15]

To show what Leo and his flock are up against, Egidio cites a text from Isaiah that he had often heard the pope repeat: "I will make mention of Raab and Babylon." Egidio does not disclose what the pontiff meant by quoting the prophet — perhaps that one's friends should be kept close, and one's enemies closer — and even Isaiah's meaning, where Raab seems to stand for the prideful Egypt, needs explication. But Egidio's concern is the Latin word *Raab* (or *raab* in the Vulgate text), which might transliterate either a Hebrew proper name, *Raĥav* (רחב), or an adjective meaning "proud," *rahav* (רהב). The proper name is a prostitute's: she helps Israelite spies in an episode from the book of Joshua. As Egidio puts it: "in that holy language in which both Laws were handed down, *Raab* is not spelled with the same letters for the prostitute, with a *ĥet*, meaning 'breadth,' and for *raab* in the Psalm with a *he*, meaning 'arrogance.'"[16]

The pope, uninformed about the Holy Spirit's favorite letters, opens himself to such embarrassing mistakes, for which Christians are constantly mocked by Jews. (If Christians could not even talk properly, no wonder the chronology of Easter stumped them!) But Egidio is confident that Rome can recover. Recent and current efforts to promote the study of Aramaic and Arabic, with the Holy See's support — "something never seen in past ages and reserved for Leo's fame and good fortune" — have convinced him to send his *Book on Hebrew Letters* to the pope as a call for religious reform of the elements of language.[17]

This call is also a revelation of Jewish secrets to Christians. Like Egidio's original readers in the curia, scholars today must investigate it through the Kabbalah that he discloses, first by looking again at the form and content of his little book. Its main topic is the Hebrew alphabet, the shapes of the letters when written as well as their sounds when spoken: both are elements of a mystery sanctified by the Holy Spirit. The mystery can be clarified in several ways: first, by locating its sources, some in specific texts, others in larger frameworks of esoteric wisdom; next, by distinguishing the conventional from the unconventional in Egidio's exposition; and then by

[15] *Lib.*, fol. 14; Suetonius, 1933, *Claudius* 41.3; Tacitus, 1963, *Annals* 11.14; Polydore Vergil, 1.6.12.

[16] *Lib.*, fol. 14; Joshua 2:1–21; 6:17, 23, 25; Isaiah 30:7; Psalm 87:4; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25; Midrash, Exodus 27:9; *Zohar* 2:170b. Raĥav was important to Egidio for other reasons as well: see Stein Kokin, 2011.

[17] *Lib.*, fols. 14–15; Grafton and Weinberg, 213–30; Wilkinson; Martin, 172–73; Secret in Egidio da Viterbo, 1959, 1:32; Galbiati.

analyzing the strangest feature of his exegesis, treating the letters as gendered and sexualized. In addition, not only is Egidio's Kabbalah Platonic as well as Christian, he also links this Mosaic tradition with the ancient Etruscans in a millenarian fantasy that foresees a Roman victory over Jerusalem with the pope reigning triumphant at the end of time.

2. BREATHING THE SPIRIT

The first part of Egidio's book is an exhortation, followed by a second part that is explanatory and more than twice as long. A great deal of explanation is needed because the book's call for action in its first part will have been muted for almost all Christian readers (or hearers) by the very ignorance of Hebrew and Aramaic that Egidio wants to eliminate. Accordingly, the book's second part is an account of the Hebrew letters, presented in alphabetical order. But the burden of explanation in the second part is exegetical and theological, not grammatical or philological, leaving readers poorly equipped to benefit from Egidio's extraordinary achievement as a student of Hebrew and Aramaic. "They keep faltering," he says of his contemporaries, "their thoughts keep straying and slipping, causing great laughter even among that people's children who have learned the tongues of the prophets, especially when our people encounter these expressions written in the letters that belong to the Holy Spirit's sacred speech, those more akin to that same Spirit because they alone play a role in our breathing in and out — something that Greece could never emulate nor Latium imitate!"[18]

Egidio identifies three Hebrew letters as especially the Spirit's own because they are aspirated or breathed. However, of the three letters that he singles out — *he* (ה), *ḥet* (ח), and *ayin* (ע) — only *he* is actually aspirated: along with *alef* (א) and *resh* (ר), the others are now classified as gutturals. These distinctions are anachronistic, of course, and all the letters in question may seem breathy in some ordinary sense, without reference to modern phonetics.[19] Breathing or aspiration is Egidio's theme, in any case: anyone with a humanist education in Latin and Greek, but without Hebrew, will have seen Greek writing as the most familiar case of aspiration. Every student of the Greek alphabet had to master not only its twenty-four letters, but also three accents and two breathings — rough and smooth — whose presence or absence changes (at least notionally) the sounds of all seven vowels and one consonant (*rho*). On a first encounter with Greek, a reader used to the

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[18]*Lib.*, fol. 4.
[19]Ibid., fols. 5, 12, 14.

Roman alphabet will have found these features of the new script strange or even daunting.

Latin script distinguishes its five vowels only as long or short, and in Egidio's day diacritical signs (like the macron and breve) were not used systematically to mark that distinction. To indicate an aspirated sound in Latin, no marks at all are attached to the Roman letters, as breathings are to Greek letters: all the work of aspiration is done by *h*, a separate consonant, but this effect of *h* is consistent only after *c*, *p*, *r*, and *t*; in other positions *h* is either silent or a very weak breathing. Priscian says that "a breathing (*aspiratio*) can be put before all the vowels, but after only four consonants — *c t p r* — in the Greek manner, as in *habeo, Herennius, heros, hiems, homo, humus, Hylas, Chremes, Thraso, Philippus, Pyrrhus.*" Confusions about spelling (*arena / harena, umerus / humerus, umor / humor*) arose because Latin speakers themselves were unsure when *h* should be pronounced.[20]

Writing in Latin, Egidio reports that certain Hebrew letters are breathed, a feature that "Greece could never emulate nor Latin imitate." He seems to have thought that the Greek script, with its two breathings, was less defective in this way than the Roman alphabet, with its single *h*: Latin cannot even copy (*imitari*) what Greek fails to surpass (*assequi*). Two gutturals, *alef* and *ayin*, have no analogs at all in spoken or written Latin, or in Greek. Although the Latin *h* corresponds loosely both to *he* (ה) and to *het* (ח), complications arise in a purely alphabetical transliteration (without diacritical marks) of a word — like חכמה, "wisdom" — spelled with *ĥet*, *he*, and *kaf* (כ). In such cases, two Latin letters (*k* and *h*) will be needed to represent just one Hebrew letter, *ĥet*. And one of those two, *k*, must do double duty, for *kaf* and for *ĥet*. One option, KHOKMAH, is satisfactory for the sound of *ĥet* (ח), the first letter, but not for *kaf* (כ), the second letter, which can be pronounced like *ĥet*. Another option, KHOKHMAH, solves that problem, but at the cost of treating the first and second Hebrew consonants as if they were identical. Just one Greek letter (χ, *chi*), however, will work for *ĥet* in a transliteration (χόκμα) that also leaves *kappa* (κ) free to stand for *kaf*. In any case, some such worries persuaded Egidio that Latin (or Italian) made itself conspicuously absurd when used as a basis for pronouncing Hebrew.[21]

But the sacred language, if only one could speak it, has great power: with almost no knowledge of Hebrew, Marsilio Ficino understood that much,

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[20]Priscian, 1855–59, *Institutiones* 1.24; W. Allen, 43–45.

[21]Note, however, that χόχμα, with *chi* in first and third place, may be a better transliteration; even though this version uses the same sign twice, unlike the Hebrew word, the χ captures the breathiness of both ח and כ.

writing of the Tetragrammaton that "all miracles can be done in that name if it is pronounced correctly — which is the most difficult thing of all to do; it takes a miracle just to pronounce it! I think God made it so difficult so that nobody would pronounce it and do miracles through it, unless God were to cry out through it, as if it were a trumpet. This shows that to God the most acceptable name of all was 'Jesus,' whom the Jews acknowledge to have done miracles through that name correctly pronounced." Jesus, God's human son, is also his trumpeting voice on earth, the voice of YHVH. The wonder-working name might be YHVH or Jesus, or one name might contain the other. This is not clear in Ficino's account, which comes from an early work written two decades or more before Reuchlin's first exploration of this famous problem. Writing more than two decades after Reuchlin, Egidio took a stand on pronouncing the name that was better informed than Ficino's and also more ambitious: he found it outrageous that ignorance of Hebrew kept Christians from being blessed by the miracle that Ficino merely described.[22]

The elements of Hebrew, then, are instruments of salvation. Accordingly, the first part of Egidio's book introduces them to Christians, showing that the number of Hebrew letters is twenty-two, for example.[23] But how to write and pronounce them are different problems. Because Egidio's introduction gives only quick answers to these basic questions, his audience will not have been ready for the advanced theology in its second part. To make matters worse, this theological account of the letters is also a lesson in Kabbalah, one of the very first of its kind. The first part of the *Libellus* explains only that Kabbalah is an ancient Jewish tradition of biblical interpretation recorded in secret books recently studied by Pico, Reuchlin, and Ricci. But Pico's Kabbalist *Conclusions* of 1486 are impenetrable as they stand without commentary in the early printed versions, and Ricci's 1516 translation of Joseph Gikatilla's *Gates of Light* is another tough nut to crack. Since Reuchlin published *The Art of Kabbalah* only in 1517, the year of Egidio's book, it could not yet have been read widely. Only the specialized study of 1494 *On the Wonder-Working Word* was well known — or notorious — far more than the *Isagoge* and other expository works that Ricci started to publish in 1509.[24]

In the years of Reuchlin's persecution as a Judaizer, perhaps Egidio expected too much of his Christian readers. Introducing the second part of

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[22]Ficino, 56, 144–45. Although Ficino knew little about the Jewish tradition, he could have read a Latin version of the medieval *Toledot Yeshu*, which gives an account of the Name as the source of the miraculous powers that made Jesus famous: see *Toledot Yeshu*, 13–19; see also Bartolucci.

[23]*Lib.*, fols. 4–5.

[24]Ibid., fol. 2; Reuchlin.

his book, and speaking of the "sacred numbers signified in the letters passed down by God to Moses," he notes that Cardinal Giulio wanted "their forms and parts to be summarized as briefly as possible . . . wrapping them all in holy silence."[25] To these whispers that were to stay muffled, most Christians had no access at all. Egidio's ability to amplify them was exceptional, requiring linguistic preparation that was very rare in his day. According to an Italian observer, he was already "skilled in Greek, Hebrew and Latin" in 1502. Leo's election in 1513 inspired him to press on, pondering "the secrets of letters and certain divine names." By 1517 his knowledge of Hebrew and command of its biblical and postbiblical literature were remarkable: he may have been working with the language for twenty years or more, having started in Florence, where he could have found a Jewish teacher in the circle that Giovanni Pico had attracted. Later, as he flourished in Rome, papal resources brought new opportunities. Elia Levita, soon to be renowned for his mastery of biblical Hebrew and Aramaic, joined his household around 1517 and stayed a long time: perhaps Egidio helped Elia with Greek while helping him with the sacred languages.[26]

Driven from Padua in 1509 when he was nearly fifty years old, Elia had fled to Rome and eventually introduced himself to Egidio, claiming to know "the sundry secrets connected with grammar and scripture." They became friends, taking "sweet counsel together, iron sharpening iron," in Elia's Talmudic phrasing. But the partnership offended some Jews: the critics said "woe to my soul because I taught the Law to a Christian." Elia objected that such teaching is forbidden only for certain "esoteric doctrines, . . . the Creation, the Vision of Ezekiel and the *Book Yetzirah*" — code words for Kabbalah. If Elia was no Kabbalist and was not Egidio's instructor in that secret art, surely there were others willing to cross that line, as Yohanan Alemanno had crossed it for Pico. Converts like Flavius Mithridates and Paolo Ricci could also teach Christians. Hebrew and Aramaic books about Kabbalah were treasures for Egidio, but only learned Jews could have shown him how to untie their knotty secrets.[27]
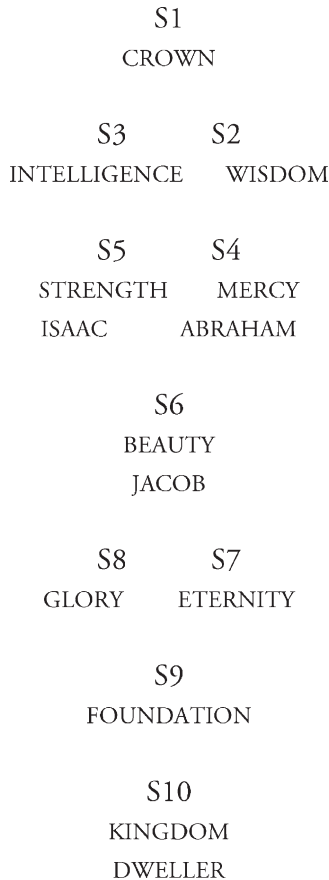
The topic of his *Libellus* is esoteric: Egidio understands its mysteries, but Cardinal Giulio has told him to keep his exposition short and to respect the arcana. To make sense of them, however, a little information about

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[25]*Lib.*, fol. 17.

[26]Ibid.; Weil; O'Malley, 12, 16, 70, 74–76, 83–84, 98; Friedman, 36–49; Martin, 122–23, 142, 153–57, 162–75; Rowland, 215, 332, citing Egidio's *History of Twenty Centuries* in Biblioteca Angelica, MS Lat. 351, fol. 2ᵛ; Grafton and Weinberg, 71, 150–51, 308–17; Penkower, 25–26; and for the Roman environment that supported both Elia and Egidio, see Davis, 64–83.

[27]Levita, 94–100; O'Malley, 83–84.

Kabbalah — more than Egidio gives — will be helpful.[28] In one sense, Kabbalah is a topography of supercelestial divine space, the region from which the lower world comes when God creates it. Maps of this space show the disposition of God's attributes in it, from high to low: these ten items (S1–10) can be thought of as properties of God or as emanations from God. A common way to map the Godhead is to show it as a tree with three trunks (or columns) and ten nodes, in this configuration of *sefirot*:

S1

CROWN

S3   S2

INTELLIGENCE   WISDOM

S5   S4

STRENGTH   MERCY

ISAAC   ABRAHAM

S6

BEAUTY

JACOB

S8   S7

GLORY   ETERNITY

S9

FOUNDATION

S10

KINGDOM

DWELLER

The letter *S* abbreviates *sefirah* (plural, *sefirot*), literally a "counting," but here a Kabbalist term of art. The middle trunk is S1, S6, S9, and S10; the right

trunk is S2, S4, and S7; the left is S3, S5, and S8. All ten *sefirot* have a multitude of names, signs, and symbols, and a major task of Kabbalah is to puzzle out the nomenclature and symbolism. The primary names — Crown for S1, Wisdom for S2, Understanding for S3, and so on — are more or less stable across the whole range of Kabbalist texts, but other secondary and tertiary names are less constant and sometimes idiosyncratic. Looking at primary names like Wisdom and Understanding, it is easy to see the *sefirot* as God's attributes, but this is only part of the story, which can only be sketched here.[29]

Other names suggest that the seven lower *sefirot* are persons: S4 is Abraham, S5 is Isaac, S6 is Jacob. Although these patriarchs are male, other revered biblical figures are female, and so are some of the *sefirot*. The gendering starts with grammar. Wisdom, a name of S2, is feminine in Hebrew (*Ĥokhmah*), and so is *Shekhinah*, the Dweller, frequently a name of S10, also called the Kingdom. Women and men have sex, and women become pregnant, a commonplace of human life and of Kabbalah. S6, called Jacob and Beauty, is male. In the narratives of Kabbalist salvation history, the female S10 copulates with the male S6. Their sexual act is a redemptive event: sefirotic intercourse ends the Shekhinah's alienation or exile, caused by human violations of God's Law. Keeping the law restores the moral and hypercosmic order and promotes sexual activity on high.[30]

The *sefirot*, bearing the names of biblical persons and divine attributes, are designated by the Hebrew letters that are also numerals. This point is fundamental, though it is not within the Anglolexic (English-reading) experience of letters (*a b c*), which are not numerals (1 2 3) but may symbolize numerals or the numbers that numerals stand for. To say that *alef* represents the numeral 1, or the corresponding number, misses the point, since *alef* is both just a letter (with no counterpart in Roman script) and a numeral, corresponding to the Arabic numeral 1. The most striking passages of Egidio's book are those that give sexual anatomies — in the Kabbalist framework just described — of the numerically meaningful Hebrew letters.

His guide to this remarkable alphabet is a Hebrew "Book of Figures," as he calls it, whose author he does not know. Modern-day experts describe it as an unusually rebarbative treatment of a famously obscure subject: its author

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[29]Scholem, 1974, 105–16, 418.

[30]See Idel, 2005, for extensive discussions of sexual relations among the *sefirot*. Note that grammatical gender affects, but does not control, the sexuality of the *sefirot*: *x* is sometimes seen as a father, for example, while the male *Tiferet* has a grammatically feminine name.

was a Byzantine Jew. This *Sefer ha-Temunah* (*Book of the Figure*) circulated by 1350 but probably not in Italy until the late Quattrocento: Egidio knew it before it was famous among Jews. Its millenarian doctrine of cosmic cycles would have attracted him; he also probably knew the different *Book of Figures* attributed to that provocative Christian prophet, Joachim of Fiore. The cycles of the Hebrew *Book of the Figure* start in the Bible.[31]

Leviticus records instructions from Moses for the people of Israel to sow their fields for six years and then let them rest for a seventh. The fiftieth year after seven such cycles of seven "shall be a jubilee for you." On a grand scale of 50,000 years, regulated by the seven lower *sefirot* (S4–10), the universe follows the same rhythm of creation, destruction, and renewal, as souls are gathered up by God and then sent forth again in endless rounds (*gilgulim*) of transmigration. This is the theosophical cosmology expressed by the *Sefer ha-Temunah* in successive trips through the alphabet in three books of ever more elaborate exposition and ever-richer imagery. The book is transformative: the reader wheels through its letters to experience birth, death, and rebirth. The sabbatical cadence is also Saturnian, ruled by the planet that governs the Jewish people, and it is also millenarian. The shape of *tet* (ט), one of Saturn's letters, is the topic of a passage that illustrates what Egidio found in this mystifying book:

> The higher souls returning from their labor draw strength from this shape; it routs the wicked from their place and lengthens the time of their transmigration. Yet in the end it offers rest to them all. . . . In fact, this letter is formed from *kaf* (כ) and *zain* (ז), so that the Diadem [S1] finally unites the seven sabbaths [S4–10] and everything returns to the *sefirah* of Understanding [S3], as at the beginning, and their shape changes. . . . The Messiah, Son of David, will not come until all the higher souls contained in the Body have been used up. The higher redemption and that lower one will then be joined in the primal light. . . . In the seventh day, the year of remission and the Jubilee will be the same, in the shape of the letter *ĥet* (ח), and all will turn back to the first Redeemer who peacefully redeemed everything, and "the one who was sold will be redeemed" and "will be freed at the Jubilee," which are the days of the supernal Messiah.[32]

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[31] *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 245–346, cited here in Busi's invaluable Italian version; Scholem, 1974, 52–54, 120–22, 335–36; Reeves, 1–28, 100–05; Reeves and Hirsch-Reich; Ogren, 2009a and 2009b; Idel, 2011a, 290–91; Idel, 2011b, 677–86. A copy of Egidio's *Scechina* in MS Bibliothèque nationale (BN) F. Lat. 3363 follows a collection of Joachimite prophecies: Secret in Egidio da Viterbo, 1959, 1:65n1.

[32] Leviticus 25:1–12, 31, 48; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 309–11; Idel, 2011c, 59–60; Ogren, 2009b, 19–20.

Inspired by this orthographic theology, and thinking of his own insights into the Hebrew letters as signs of the times, Egidio prays for the Coming of the Kingdom: "Plant your grain of mustard," he begs the Lord, "and put an end to both Laws."[33] But invoking this Gospel formula of antinomian apocalypse is not enough: "Now that God is setting new things in motion [in 1517, in those last days] things long hidden come to light, freely disclosing themselves to the cognizance of pious minds." As one such righteous soul, Egidio makes it his job to excavate the deepest prophetic secrets of sacred writing.[34]

Not just letters, then, but also the placements, orientations, shapes, and components of letters are Egidio's topic, right from the start of the second part of his book. "א comes first," he writes, "the letter *aleph*: although one and simple, it is a composite of three, a *vav* in the middle and two *iodim*."[35] He means that the three parts of the composite *alef* (א) are two other letters, *yod* (י) and *vav* (ו), that add up to 26 (10 + 10 + 6; ו + י + י), which is also the sum of the letters of the Tetragrammaton:

$$\text{א} \longrightarrow \text{י ו}$$

The long *vav* (ו) tilts left to make the *alef*'s diagonal stroke, surrounded by one *yod* (י) at the top right and another mirroring it at the bottom left. If anatomizing and rearranging letters in this way surprised Egidio's readers, imagine how astonished they would have been when the anatomy turned out to be genital and sexual. They would have found Egidio's book bizarre, no doubt, when they encountered this strangest feature of his Kabbalah of Hebrew letters. The second part of his book dissects the alphabet, in the service of politics and theology in order to uncover its sexuality.

3. EXEGESIS CONVENTIONAL AND CREATIVE

At the same time (and inevitably, considering Egidio's audience), the *Libellus* does something less outrageous but still strange to all but a few Christians: introducing Kabbalah with examples of a novel exegesis that uncovers secrets of scripture. The sexuality of the letters is just one such secret, whose discovery is one striking result of applying a general hermeneutic method. Before turning to Egidio's sexual alphabet, it will be useful to see his Kabbalist methodology in action.

[33]*Lib.*, fol. 32; Matthew 13:31–32.

[34]*Lib.*, fols. 17, 24, 32; Secret in Egidio da Viterbo, 1959, 1:12, 16–17; Secret, 114–15; O'Malley, 36–38, 61–62, 74, 106, 113, 127–30: Egidio writes "nunc Deo nova moliente," but see O'Malley, 2, 161, on the pejorative force of the phrase *res novae*.

[35]*Lib.*, fol. 17; *Zohar* 1:34b; 2:54a, 136b; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 248, 263–64, 298–99; O'Malley, 59, 78–79.

A good place to start is a question from Proverbs: "what is his name?" Since there is no punctuation in the Hebrew text, this question can be read as an assertion, that a name of God is "what," or *mah* (מה) in Hebrew, whose letters, *mem* (40) and *he* (5), add up to 45.[36] That number is one of those that define numbered lists of God's names, a Kabbalist motif that Egidio introduces with a descending series of arcane quantities: 613, 248, 70, 50, 45, 32, 27. Six hundred thirteen biblical commandments dwindle to 248 if only the positive injunctions are counted. "They shrink this copious quantity as well to Seventy Names," Egidio explains, and then "to Fifty Gates of Understanding, then Forty-Five Names, and next Thirty-Two Paths of Wisdom. Then those contract into the number of the letters, which are twenty-seven." Secret calculations converge on the twenty-seven letters, and forty-five is a station on that mystical journey — the number of the divine name *mah*, but also the number of letters in a much-larger divine name, and finally the number of such names in a Kabbalist list of God's names.[37]

Since the Fifty Gates, the Forty-Five Names, and the Thirty-Two Paths are major themes of Kabbalah, they are obligatory topics of any introduction to it, like those that Pico and Reuchlin had already provided. Still, it was novel in Egidio's Christian world to describe these arcane patterns of imagery and symbolism and to illustrate the exegetical techniques underlying them. But the novelty was ephemeral: readers of the Latin literature on Kabbalah would soon take such material for granted. They would also expect to see Kabbalah familiarized by Latin words standing for concepts that Christians saw as distinctively Kabbalist, in the way that Egidio's account appeals to Scholastic philosophical terminology ("attributes," "properties," "prime matter," "real distinction"). Although Christians might find it hard to see why a *sefirah*, or numeration, should belong to God, it would not be so hard to think in that way about the divine properties, attributes, or perfections that had long been debated in European universities. Extending the reach of

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[36]Proverbs 30:4; *Zohar* 2:79a–b, where the famous question from Proverbs is read as a number of different questions, like "Who has gone up to heaven," where "Who" and therefore "What" are taken to name God, as in Psalms 47:6, "God has gone up with a shout of joy." The question in the Hebrew text of Proverbs has only two words and five letters: the word that is not "what," which is "his-name," is all the more resonant because "the Name" is a common substitute name for the more sacred names of God, like Adonai, Elohim, and the Tetragrammaton.

[37]*Lib.*, fol. 31; Exodus 33:7; Numbers 14:12; Babylonian Talmud, *Makkot* 24a; Midrash, Genesis 24:5; *Sefer yetzirah*, 1993, 1:1, 6:7; *Sefer ha-Bahir*, 2005, 151–52; Pico, 23, 64. Of the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, five are written in two forms, so that the total number of signs is twenty-seven.

Christian thought in this way was an achievement for Egidio, but it did not distinguish him from other Hebraists writing in Latin.[38]

He was also not the first or last to unriddle Hebrew as Kabbalah's linguistic matrix, though his puzzle-solving skills with the sacred language are certainly impressive. At the very end of the long trail of numbers that starts with 613, for example, what Egidio finds among the ancient secrets is a 2 in the divine name *Yah*, whose two puny letters, *yod* (י) and *he* (ה), enclose an immense mystery. This two-letter name is part of the great four-letter name, the Tetragrammaton, *yod he vav he* (יהוה): "into the four chosen letters . . . of which the first is *iod*, they also put a complete Name in the half that sounds like IA, which is enclosed in the secret of *alleluia* . . . placed at the foot of the Psalms."[39]

Egidio wants to teach his readers just such secrets. The Kabbalist learns this one from the last Psalm (150), one of those that end in *halleluiah*, whose last two letters spell *Yah*. The exclamatory *halleluiah* is a compound, *hallelu-Yah*, "praise Yah!" Its first and last letters are *he*: הללויה. The psalmist's exclamation follows a command: "all that breathes — praise [*tehallel*, תהלל] the Lord," the God who created the world with the mere breath of a *he*. But a midrash warns that "if you make the letter *he* into the letter *ḥet*, you bring . . . destruction upon the world," since *teḥallel*, spelled with a *ḥet*, means "desecrate," which would defile the Psalm. Moreover, "all that breathes," meaning all breathing animals, can pronounce *he* (ה), but not *ḥet*, whose written form is nearly identical — ח. Speaking of the amenable *he*, Egidio cites "the Aramean theologians," who "tell us that . . . only this letter is plainly heard even when animals breathe: by breathing out, animals that draw breath express the letter that is produced just by breathing." But the breathy *he* is also the letter "that the Arameans ascribe to the numeration that they called *Bina*, Will and Spirit," indicating that S3 in the highest triad of *sefirot* is the Holy Spirit. Phonology underwrites theology, showing why the *he* "pronounced neither by the teeth nor the palate nor the tongue but by breathing alone was dedicated to the Breathing Spirit, which is not only easy for man but even natural."[40]

Egidio has already singled out *halleluiah* as one of the Gospel words protected by the Holy Spirit. His account of the *he* that begins and ends this holy word is remarkably learned and clever, compared to what most Christian contemporaries could produce. From a wider perspective, however, the

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[38] *Lib.*, fols. 16–17, 20.

[39] Ibid., fol. 31; Psalm 150:6.

[40] *Lib.*, fol. 22; Psalm 150:6; Babylonian Talmud, *Menaḥot* 29b; Midrash, Genesis 12:10, Leviticus 19:2, Ecclesiastes 2:15; *Zohar* 1:29b, 30a.

grammar is elementary and the exegesis traditional, and Egidio's application of his newfound learning is not at all creative. He undertakes what was already conventional and reflexive for Christian apologists and would be for Christian Kabbalists: Christianizing not just the Hebrew Bible but also Kabbalah as a hermeneutic tool for Christian apologetics.[41]

"The first Trinity," Egidio writes, "most divine, exists in itself, needing none. The two trinities that follow are like what our people call 'attributes' and 'properties' of those above: they watch over the world that is to be born, tended, and governed." The full triplet of trinities is S1–3, S4–6, and S7–9. But the customary division of all ten *sefirot* into three above (S1–3) and seven below (S4–10) permits Egidio to set the higher group apart as the triune God, treating the lower seven as modes of the divine substance. Since S3, *Binah* or Understanding, is also *Ruaĥ*, or Spirit, it is also natural to identify the third *sefirah* with the third person of the Trinity, the Paraclete, or Comforter. Finally, just as S3 flows ineffably from S1, so do the lower seven *sefirot*, S4–10, flow from the Spirit. Thus, these seven attributes are also the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, well-known to Christian theologians after Isaiah's list of seven gifts was absorbed into Christian tradition, which also accommodated the cardinal virtues enumerated by Greek philosophers.[42]

Trinitarian theology and philosophy appropriate the realm of the *sefirot*. Egidio, who established his theological credentials in the usual way by commenting — in an unusual, Neoplatonic way — on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, had spiritual, intellectual, and institutional obligations to Christian dogma that made it instinctive for him to colonize Kabbalah. Less predictable was his using Kabbalah to interpret Christian scripture and illuminate Church doctrine.[43]

Parallel tales of celestial ascent — Paul's rapture to the third heaven and Moses rising through the seven lower *sefirot* — seem to show Egidio handling these stories conservatively, as one might expect. Since Moses could not pass the fiftieth Gate of Understanding at S3, after moving up from S10 through S4 by the forty-nine lower Gates, "Moses did not get the prize. Then Paul — or Benjamin, the 'ravening wolf' — got the fire of Prometheus and did not steal it, but was filled with the Spirit who descends in the shape of fire." The Benjamin of Genesis 49 is a type of Paul ("of the tribe of Benjamin") before conversion, when he savaged the early Christians

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[41] *Lib.*, fol. 12.

[42] Ibid., fols. 4, 16, 19, 39; Isaiah 11:2–3; John 14:26; 1 Corinthians 12:4–11; Midrash, Song of Songs 1:9; Augustine, *On the Trinity* 7.1; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Iᵃ 37.2; *Zohar* 1:31b, 2:175b; O'Malley, 37.

[43] Egidio da Viterbo, 2010.

like a wolf. But Paul, having been "caught up to the third heaven," has no need to steal the fire given to him there by the Pentecostal Paraclete who, like Prometheus, is mankind's benefactor — and Paul's, who outshines Moses in the Spirit's graces.[44]

Paul, the apostle who is Egidio's main guide to Christian doctrine, could outdo Moses only because he had the Wisdom (S2) beyond S3 that Moses could never reach: 2 is the number of this Wisdom, the same as the letter *bet* (ב). Egidio learned from the *Book of the Figure* that *bet* "is the path of the higher Wisdom, the 'first-born' of the primal *aleph*," which is S1. "Fully filled with Wisdom's light," he concludes, "our Apostle uses these words, calling that Wisdom the 'first-born of all creation.'" Egidio's point is this: when Paul writes in Colossians about "the image of the invisible God" that is "the first-born of all creation," he has been inspired not just by the Spirit (S3), but also by the Son (S2), who stands above all creation as the only begotten of the Father (S1). Egidio's exegesis of this New Testament passage is Kabbalist, showing the sefirotic side of Paul's ascent to the full Wisdom of the Trinity.[45]

Egidio's Christian Kabbalah goes beyond conventional apologetics to a Kabbalist reading of Christian scripture and Kabbalist conclusions about Christian doctrine. A few cases must suffice to illustrate this genuine creativity of the *Libellus*, which is apparent throughout the book. Still commenting on *bet* (ב) as the letter of Wisdom (S2), Egidio points out that in the Latin version of Proverbs, where "Wisdom has built herself a house," the Hebrew text actually has not just one Wisdom but Wisdoms in the plural. He identifies them as a pair, S2 and S10, a higher and a lower Wisdom, both female and both called *bet*, which sounds like *bayit*, the word for "house."[46]

Then he adds that S10, "like the Moon, has no light of her own but tries to get it from her Sun, and so she is called poor and needy. The Apostle says that the upper Wisdom came down there and 'dispossessed herself,' which is why *bet* signifies both Wisdoms, the wealthy one when by itself and intact, the poor one when by itself and broken into *dalet*, a word that sounds like 'poverty' in the sacred language." Once again, Paul holds the key to the mystery, having hidden it in his Letter to the Philippians: "He dispossessed

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[44] *Lib.*, fols. 35, 39, 42, 47; Genesis 49:27; Romans 11:1; 2 Corinthians 12:2; Philippians 3:5; Hippolytus, 1897, *Comm. ad Gen.* 49:27; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 252, 271.

[45] *Lib.*, fols. 11, 18; Colossians 1:15; *Zohar* 1:141b, 207a; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 248. For the phrase from Colossians, Egidio quotes the Vulgate's *omnis creaturae*, for which the King James Version gives "of every creature." But the Greek is πάσης κτίσεως — "all creation" — which obviously is Egidio's meaning as well. The postclassical *creatura* can also mean "creation," as at Revelation 3:14.

[46] *Lib.*, fol. 18; Proverbs 9:1.

himself, taking the form of a servant." To redeem creation, Christ comes down from heaven to suffer as a servant. Likewise, in a primal sefirotic abnegation, Wisdom (S2) descends from on high, dispossessing herself as S10, "the poor one . . . broken into *dalet*." The *bet* of Wisdom breaks in two, leaving a *dalet* and a *vav*; when *vav* (ו) drops away from the bottom of *bet* (ב), *dalet* (ד) is the remainder:

$$ ב \longrightarrow ד \ ו $$

But *dalet* sounds like *dallut*, which means "poverty," because when she descends to S10, Wisdom leaves her wealth behind. And the lower Wisdom who is *dalet* and *dallut* is also *delet*, a "door" opening down to the lower world and up to the higher worlds. The door opens the house, the Shekhinah in whom God dwells, for S10 is a Dwelling and a House.[47]

If this disassembling of letters seems excessive, consider Egidio's position in light of a passage that he cites from John's Gospel, where Jesus answers attacks from the Jews by commanding his opponents to "search the scriptures." Clearly, no lesser inquiry will do for Christians, who must look "deeply within at secrets that lie hidden, in particular by knowing the letters in their placement, parts and use." This is why the broken pieces of *bet* are meaningful, and the same holds for all the letters.[48] The letter *tet* (ט), for example,

$$ ט \longrightarrow כ \ ו $$
$$ ט \longrightarrow כ \ ז $$

is visibly split, either into *kaf* (כ) and *vav* (ו) or into *kaf* and *zayin* (ז). To find out why, remember the word *tov* (*tet vav bet*, טוב), or "good," where *tet*, cleaved in two, signifies two worlds, the world of light to come and this dark world of the present, broken apart like *tet* and numbered by *bet* (ב), which is 2.

The first *tov* of all appears in the creation story. After God says five times that each stage of creation "was good," on the sixth day he creates man and declares the result to be even better — "very good," *tov* (טוב) *me'od* (מאד). But *tov*, starting with the two-sided *tet*, begins in ambivalence. And even the inconspicuous "very" (*me'od*) seems threatening at first: it sounds a little like "death" (*mavet*, מות) when *mavet* is written with the same consonants but vocalized differently (in a distinct grammatical form) as *mot*, as in the common biblical phrase "he shall surely die [מות יומת, *mot yumat*]." According to Egidio, this is why "in *tov meod* in Genesis, they interpret *tov* as 'life,' *meod* as the 'death' that is far better than this life." This Kabbalah gives insight into

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[47] *Lib.*, fol. 18; Proverbs 9:1; Colossians 2:3; Philippians 2:7; *Sefer ha-Bahir*, 138.
[48] *Lib.*, fol. 43; John 5:39; O'Malley, 69–70.

Christian doctrine, expressed in this case by Jesus himself in John's Gospel: "My kingdom is not of this world." "If the highest good for mortals is up there," Egidio argues, "and if man can reach it only through death . . . then writing *tov* or 'good' with this letter is right." For *tet*, sounding like *tav* (ת), the last letter of all that comes at the end of "death" (מות), "signifies death and the end of life."[49]

4. SEX AND THE ALPHABET

The very words of Jesus in John's Gospel, like Paul's words in his Epistles, obligate Christians to read them through Kabbalah. As students of Kabbalah, Christians must therefore learn the various techniques of gematria and the various numerological alphabets used to decode the secrets breathed into scripture by the Spirit. They must also learn the mystical names of God and how those august names become "that most divine Name before which 'every knee must bend,' as the Apostle witnesses," the name Jesus that Christians cannot yet say because they are still ignorant of the sacred tongue.[50] All that is more than Egidio can teach in his *Libellus*. But he reviews the topics that he finds salient and most instructive, giving memorable examples. Most memorable is his sexual anatomy of the Hebrew letters.

The Bible itself confronts its readers with sexuality, most famously in the erotic Song of Songs, where the beloved is a sister and a bride. This little book was a favorite of Kabbalists and other commentators, including Yohanan Alemanno, whom Egidio could have known, or known of, from his trip to Florence in the mid-1490s.[51] He also knew how other texts, like the love story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, were turned into sefirotic theosophy by the authors of the *Zohar*. The *sefirot* sometimes behave like persons, and the behavior is sometimes sexual. When the higher Wisdom (S2) descends to become the lower Wisdom (S10), she turns into the Moon, who borrows her light from the Sun, called Tiferet (Beauty), or Jacob (S6). The moon is female, hence lower, empty of light, and impoverished. The sun is male, hence higher, full of light, and rich in

[49] *Lib.*, fols. 26–27; Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; Ecclesiasticus 39:21; John 18:36; *Zohar* 1:47a, citing Midrash, Genesis 9:5; *Zohar* 2:151b–152a; cf. *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 250–51, 268–69. For *mot yumat*, see Ezekiel 18:13, for example.

[50] *Lib.*, fols. 2–4, 7–8, 14, 16–18, 21–22, 28, 31, 36, 45; Exodus 23:21; Philippians 2:10; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 252–53, 271–74, 325.

[51] Mello in Rashi; Andreatta in Gersonides; Lelli; Idel, 2011a, 177–78, 289–92, pointing out that Alemanno seems to have been the first person in Italy with knowledge of the *Sefer ha-Temunah*.

potency. Such oppositions of sex and gender are everywhere in Kabbalah. Egidio could not have missed them.[52]

Sex is one thing. The alphabet is another. To think of something more abstract and asexual would be hard. The way to a sexual anatomy of letters starts with the command of Jesus to "search the scriptures," meaning their "placement, parts, and use," according to Egidio.[53] How letters are used is a plausible question for biblical philology, but what about their parts and placement? The answer comes from a verse of Samuel, "you have enlarged my steps under me," where the expected Hebrew word, *tahtai* ("under me"), has been replaced by the anomalous *tahteni*, differing by just one letter, a *nun* (נ), which is 50 and whose placement is unusual. The tiny *nun* stands out because it is in the wrong place, giving a clue to the grand mystery of redemption.[54]

The point is subtle and relies on the mystical theology of prayer. When the fundamental prayer of Judaism, the *Shema*, with its twenty-five letters, and the response to it, in twenty-four letters, work together devoutly to proclaim the divine unity, forty-nine Gates (25 + 24) stand open. God then counts those who have prayed in this pious way as having fulfilled the whole law, suggesting complete Understanding and thus the fiftieth Gate (S3) — a *nun* and a 50 — not just the lower forty-nine (S4–10). Taken together, the Fifty Gates, also called the Jubilee, correspond to the fifty-year festival ordained in Leviticus, but also to the Great Jubilee of 50,000 years, when seven 7,000-year sabbatical cycles come to an end and the seven lower *sefirot* collapse upward into the higher three in a final millennium — perhaps the one that Egidio saw coming in 1517. All this lore about the Gates is signaled by the tiny misplaced *nun* in *tahteni*, and the Gates are at the center of Egidio's concerns.[55]

If this inquiry about *nun* sets the exegetical standard, one would expect the shapes and parts of letters to be as informative as their placement. This is certainly so for the shape of the letter *zayin*:

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In Exodus, Joshua's troops prevail against Amalek only while Moses, watching the battle from a hilltop, keeps his arms raised, holding up "the

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[52]*Lib.*, fols. 18, 23, 33, 49; Genesis 29:31–30:24; Psalms 113:9; Song of Songs 4:9–12; Midrash, Genesis 53:5; *Zohar* 1:141b, 153b–154a, 207a; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 248, 251–52, 255, 270, 315–16, 332–34; Martin, 53–54.

[53]*Lib.*, fol. 43; John 5:39.

[54]*Lib.*, fol. 47; 2 Samuel 22:37.

[55]Leviticus 25:11; 1 Kings 9:1, 10:18–19; 2 Chronicles 7:11; *Zohar* 1:96a; 2:4a, 14b; Pico, 22, 24, 66; Ogren, 2009a.

rod of God." In this ancient conflict Egidio sees a new portent, and astrology enters his calculations. The Hebrew name of the constellation Libra, the Balance or the Scales, is *M'oznayim*, "where the twin peaks of this letter [*zayin*] signify the two pans of the scales of impartiality, as the divine force whereby God, leaning now toward one side, now toward the other, bestows victory with perfectly equitable judgment." Standing on the hill, Moses himself embodies the scales of justice, whose form is *zayin*. And throughout history, as the celestial balance rises and falls, the Jews have sometimes outdone the Romans in piety, Rome's characteristic virtue. It was the Jews who sent a "Hebrew Pontiff" to Rome in the person of Peter, Leo's predecessor, and Egidio hopes that Leo will be the pope of the millennium.[56]

The Bible foretells the millennium in the Great Jubilee of 50,000 years, also known as the higher Gate of Understanding (S3), corresponding to the lower Gate at S10. "The higher Gate they call the Great Jubilee and Horn," says Egidio, "the lower one the House of Kings and the Ivory Stair — literally the source from which Virgil (and Homer before him) took their Twin Gates: on one side a high Gate of Horn as the final goal, on the other an elephantine Gate of Ivory, the middle region where we dwell piously in life so that we might reach the higher one after death." The episode of the Gates that ends the sixth book of the *Aeneid* was deeply meaningful to Egidio, who reads Virgil's story of descent to the underworld as a Platonic soul-voyage, in personal terms, but also in historical terms as the pageant of salvation.[57]

Prominent in these narratives is the letter *quf* (ק), not just the whole letter but also its parts, "for it has a *nun*, an upright pillar, standing for the upper Gate, and for the lower Gate a moon-shaped *caph*":

$$\text{כ ן ק} \longrightarrow \text{ק}$$

The parts of *quf*, symbolizing two Gates, are a (final) *nun* for the straight stroke on the left and a curved (not final) *kaf* for the stroke on the right. But this is only one configuration; in another, *resh* (ר) replaces *kaf*:

$$\text{ר ן ק} \longrightarrow \text{ק}$$

"According to an opinion of the Aramean fathers, *coph* can also add the shape of *res* to the straight *nun*. In this way, ק, it is made with *kaf*, in this way, ק, with

[56] *Lib.*, fols. 25–26; Exodus 17:9–12; 1 Samuel 2:6; Proverbs 16:11; Midrash, Exodus 16:3; *Zohar* 2:95b, 175b; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 266–67; O'Malley, 123.

[57] *Lib.*, fol. 47; Homer, 1917, *Odyssey* 19.560–69; Plato, *Charmides* 173A–B; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.124–41, 893–901; Macrobius, 1994, *Commentary on Scipio's Dream* 1.3.17–20; Dante Alighieri, 1965, *Inferno* 1.1–6, 3.1–4; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 254, 277, 330.

FIGURE 1. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV) MS Lat. 5808, fol. 48ᵛ.

res."[58] The distinction that Egidio intends can be seen best in the manuscript, where the right part of the second *quf* is plainly more angular — more like a *resh* — than that part of the first *quf* (fig. 1). This detail shows that Egidio, following the Lord's commandment, was thinking about the parts of the letters. It also suggests that the scribe was one of those in Leo's Vatican, probably from Egidio's *famiglia*, who could write at least a little Hebrew. Moreover, the manuscript itself, which measures its lines carefully from page to page through exactly fifty pages, may be an emblem of one of its own main messages: that Christians must ascend by Kabbalah through all fifty Gates of Understanding. Since the manuscript is a presentation copy, such physical features and orthographic details are likely to be meaningful.[59]

In fact, no detail is too small to notice in Kabbalah: *multum in minimo*. Perhaps this is a pathology, not a hermeneutic principle. The question seems fair in light of Egidio's exuberant treatment of the Hebrew letters as sexually active and mutually engaged. To get the full effect, and to judge it fairly, the best way is to see the context by reading the whole *Libellus*, which is not very long. Short of that, a few passages featuring *kaf* and *vav*, the busiest gendered letters in the book, can be examined.

Although Egidio has much to say about S10 as the female and lunar *kaf*, he never uses her most famous name, Shekhinah, which became the title of the immense study of Kabbalah that he began at Clement VII's request in 1530. Once in the *Libellus* he calls her Dispensatrix, a traditional title of Mary as the primary channel of grace.[60] In sefirotic mythology, Tiferet (S6) impregnates

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[58] *Lib.*, fol. 48; *Zohar* 1:203b; 2:6b, 57a; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 254, 277.

[59] We are grateful to John Monfasani for examining the manuscript and confirming that it is a presentation copy made by a professional scribe, though the corrections may be Egidio's: see Monfasani.

[60] *Lib.*, fol. 16; O'Malley, 13–14; Martin, 174–75; Secret, 113–20.

the Shekhinah (S10), who dwells in the shadow of S9, *ayin*, whose name means both "spring" and "eye," watching, from a Christian point of view, over the Virgin in whom Christ (commonly identified with Tiferet) is conceived, under the gaze of *ayin*, who is also the messianic Just One, or *Tsadiq*.[61]

Describing S6 as shining amid the *sefirot*, like the sun among the planets, Egidio explains that *kaf*, or the tenth, "is his sister, and while filling her with light, the Sun makes her pregnant as his most beloved bride, the source of everything human." Her female role is to be empty in order to be filled: "she delivers nothing to any other [*sefirah*], taking everything into herself, so that the meaning of male above and female down here is preserved in a certain pattern — an arcanum." The form of *kaf* follows her function; she is

כ

"a semicircle, closed on the side from which she stays away, open on the side where she lets the stream enter her sanctuary — like a woman's womb about to receive its conception and child from her husband, performing her wifely duties of loving, conceiving, birthing, nursing, rearing, and protecting."[62] Her spouse and brother is "the pillar of the six numerations and the sixth in their midst, who is called Tipheret." He is "the letter *vav* . . . the pillar of the world, simple and self-contained, needing no one, perfect, complete and transcendent":[63]

ו

Vav finds his bride in "the tenth, who loosens her belt and spreads her womb wide to join with the man crowned by the light of the stars who are the higher numerations — the *aleph* that is three and one, and then the six others in the tree of divine numerations. The result is Isaiah's song: 'the voice of joy, of the utmost pleasure of bridegroom and bride.'"[64]

Kaf and *vav* join in a sexual and mystical union that is also orthographic. In most cases, when Egidio takes the other letters apart to find their elements, what he discovers is an intruding *vav* joined in one way or another with a receptive *kaf*. *Lamed* is one such composite, and a phallic spectacle in its own right:

ל ⟶ ו כ

[61] *Lib.*, fols. 42, 46; Deuteronomy 33:28; Psalm 104:4; Song of Songs 4:15; John 4:10–11, 7:38; Seneca, 1965, *Letter* 49.6; *Sefer yetzirah* 1:9–10, 12; 3:4; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 253–54, 276, 329; Stein Kokin, 2011.

[62] *Lib.*, fols. 33–34; Song of Songs 4:9–12; Ecclesiasticus 26:1–2; *Zohar* 1:86a; 2:34b, 232b; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 251–52, 270, 315–16.

[63] *Lib.*, fols. 7, 23; Exodus 27:10, 33:21; Leviticus 26:42; *Zohar* 1:117b, 119a; 2:126b; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 249, 266, 305–06.

[64] *Lib.*, fol. 27; Jeremiah 33:11; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 250–51, 309: the bridal song is Jeremiah's, not Isaiah's.

"Topped by a tower, he" — "he" is the *vav* in *lamed*'s upper half —
"penetrates everything and she" — "she" is the *kaf* who is not on top — "is
made the mother of everything, as if joined with the highest bridegroom in
the highest bedroom and chamber." Also, "a chain of number links both
letters to the chief and most secret Name of all." The arithmetical link is 26,
the sum of *vav* (6) + *kaf* (20) but also the sum of *yod* (10) + *he* (5) + *vav* (6)
+ *he* (5), the letters of the Tetragrammaton (יהוה). Thus linked with God's
holiest name by the nuptials of *kaf* and *vav*, *lamed* rises to divinity, like the
other letters composed of *kaf* and *vav*. Since Egidio (following Reuchlin)
finds the Tetragrammaton embedded in the name Jesus, he knows that the
supernal marriage of *vav* with *kaf* also expresses God's incarnation, written
in the very letters that spell God's name.[65]

Samekh, shaped like a womb,

$$ ס \longrightarrow ו \: כ $$

is like the other letters that "bond tenth to sixth, bride to bridegroom, queen
to king, so that while they are still two in form and flesh, they look as if they
are one thing . . . when joined in copulation."[66] A different case is *pe* (פ),
where *kaf* marries *yod* (י) rather than *vav*:

$$ פ \longrightarrow י \: כ $$

Yod as S9 "copulates with the tenth — mouth to mouth, male to female,
bridegroom to bride — as if in a secret bedchamber." The pious understand
"the intercourse of male and female in *pe* . . . as a symbol of the divine nuptials,
and that . . . from this final moment, from the 'kiss of the mouth,' the bride
begins her hymns of holy love and her inexpressible wedding song."[67]

5. HEBREW TRUTH AND PLATONIC PIETY

The *Sefer ha-Temunah*, a much-fuller account of the letters than the *Libellus*,
is Egidio's main source. He owned a translation, and he cites it explicitly
eight times, calling its author "this theologian."[68] This theologian is not one

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[65] *Lib.*, fol. 36; Reuchlin, 356–88.

[66] *Lib.*, fol. 41.

[67] Ibid., fol. 46; Psalms 19:5, 116:5; Proverbs 10:25; Song of Songs 1:2; Babylonian
Talmud, *Berakot* 8a, *Mo'ed Qatan* 28a; *Sefer ha-Bahir*, 180; *Zohar* 1:98b, 197a, 225b; 3:25a;
Pico, 59.

[68] *Lib.*, fols. 18, 27, 36, 38, 41–42, 46: in Egidio da Viterbo, 1959, 1:12, Secret says that
the translation in Paris BN Lat. 527 is "certes . . . de la main du cardinal," suggesting that it
may be his copy of the original in the Angelica, perhaps a translation by a Jew working for the
cardinal.

of the "Aramean theologians" whom Egidio also cites, the authors of Talmudic, Midrashic, and Kabbalist texts that were often written in Aramaic. One such Aramaic book is the most celebrated guide to Kabbalah, the *Zohar*, which was not much read in Quattrocento Italy. Egidio acquired a copy, however, and had a partial Latin translation.[69] For any of these works or for related material, Egidio's proximate source may have been oral — one of his Jewish teachers. To learn from them and their secret books, Egidio knew that he had to cross a "barrier of the nations."[70] But he also knew that the book of Revelation describes a part of the Temple that non-Jews could enter, the "court . . . given unto the gentiles." According to Josephus, it was "surrounded by a stone wall for a partition, with an inscription that forbade any foreigner to go in, under pain of death." The book of Acts tells how Paul nearly caused a riot when he "brought Greeks also into the Temple," and Paul was Egidio's hero: he too brings Greeks and Romans into the Temple.[71]

Some of these gentiles are Christians, the church fathers who enlighten Egidio about the original Hebrew scriptures, *Hebraica veritas*. Jerome often uses this phrase to explain and defend his new Latin version of the Hebrew Bible. By using his own Hebrew learning so adventurously, Egidio sides with Jerome against Augustine, the patron of his order, who disliked Jerome's Vulgate, preferring "that you not read your translation from the Hebrew in the Churches lest we confuse and greatly scandalize Christ's people." The great scandal at issue in the *Libellus* is Christian ignorance of Hebrew. Accordingly, Egidio praises an even greater Christian Hebraist, the controversial Origen, who "alone among our people" understood the Trinitarian meaning of the cherubim guarding the ark, an interpretation that Origen credits to "my Hebrew master."[72]

Hebraica, patristics, and Scholastic theology are key resources for Egidio, who is also a master of humanist Latin and oratory. Every page of the *Libellus*, especially the first part that exhorts the pope to action, is full of rhetorical ornament and rhythm, with frequent displays of classical erudition, as at the end of the first part, where an allusion to an allusion

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[69]*Lib.*, fols. 22, 30; O'Malley, 87; Secret, 109–10; Martin, 164–65; Idel, 2011a, 224–26.

[70]*Lib.*, fol. 19; Genesis 38; 2 Samuel 3:3; Ruth 4:18; Psalm 118:22; Matthew 1:3; John 1:14; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:14–22; Midrash, Exodus 30:3; *Zohar* 1:72a, 231a.

[71]Acts 21:26–30; Revelation 11:2; Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.11.5.417.

[72]*Lib.*, fols. 4–5, 17–18; Isaiah 6:2–3; Ezekiel 10:2–7; Habakkuk 3:2–4; Origen, 1976, *On Principles* 1.3.4; Origen, 1862, *Homilies on Isaiah* 6:2–3; Jerome, *Letter* 57.9; Augustine, *Letter* 116.35; Grafton and Williams, 1–132.

to Horace by Juvenal glosses a remark made by Diogenes, the philosopher, but recorded by another Diogenes, the doxographer.[73]

In the Rome of the Medici popes, anyone writing in this high humanist style about the Aramean theologians would also know the ancient theology of the gentile sages made famous by Marsilio Ficino. The *Libellus* never mentions Ficino, whom Egidio met in the years before he died in 1499. But the great Platonist's philosophy is visible in a technical term, *first in any kind*, used in the *Libellus* and characteristic of Ficino's metaphysics. The book opens with references to Plato, to "Orpheus, Musaeus, Linus, and their like," and to Iamblichus and Dionysius the Areopagite. All of this, and even Egidio's focus on Paul's Letters, argues that the last phase of Ficino's revival of Platonism lies behind Egidio's desire for a reform of language. After the salutation to Cardinal Giulio, the first words in his book come from the *Philebus*, describing the godlike Thoth's invention of writing. Next comes the *Cratylus* on divine names.[74]

Ficino, who revealed these texts to the Latin West, nonetheless believed that their holiest secrets — "unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter," in the words of the Gospel — were to be revealed only to a few: above all, given Plato's distrust of writing, they must not be written, only spoken, and spoken only by a sage to the few students prepared to hear them and keep them undefiled. Where Egidio prizes written letters more than words, Ficino had favored speech over writing. Yet Ficino also taught that "there is a living force in names, especially in divine names." And he wondered why the Egyptians, Persians, Magi, Greeks, and Romans followed the Jews in naming God with four letters — which must be written, of course, in order to be letters — letters that he misread as *he ho ha hi* and linked with "essence, being, power, and action," the four principles that God used to order his creation.[75]

Though thinly informed, such speculations are congenial to the aims of the *Libellus*, whose author was greatly indebted to Ficino for tracing Plato's philosophy to the ancient theologians of the East and interpreting it as a kind of piety that Christians should emulate. Ficino's revived and sanctified Platonism supports Christian dogma on such key doctrines as an immortal human soul and a providential creator of the universe. By questioning or denying these articles of faith, on the other hand, Aristotelianism threatens

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[73]*Lib.*, fol. 15; Horace, 1901, *Epode* 5.90; Juvenal 1.51 (see Persius and Juvenal); Diogenes Laertius, 1964, *Lives* 6.38.

[74]*Lib.*, fols. 1–3, 30; Plato, *Cratylus* 388D–390E, 400B–409A; Plato, *Philebus* 18B; Kristeller, 146–70; O'Malley, 48–58; Martin, 14–18, 138.

[75]2 Corinthians 12:4; Plato, *Letter* 2.313–14; Ficino, 142–44; M. Allen, 421–27.

Christian piety. Egidio once told Ficino that he was "sent to us by divine providence, to make clear to us that the mystical theology of Plato is highly consonant with our sacred teachings and indeed anticipates them." He also probably knew that when Kabbalists contrast questioning with piety, the impious questioning is typically understood to be philosophical and Aristotelian.[76]

Like Ficino, Egidio would see the three hypostases of One, Mind, and Soul as a Neoplatonic confession of Trinitarian faith, especially in the poetic theology of Proclus with its hierarchies of divine triads like Rhea, Hera, and Hebe, who are heathen goddesses only on the surface. But Egidio could give the ancient theology new depth by mapping such pagan triads on to biblical lineages, such as Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. Since the *Zohar*, citing the "joyous mother" of Psalm 113, sees Leah as *Binah* (S2) and Rachel as the Shekhinah (S10), the lineage is also sefirotic. The exegesis is intricate, and the Hebrew part of it is beyond Ficino's reach.[77]

Likewise, although Ficino produced a huge commentary on the *Timaeus*, he could not have understood how the tiny *yod* (י) illuminates Plato's cosmology. The little letter is "tenth in the ordinary alphabet but second in the secret איק." The secret that Egidio mentions is an alphabetical cipher named by its first three letters, *alef* (א), *yod* (י), and *quf* (ק). Read as numerals, these letters and those that follow are 1, 10, 100, 2, 20, 200, 3, 30, 300, 4, or *alef, yod, quf, bet, kaf, resh, gimel, lamed, shin, dalet*, where *yod* comes second and *dalet* tenth. Since *yod* (10) is both tenth, in the normal alphabet, and second, in this cipher, this least of the letters encompasses both the sefirotic and the created worlds, as "the second [S2], where producing the upper world begins, and the tenth [S10], whose gift is the lower world that is to be procreated," thus restating the motif of Wisdom's descent to become the Shekhinah, the primordial point expanding to create the universe. According to Egidio, the two-stage cosmogony of the *Timaeus* — making the mixing bowl and then mixing the souls in it — mirrors the emergence of the lower sefirotic world from the second *sefirah* and then of the human world from the tenth *sefirah*.[78]

Reaching into the Hebrew arcana for clues to Plato's cosmology is a long reach indeed, and less like Ficino than Pico, whom Egidio also admired and

[76]*Lib.*, fols. 12, 27, 46; Philippians 1:23; Plato, *Laws* 899D; Iamblichus, *Mysteries* 7.5.259; O'Malley, 40–56, 82; Martin, 51–53, 339.

[77]*Lib.*, fol. 23; Genesis 29:31–30:24; Psalm 113:9; *Chaldaean Oracles*, 1971, 56; Proclus, 2005, *Platonic Theology* 5.11; Proclus, 1903–06, *Commentary on the* Timaeus 407.21–420.19; Midrash, Genesis 53:5; *Zohar* 1:153b–154a; Lamberton, 211–18.

[78]*Lib.*, fols. 18, 28; Genesis 1:3; Plato, *Timaeus* 41D; *Zohar* 1:16b.

actually names in the *Libellus*. It is possible, moreover (though far from certain), that Egidio understood one of the deepest secrets of Pico's *Conclusions*. Pico holds his riddle close, however. At its heart is a missing *mem*, one of five Hebrew letters that have two forms: one *mem*, which is "open" (מ), comes at the beginning of a word or in the middle; another, which is "closed" (ם), is used to end a word. Either can be the number 40, but sometimes the closed *mem* is 600. Although Pico says nothing at all about the *mem* in thesis 600 of his *Conclusions*, that thesis presents a cognate piece of Platonic numerology, to which Egidio also alludes, where *mem* is his subject, and where he wants to show why *mem* is "in the place of the Great Name . . . *sixth* in the middle of the Denary" — in the center of the ten *sefirot*, in other words. Like S2 and S3 as progenitors of the central sixth *sefirah* (S6), factors of the number 6 are 2 and 3 — the Binary and Ternary, as Egidio calls them here.[79] And he is using his number-words carefully.

Tres is "three," *ter* is "thrice," and the partitive *ternarius* is "threefold," or "containing three." Such partitive numeral words — *ternarius, denarius*, and others — occur throughout the *Libellus*. But it is while discussing the two *mems* that Egidio mentions "Pythagorean numbers," with not just the Ternary and Denary alongside them but also the Binary.[80] The Pythagorean Denary is the Tetractys, an arithmetic amulet in the form of an equilateral triangle, flowing from a single point at its apex and producing ten points in all:

$$1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10:$$
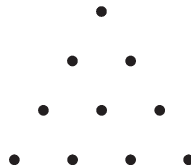
The shape of this Denary, covered by the "silence of Plato and Pythagoras," mirrors another hidden shape, called Crantor's Lambda, that descends not from a point but from 1, the origin of number.[81] It is a lambda because of its shape, and Crantor was the ancient Platonist who unveiled it:

$$\Lambda$$

Next after 1 in the Lambda come 2 and 3, the Binary and Ternary, whose names are partitive, "twofold" and "threefold," because they are more than single numbers: the Binary contains all the twos; the Ternary contains all the

[79] *Lib.*, fol. 36.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., fol. 33.

threes. In metaphysical terms, they are the second hypostasis, Mind, and the third hypostasis, Soul, proceeding from the One on high. Each number, 2 and 3, heads its own branch of a forked series, each fork tracing the powers of 2 and 3, the first numbers, both diverging from 1:

$$1$$
$$2 \quad 3$$
$$4 \qquad 9$$
$$8 \qquad\qquad 27$$

Putting it algebraically,

$$3^0 = 1, 3^1 = 3, 3^2 = 9, 3^3 = 27 \ldots 3^n = q$$
$$2^0 = 1, 2^1 = 2, 2^2 = 4, 2^3 = 8 \ldots 2^n = p$$

After 1, which is the origin of numbers but not itself a number, the first three powers of 2 that are numbers are 2, 4, and 8; likewise for 3, 9, and 27 among the powers of 3. Although the ancient Platonists had called this construct the Lambda, for Pico it is "the triangle signifying the soul" because its form expresses the harmony of the world-soul in the *Timaeus*.[82] Just how Plato conducts that symphony is not the issue here, where the salient data are the sums of the two series and the product of those sums:

$$1 + 3 + 9 + 27 = 40$$
$$1 + 2 + 4 + 8 = 15$$
$$40 \times 15 = 600$$

Derived from the powers of 3, 40 is the open *mem*; derived from the powers of 3 and of 2, 600 is the closed *mem*.

The Tetractys, the Lambda, and the arithmetic of the two *mems* show the state of this mystery as Pythagoras, Plato, and Pico left it, before Egidio made his comments on both forms of the *mem*, possibly taking the puzzle in a new Kabbalist direction. Egidio explains that "both kinds are used to write the word מים . . . [and] this word means 'water.' In the Old Law, each *mem* applied the power of its number — when floodwaters cover the world for forty days, and when Moses, receiving the Law, abstains from food for forty days, after the sea parted to make a path and the troop of Egyptians had perished in its waters."[83]

Now 600 was the number of chariots that Pharaoh sent to pursue the Israelites; 600 was also Noah's age when the skies opened for forty days. When

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[82] Pico, 41, 62.
[83] *Lib.*, fol. 37.

Egidio assumes that his audience understands how "each *mem* applied the power of its number," he may well take this much scriptural learning for granted. He might also assume that an acute reader of the *Timaeus* (and its commentary tradition) would recognize the metaphysics of the Binary and Ternary. As for the two *mems*, another of Pico's *Conclusions* declares that "in Kabbalah one can know through the mystery of the closed *mem* why Christ sent a Paraclete after him," or in Trinitarian arithmetic why the Ternary 3 follows the Binary 2. But that same reader, unaware that the closed *mem* is 600, will have had no reason to look for a *mem* in number 600 of Pico's theses, the one that introduces Plato by way of the *Timaeus*, using this very same numerology. Whether Egidio actually made that arcane connection — testifying again to his extraordinary insight, fueled by immense erudition — is unknown. Pico, in any case, had already shown how to apply the Kabbalah of letters to the divine numbers of Pythagoras and Plato.[84]

6. ROMAN PIETY AND HEBREW PERFIDY

Such displays of learning and intellect, amplified by great ingenuity, also energize the *Libellus*, as Egidio pursues the theme that gives his book a coherence that is more than methodological — though the method itself is impressive enough just in presenting an exegetical practice that almost all Christians will have found novel, if not weird. This pervading theme is piety, whose constant presence shows in Egidio's frequent use (twenty-four times) of *pius* and *pietas*.[85] But the *Libellus* is about letters. Orthography, much less a sexual orthography, seems a long way from piety.

Egidio extracts a connection from Plato and Virgil and from moralizing the *Aeneid*, especially its sixth book, where Aeneas visits the underworld. Finding moral messages in this epic is easy because the poet had put so many into it, making his hero a model Roman, not only militarily, but also ethically: *pietate insignis et armis* is a *leitmotif* for Aeneas, who excelled both in duty and in arms.[86] A Platonic view of this Virgilian morality had classical precedent, long before Cristoforo Landino commented on the *Aeneid* in Ficino's day.

Consider the character Caeneus, a Thessalian whom Virgil describes only once, in the phrase *iuvenis quondam, nunc femina* from the sixth book. Writing about this Caeneus, "once a young man, now a woman," Servius, in the fourth century CE, comments that "Caenis was a young woman who

[84]Ibid., fols. 31, 33, 36–37; Genesis 1:6; 7:6, 12; Exodus 14:7, 34:28; Psalm 69:2; Plato, *Republic* 507B–509C, *Timaeus* 35B–C; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 272–73, 253; Pico, 41, 62; Copenhaver, 56–58.

[85]*Lib.*, fols. 6–7, 9, 13, 20–27, 33, 39–40, 46–48.

[86]Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.10, 220, 305, 378, 545; 6.9, 176, 232, 403, 769; 11.291–92.

earned the reward of a sex-change from Neptune as the price of debauchery. She also became invulnerable. Fighting for the Lapiths against the Centaurs, he was pounded little by little into the earth by their repeated blows, but after death she regained her sex. By saying this Virgil makes a point, Platonic or Aristotelian, that souls commonly change sex through metempsychosis."[87]

A thumping good story moralized into half-baked philosophy: that was the fate of the *Aeneid* long before Egidio read it. In the underworld, Aeneas sees Caenis in a group of women whose deaths were tragic. Thinking of κενός, which means "empty," Egidio connects her with *dalet*, the letter of poverty, and with the lunar S10, who "suffers the renewals of the Moon and can be called Caeneus, named full at one moment, empty at another, now a woman and now a man, a boy and a girl." The ebb and flow of menstruation follows the waxing and waning of the moon as the sun's light approaches and recedes: *la donna è mobile.* The inconstant S10, who is "the Daughter of the Parent on high . . . goes hot and cold. The Son, by contrast, takes hold of the Parent and connects with him . . . gladly carrying him on his shoulders — the hidden secret, sealed in the letter *dalet* by the Arameans, at which Virgil hints with his pious Aeneas." The *dalet* that signifies poverty in the womanly S10 signifies piety in the manly S6. Egidio learns this from the *Sefer ha-Temunah*, the "book of sacred characters where the theologian reminds the pious that, even though the letter ד is single, even though it is simple, it still carries a *iod* on its shoulder." The poor *dalet* is neither composite, like the several letters composed of *kaf* and *vav*, nor double, like *kaf* herself, who has two forms — the straight *kaf* (ך) used in final position, and the other curved *kaf* (כ). Yet *dalet* finds company in *he* (ה), who is composite and follows *dalet* in the alphabet:

$$ ד \longrightarrow י \: ה $$

If a *yod* shoulders a *dalet* — returning the favor — the result is *he*, the letter of the Spirit (S3), but also the number of Isaac (S5). The *Dagger of Faith*, a Christian tract well known since the thirteenth century, interpreted the wood that Abraham gave Isaac to carry for sacrifice as foreshadowing the cross that Christ would bear — in Egidio's eyes, "the secret, sealed in the letter *dalet* by the Arameans, at which Virgil hints with his pious Aeneas."[88] This hero, the "Trojan Aeneas, excelling in duty and arms, / went deep in the dark of Hell to see his father." And after Troy was destroyed by the Greeks, Aeneas had fled the city with his family, proving his *pietas* by carrying his

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[87]Ibid., 6.448; Servius, at Virg. *A* 6.448; cf. Landino, 246–47, who does not mention Caenis in discussing this part of the sixth book.

[88]*Lib.*, fol. 21; Genesis 22:6; Zechariah 9:9; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 260; Pico, 528 (11.21).

aged father on his shoulders. In the sixth book he proves his loyalty again by braving the terrors of Hades to seek his parent's advice. He is a pre-Christian avatar of the Son of God, prefiguring the harrowing of hell, and the ordinary Christian's struggle against temptation.[89]

Pietas, the hero's outstanding virtue, corresponds in classical usage to no single English word: it is the dutiful respect owed to family, community, and gods. Hence, while it overlaps with "reverence," Virgil's pagan *pietas* is nothing like Egidio's Christian "piety," and is also not quite the *Ḥesed* — kindness, generosity, mercy, piety — that is S4.[90]

S5 against S4 — Isaac against Abraham, Fire against Water, Might against Mercy — sustains the creative tension in the Godhead and drives the sefirotic narrative. According to Egidio, S4 protects Israel and S5 protects Rome, but combat continues as the scales of history swing. "This dissension is apparent on high," one reads, and "then comes the sixth numeration . . . making 'peace in his high places.'. . . Having turned toward the seventh numeration, who symbolizes the scales . . . he says 'the die is cast' and . . . balances everything in divine proportion." These decisive words of "the sixth numeration" (S6) are Caesar's at the Rubicon, of course, which Romanizes Egidio's allusion to the victory of Moses over Amalek. This is the Roman framework in which S4 looks after Israel, an Asian nation and a neighbor of Cyprus, the island of Venus, the mother of Aeneas, the goddess of Love whose Cyprus is like *Ḥesed*, the loving fourth *sefirah*. Peace abides, except that Rome's sefirotic patron is S5, putting Might on the side of the city and the pope.[91]

Amalek, the heathen king whom Moses defeated, "is the first of the nations, but his latter end shall be that he perish forever," according to the book of Numbers. His grandfather was Edom, or Esau, the rival of Jacob, or Israel. Since Edom was also identified with Babylon, and Babylon with Rome, Edom is also the hostile might of pre-Christian, pagan Rome: "Edom rode out of Asia to found the Roman Empire," in Egidio's words.[92] But Egidio's millenarian hopes are high. He knows that the empire of Rome is also the fourth and last of the four monarchies foretold in the book of Daniel, the first and last resort of Christian apocalyptic. Moreover, he foresees a papal victory for Rome in a great crusade to close the millennium.

[89]Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.10; 2.705–11; 6.9–13, 403–04, 440–49; Marti, 851.
[90]*Lib.*, fols. 6–7, 9, 13, 20–27, 33, 39–40, 46–48.
[91]Ibid., fol. 25; Job 25:2; *Sefer ha-Bahir*, 200.
[92]*Lib.*, fol. 29; Genesis 25:30–34, 28:10–22, 31:44–55, 35:6–15, 36:1, 36:12; Numbers 24:20; Psalms 9:8, 137:7–8; 1 Chronicles 1:35–36; Josephus, *Antiquities* 2.1; Midrash, Genesis 42:2; *Zohar* 2:32a, 237a.

From Rome comes the decree of S6, called Jacob, to unite Romans and Jews at the end of days by the pope's princely authority; when the pope's troops capture the "place of the Hebrews," the two chosen peoples are also united from the Holy Land.[93]

A pope who is only half an Aeneas — outstanding in piety but not in arms — will not meet Egidio's militant expectations. This is the Egidio who would one day raise an army for Clement VII to avenge the Sack of Rome. Even in the brittle calm of 1517, just before the storm broke from Wittenberg, Egidio was vigilant for the city, whether the threat came from the "New Alexander" in Turkey or from the old Jerusalem in the Holy Land.[94] But Rome, awaiting the Heavenly Jerusalem, must deal with the earthly city right now. How to do that is not clear in the *Libellus*. The first pope was a Jew, after all, and yet his martyrdom sanctified Rome, not Jerusalem. Exiled in darkness, Jerusalem lost the power of the keys when Christ transferred them to Rome for his vicar. This is why Matthew's Gospel excludes Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, from Christ's genealogy. As a prince of Solomon's line and an ancestor of Christ, Zedekiah had flourished in the light of the Moon (S10) until she went dark, but then he was blinded and exiled to Babylon: this is what the *Zohar* told Egidio.[95]

The lesson that he learned — princely piety is a distinctly Roman virtue — animates his virtuoso exegesis of Psalm 145, which has twenty-one verses. As the last of David's acrostics, however, the Psalm needs at least twenty-two verses to complete the alphabet. Egidio confronts this problem while discussing *nun*, one of the letters that has both a normal (נ) and a final form (ן), each capped by a *yod* (י):

$$\text{נ ן י}$$

"Both *nuns* are crowned by the letter *iod*, a symbol of the sacred covenant and of circumcision," Egidio explains, in yet another exposition of phallic characters, which also shows how fidelity is rewarded and infidelity punished: "for true worshippers the bent and adoring *nun* holds out a crown that the other *nun* has snatched away from those cast out into exile."

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[93] *Lib.*, fols. 26, 29; Daniel 7:1–8; 11:1–3, 13, 40–45; Acts 17:31; O'Malley, 104, 123; Stein Kokin, 2011.

[94] *Lib.*, fols. 10, 13, 38, 40; O'Malley, 7, 106, 116–17, 127–35; Reeves, 59–60; Martin, 44, 65–67, 184–85.

[95] *Lib.*, fols. 26, 29, 41; Genesis 30:22; Isaiah 13:10, 22:22, 30:26; Song of Songs 1:5–6, 12; 6:10; Matthew 1:7–11; Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 3:7; Midrash, Genesis 73:4, Leviticus 32:5; *Zohar* 2:4a, 85a; *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 253, 275–76; Pico, 354 (1.20), 540 (11.51).

And yet, despite *nun*'s double message, the Masoretic text has no place for that letter: after the thirteenth verse of Psalm 145, headed by a *mem*, the Masoretes left a gap in the acrostic. But the Latin version, like the Septuagint, fills the gap, doubling the length of verse 13 by adding *Fidelis Dominus in omnibus verbis suis, / et sanctus in omnibus operibus suis.* Likewise, some Hebrew manuscripts begin the corresponding lines with *ne'eman* (נאמן), "faithful," which starts with a bent *nun* and ends with a straight *nun*. Moreover, the first word of the Masoretic Psalm is *'aromimcha* (ארוממך), "I shall exalt you," leading Egidio to find not Jerusalem but Rome (*roma*, רומא) "in the entryway" or beginning of the Psalm, in the second and third syllables of *'a-ro-mim-cha*. This discovery confirms his view that the extra Latin words are a gift from the Holy Spirit, restoring to Rome the *nun*-lines about fidelity (the *pietas* for which Roman Aeneas was *insignis*) that had been taken from perfidious Jerusalem.[96]

The faithless Jews "chase after shadow and darkness. . . . They have loved not *Or* but *Ur*, which is why their expectation is not the joy of Light but the misery of Fire." "Light" (*'or*) and "flame" (*'ur*) are spelled with the same three Hebrew letters, *alef*, *vav*, and *resh* (אור). The second, fiery sound is also heard in the Latin verb *uro* ("burn"); Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham's ancient city; *Etruria*, homeland of the Medici and all Tuscans; and Palinurus, the name of the pilot who nearly shipwrecked Aeneas. None of this escapes Egidio.[97]

Though he is intent on the hellish fires of book 6 that greet the faithful Aeneas, Egidio will also have noticed the stern verdict that closes the previous book, where the hero's final words are, "Too much trust in a clear sky and sea, / Palinurus: naked you'll lie in nameless sands." Asleep at the tiller, the brave steersman had fallen overboard, washing up on a beach to be killed by savages, who left his body unburied, rocking in the surf. His sin was not too-little faith in heaven, but too much in himself. When Aeneas finally spots Palinurus among the shades, "he recognized the gloomy figure deep in darkness," eliciting this comment from Servius: "The wiser say that souls newly away from their bodies are rather dirty until they are cleansed, and then the cleansed ones become brighter, and

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[96]*Lib.*, fol. 40; Genesis 17:10–11; Numbers 13:16; Psalm 145; Midrash, Exodus 15:6–7, Numbers 16:9; *Zohar* 2:215a, 235b; 3:155a. Although Hebrew is normally written without full indication of vowels, the official, or "Masoretic," text was fully vocalized by the eleventh century CE. Elia Levita, Egidio's collaborator, was an expert on the Masorah, showing that its vocalizations were postbiblical: medieval, as modern readers would say.

[97]*Lib.*, fol. 44; Genesis 11:28, 31; 15:7; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.337–82, 545; Midrash, Genesis 44:12–13; *Zohar* 1:77b; Dante, *Inferno* 3.1.

so a bit later Virgil says 'until the long day, when time's world is done, / has taken the thickened stain away to leave / the pure aetherial sense and airy fire clear,' not meaning a fire that burns, like the Sun's. Hence, as a way of cleansing, some souls are said to keep the lunar circle, others the one in the tropic of Cancer. So he is right to say that Palinurus is surrounded by dark shadows and hard to recognize because he had not yet even reached the sites of cleansing."

Egidio's response is that the lost pilot is like the Jews: "Virgil gives Palin-Urus the name that belongs to all people who chase after shadow and darkness," linking the Greek *palin*, "back again," with "Ur" in this minatory name, which means "back again to Ur." Before he was Abraham, Abram "went out from Ur of the Chaldees" to find the light (*Or*) of the covenant. Now, however, watching over the bosom of Abraham in the era of salvation history, he will never return to Ur and stray into hellfire like Palinurus. In this mortal life, when the light of heaven is not yet ours, "going to *Or* is still not permitted, and should I go back to *Ur*, I too 'return to Darkness,'" ignoring the warning that Virgil had put into the name of a foolhardy sailor.[98]

This relentless hunt for meaning in the tiniest crevices of language is dazzling and dizzying. Egidio is a Piranesi of exegesis. Where insight stops with him and whimsy starts is hard to tell. Verses missing from a Hebrew Psalm but supplied by a Latin version are interpreted by taking one Hebrew word from another line of the same Psalm and disassembling it to find the name "Rome" embedded in it. The lesson is Rome's supremacy, foretold by Israel's greatest poet. But the Roman pope's victory over the faithless Jews is also confirmed by Virgil, Rome's greatest poet and, like David, a seer: he planted the syllable UR in the name of an errant pilot, Palinurus, showing in his Latin epic where pious Aeneas, a proleptic pope, would never go — away from the light and back to the dark heathen fires from which the Jews had emerged.

7. ETRUSCAN MYSTERIES AND ROMAN POLITICS

To confirm his fantastic exposition, Egidio adds that "the ancient word for 'burning' comes from the Etruscans," and that Virgil "did not think we should neglect the mysteries of the Etruscan Method." The Romans called divination the *disciplina Etrusca*, which is germane because of the Latin *uro* ("burn") embedded in *Etruria*. The Etruscan diviners, who counted marks

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[98] *Lib.*, fol. 44; Virgil, *Aeneid* 5.870–71; 6.340; Servius, at Virg. *A* 5.870–71, 6.340.

on the livers of sacrificed sheep, foreshadow Egidio's vatic skills in divining with Hebrew letters. If this seems farfetched, remember Giovanni Nanni, a.k.a Annius of Viterbo. His hometown was also Egidio's. Annius was a Dominican who concocted tales about past Etruscan glories and published them in his *Commentaries on the Works of Various Authors Speaking about Antiquities* (1498). Like many others, Egidio was persuaded. In his annotated copy of the *Antiquities*, Noah's copious progeny make it all the way to Etruria, giving later Bible heroes a cosmopolitan pedigree. Osiris in Egypt — Janus to the Romans, Vertumnus to the Etruscans — was an even older channel for sacred history: Egidio thought that the Egyptian god knew the secrets of Kabbalah.[99]

Egidio was duped, though in good company. A decade after he sent the *Libellus* to Cardinal Giulio, one of his associates, Friar Nicholas Scutellius, was in Rome writing sermons in an unusual Latin script that may reflect Egidio's plans to reform the Roman alphabet. By this time the cardinal had become Clement VII, the second Medici pope. In 1530, Clement asked Egidio to write his book about the Shekhinah — or *Scechina*, as he wrote her name — so the pope must have approved the dedication of this immense account of Kabbalah to Emperor Charles V, who by that time was Egidio's latest millennial hope for Christendom. The *Scechina* revisits the material on Hebrew letters from the *Libellus* and also sustains Egidio's Etruscophilia. He had in no way backed down from his enthusiasms of 1517.[100]

But his *Libellus*, which was never printed, seems not to have circulated much. The only manuscript other than the one used here is an earlier draft — not a different copy — with the two parts of the book in reverse order. Since the *Libellus* calls for reform, some exposure and discussion of Egidio's plans will have been necessary, unless the project seemed too strange or too sensitive. But if Egidio had offended his papal masters in 1517, it seems strange that another pope from the same family would revive the scheme on a grander scale in 1530. Perhaps the *Libellus* was kept secret just because of its esoteric content, in obedience to Cardinal Giulio's order to maintain a "holy silence." Kabbalah is an esoteric tradition, after all, even among Jews. Another possibility, too much sex in the *Libellus*, implies a puritanism that was not typical of the pre-Tridentine Church, much less the Vatican, shortly after

[99] *Lib.*, fols. 13, 26, 32, 35, 44; Diodorus Siculus, 1888–1906, *Library* 5.2.40; O'Malley, 30–31, 112, 123–25; Grafton, 1990, 99–127; Grafton, 1991, 76–103; Rowland, 143–50, fig. 11.

[100] Egidio da Viterbo, 1959, 1:97–98, 108–10, 117, 125, 145–218; 2:13–14, 48–49, 107, 166–67, 213, 285; Secret, 113–20; O'Malley, 13–14, 116. The sermons by Scutellius are collected in MS 202 of the Biblioteca Angelica in Rome; from personal correspondence, we have learned that they will be described by John Monfasani, to whom we owe this information.

Alexander VI. The reasons for making a secret of the *Libellus* are secrets to modern readers.[101]

Such reasons will have come, not from the immemorial Kabbalah, but from the imperatives of current affairs. In 1517, the first Etruscan on Egidio's list was Pope Leo X, a Medici and therefore a Tuscan, or Etruscan, prince and, if Egidio had his way, also the New Aeneas who would vanquish the New Alexander by excelling in piety and arms. But Leo did not excel in either way; an obscure German friar — not the mighty Italian mendicant — had seized the hinges of history. Girolamo Seripando, who would lead the next generation of loyal Augustinians in the time of Trent, watched the dreams of his great predecessor crumble. Speaking of Egidio, he judged that "the great hopes he conceived for Leo . . . all eluded him. . . . Everything began going bad, and from bad to worse, whether we're dealing with the war against the Turks or the empire, of which we lost a large part: Modena, Reggio Emilia, Parma, Piacenza. Or morals, of which every light has gone out, or of reputation, which has never been worse in the minds of men. Or authority, which has never been less, to the point where it has almost evaporated in a joke."[102] Egidio's crusading fantasies were just that: millenarian delusions. And the Kabbalah of letters on which these mirages float is also fantastical. But Egidio's Christian Kabbalah commands more respect than his Christian *Romanità*. In the world of biblical exegesis as it then was, there were few to rival his learning, ingenuity, and shameless originality. If that is so, this analysis might well end, as Egidio ends his *Libellus*, with another look at the final *nun*, which is straight and erect, not bent and relaxed like the other *nun*,

$$נ \; ן$$

and, like Egidio, contemporary readers might look hard at "what the *nun* with a long leg promises — duration and an eternity of days. . . . And, as in the wedding song, we say 'drink and get drunk, my friends!'"[103]

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[101] *Lib.*, fol. 17; *Lib. α*, the other manuscript of the *Libellus*, is BAV Lat. 3146, fols. 1ʳ–26ᵛ, for which see Secret in Egidio da Viterbo, 1959, 1:23n1. Although the date, 1519, on the first page is wrong, a note (perhaps in a different hand) claims that *Lib. α* is Egidio's autograph. Secret, 110–11, stating that the *Libellus* was "rather widely known," mentions only Pietro Galatino and Teseo Ambrogio degli Albonesi as having seen the book firsthand; others knew it from extracts made by Ambrogio. Secret, 120, concludes that "the state of research on Giles of Viterbo does not yet allow us to know the reason why his work remained unpublished."

[102] Rowland, 214, 235–36, 253–54, citing a comment written by Seripando in the margins of MS Biblioteca Angelica, MS Lat. 351, fol. 398ʳ, which is a copy of the *History of Twenty Centuries* that Egidio wrote just after Leo X's election when his confidence was at its peak.

[103] *Lib.*, fol. 50; Song of Songs 5:1.

Egidio's *Libellus* ends in sensuous, joyous drunkenness, a state of body and soul that, from a modern point of view, seems unsuited to the papacy's spiritual mission. But that view of Rome is remote and implausible: between a notional or optative Rome viewed from five centuries later, on the one hand, and the Rome that Egidio saw close up, on the other hand, come not just Giulio, the patron, and Leo, the Tuscan warlord, but also Thomas More and Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola, the *Index of Prohibited Books* and John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. Just before that big chill, perhaps sex and wine were not great threats to any religion that could prevail in Rome. This was true of Cardinal Egidio's religion, as his *Libellus* plainly shows. And of Pope Leo's too: his famous remark about enjoying the papacy that God had given him may be apocryphal, but the *Libellus* suggests that it is *ben trovato*. And no one can say where Egidio's Christian inquiry into Kabbalah might have led were it not for the events of 1517. Had more Christians read his *Libellus*, perhaps fewer in the next generation would have rushed to burn the Talmud.

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