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JOHANNES REUCHLIN: KABBALAH, PYTHAGOREAN
PHILOSOPHY AND MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

MOSHE IDEL

1. Johannes Reuchlin as a Reborn Pythagoras

Various philosophies left their imprint on the different forms of Kabbalah. The impact of Neoplatonism¹ and Neoaristotelianism² is best known, though some traces of the impact of Stoicism³ and Atomism⁴ can also be discern in the vast Kabbalistic literature. Pythagorean philosophy is perhaps the third in its importance, from the point of view of the themes it impacted on Kabbalah.⁵ Though there are some

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3. See M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (SUNY Press, Albany, 1988), p. 113.
4. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 259, and M. Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in Early 17th Century," *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Isadore Twersky - Bernard D. Septimus, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 137-200.
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examples of mentioning Pythagoras in medieval Jewish literature, this is a rare phenomenon.⁶

However, in the ambiance of the Renaissance impulse to restore ancient forms of knowledge that was so strong, this attitude has nothing especially bizarre. This is what happened in the case of Reuchlin, who proposed to bring back to the Italian soil the oldest of its autochthon philosophy: Pythagoreanism. This sort of philosophy which indeed flourished in Southern Italy in antiquity but disappeared afterwards was not only one of the oldest, since this is the case, according to some *Vitae of Pythagoras*, also of Thales. Unlike most of the other philosophies Pythagoras enjoyed a special character: he studies in the Orient, with Phoenitians, Egyptians and Babylonians, and brought their knowledge to Greece and then to Italy. However, already according to some late antiquity testimonies, the Phoenitians included also the Jews, and we know from Iamblichus' *Vita* that he was imagined to have visited the mount Carmel before leaving for his long sojourn in Egypt.⁷ This type of testimonies, known to the Renaissance authors since the printing of Eusebius of Caesarea and Clements of Alexandria, who capitalized on the lost histories of Alexander Polyhistor, who drew from the lost history of the Alexandrine Jewish historian Artapanus, and of Marsilio Ficino's translations, were backed by older views, some mentioned above, who contended direct contact between the philosopher from Samos and the Jews. Thus, Pythagoras was not only the divine man, adored by some many ancient Greeks and Italians, but in fact the first who proposed a syn-

London, 1975), p. 40; and D.J. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989), pp. 230–232. On Nemesius of Emessa, John of Damascus and Shahrastani, who mentioned Pythagoras, see Harry A. Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, eds., Isadore Twersky & George H. Williams (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1973), vol. 1, p. 357 and also Sa'id al-Andalusi, *Tabaqat al-umam*, tr. G. Blachere (Paris, 1935), pp. 57–62. On the Pythagorean *Golden Verses* translated from Arabic in Hebrew see Martin Plessner, "The Translation in Arabic and Hebrew of the Golden Verses of Pythagoras," *Eshkoloth* vol. 4 (1962), p. 58 (Hebrew)..

6. On Pythagoreanism and Kabbalah see M. Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, (Continuum, London, New York, 2007), pp. 315–318, and my introduction to Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah, De Arte Cabalistica*, trs. M & S. Goodman, (The Nebraska University Press, Lincoln and London, 1993), pp. XI–XV. On Pythagoras in Renaissance Jewish sources see the conception that Pythagoras discovered music in Yehudah Moscato's *Nefuzot Yehudah*, Sermon I, [cf. Israel Adler, *Hebrew Annotated Manuscript Sources up to circa 1840, Repertoire International de Sources Musicales*, (G. Henle Verlag, 1989), p. 224] and Samuel Archevolti's *'Arugat ha-Bosem*, fol. 118a, [cf. Adler, *RISM*, p. 97], Abraham Portaleone, *Shiltei Gibborim*, [cf. Adler, *RISM*, p. 256], Joseph Solomon del Medigo, *Sefer 'Elim*, [cf. Adler, *RISM*, pp. 119–120]. See also R. Shelomo ibn Verga, *Sefer Shevet Yehudah*, ed. I. Baer, (Jerusalem, 1957), p. 158

7. Pars. 13–15, pp. 41–43.

thesis between the Greek philosophy he knew so well before his journey to the East - taken because of the alleged advice of Thales - and the variety of Eastern sorts of wisdom. In short, Pythagoras was the first who brought to the Greeks and Italians the eastern knowledge, religious wisdom and science altogether.

However, after the destruction of the Pythagorean school in Italy this knowledge was relatively forgotten. So, at least we learn from one of the most important biographers of Pythagoras, Iamblichus of Chalcis, himself a Syrian figure like Pythagoras

*"invoking the gods as leaders, and entrusting ourselves and our discourse to them, let us follow wherever they lead, in no way discouraged by the long time this philosophical school has been neglected, concealed by outlandish teachings and secret codes [symbola.] obscured by numerous false and spurious treatises, and entangled in many other similar difficulties."*⁸

Iamblichus wrote his book as an introduction to a large multivoluminous treatise on Pythagoreanism, which he apparently never finished in its entirety. As we know such a Pythagorean reform never took place in a pure manner because Neoplatonism, though inspired from time to time by Pythagorean themes, succeeded and Iamblichus was in fact one of those who had a share in this success. However, his attempt to bring back Pythagoras's philosophy is of a certain importance for our subsequent discussions. This may be also the case with the other figure that drew from Neo-Pythagorean sources, and even save some pieces of Iamblichus's book on Pythagoreanism from oblivion, the Byzantine 11th century scholar Michael Psellus.⁹ We may summarize the different surges of Pythagoreanism in antiquity and Middle Ages, as strongly connected to an earlier *floruit* of some forms of Platonism. This is also the case in the Renaissance. After Ficino's introduction of the various forms of Platonism and Neoplatonism, the Pythagorean elements that were components of these literatures, gelled as a theory that contends to stand for itself, as Reuchlin would assume.

However, it is only at the beginning of the 16th century that a more explicit approach to this Greek philosopher as a student of the Kabbalists emerged in a writing of a Christian author Johann Reuchlin. Already in his first Kabbalistic writing, *De verbo mirifico*, printed in 1494, two main Kabbalistic topics had been presented as similar to two Pythagorean topics: the Tetragrammaton which corresponds,

8. Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life*, tr. Gillian Clark, (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1989), p. 31.

9. See O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived*, pp. 85-53.

according to him to Pythagoras' *tetraktys*,¹⁰ and the ten *sefirot*, which correspond to the holy decad.¹¹ He is mentioning 'symbol' in relation to Kabbalah also sporadically before *De Arte Cabalistica*.¹² However, a dramatic turn of Reuchlin in relation to Pythagoras is evident *De Arte Cabalistica*. In this book Pythagoras is mentioned together with all the other figures constituting the main sources of the *prisca theologia* according to Marsilio Ficino.¹³ He presents himself as a Pythagoras *redivivus*, and describes his enterprise when composing *De Arte cabalistica*, to the Pope, Leo X, as follows:

*"For Italy's part, Marsilio Ficino has published Plato, Jacob Faber of Estaples has brought out Aristotle for France. I shall complete the pattern and for Germany I, Capnion, shall bring out the reborn Pythagoras with your name at its head. His philosophy, however, I have only been able to glean from the Hebrew Kabbalah, since it derives in origin from the teachers of Kabbalah, and then was lost to our ancestors, disappearing from Southern Italy into the Kabbalistic writings. For this reason, it was almost all destined for destruction and I have therefore written of the symbolic Philosophy [Symbolica philosophia] of the art of Kabbalah so as to make Pythagorean doctrine better known to scholars."*¹⁴

Reuchlin argument as to the affinities between Pythagoreanism and Kabbalah has a double edge: the former stems from the latter, but when it disappeared, it was absorbed into the latter. In one way or another, the scant knowledge of Pythagoreanism

10. See also *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 251.

11. *De Verbo Mirifico*, p. 941.

12. To be sure: I am aware of the existence of the term "symbol" in Christian theology long beforehand, under the impact of Pseudo-Dionysius, who probably wrote a book on "Symbolic Theology", now lost. On his theory of symbolism see Moshe Barash, *Icon, Studies in the History of an Idea*, (New York University Press, New York, 1992), pp. 165-179. A resort to symbolic theology is found also in the 12th century. See M. D. Chenu, *La Théologie au douzième siècle*, (Paris, 1957), pp. 191-209, and his *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century*, tr. J. Taylor – L. K. Little, (Chicago University Press, 1968), pp. 126-127, and Paul Ricoeur, *Conflict of Interpretations*, (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1974), pp. 58-59. In any case, Reuchlin refers in many cases to Pythagoras as the source of his resort to the term symbol. The existence of the earlier uses of symbol in Christian thought indubitably facilitated the adoption of the Pythagorean terminology. See Robert Murray, S. J. "Recent Studies in Early Symbolic Theology," *The Heythrop Journal* 6 (4), (1965), pp. 412-433. Reuchlin was, obviously, influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius. See Idel, *Enchanted Chains, Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 2005), pp. 192-193.

13. *De Verbo Mirifico*, pp. 903, 949.

14. See Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 39. See also S.K. Heninger Jr, *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics*, (San Marino, 1974), p. 245.

can be supplied by returning to the source from which it 'originally' stemmed. Moreover, the entire project is dedicated to the Pope, Leo X, a Florentine figure belonging to the De Medici family, whose father and grandfather were encouraging the renewal of the Platonic and Neoplatonic literary corpora. Thus, it is not only the restoration of an Italian tradition, but also the completion of an enterprise initiated by the Pope's family.¹⁵ Thus a combination of Italian patriotism with some form of adhering to what has been presented as a project advanced by the de Medici family in Florence a generation beforehand, and an attempt to have an influence on the culture of Germany in the manner Ficino has in Italy and Jacques d'Etapes had in France, produced the most influential enterprise of Reuchlin. Written and printed at the peak of the dispute about the Jewish books in which Reuchlin has been so deeply involved, this vision of Kabbalah as the ancient ground of the Italian philosophy, and the modicum to restore it, could serve as an additional argument in the necessity to be involved in Jewish learning in general, and of Kabbalah in particular.

It is highly interesting that Reuchlin ignores here the whole series of *prisci theologi* and selects only the classical figures, Plato and Aristotle, as paragons of learning, to whom Pythagoras is to be compared. The other pagan philosophers or magicians, like Zoroaster, Orpheus or Hermes, did not play, unlike *De Verbo Mirifico*, any decisive role in Reuchlin's *De Arte Cabalistica*, when compared to the central status as the ancient theologians he attributes to Pythagoras. However, what is new with Reuchlin is the fact that for the first time in the work of a Christian thinker, Kabbalah was presented as the source of a major type of philosophy to be revived for the benefit of Europe; Reuchlin indicates that the affinity between Kabbalah and Pythagoreanism is not a matter of different corpora which share similar theological views but that the Pythagorean philosophy has been extracted, historically speaking, from the Hebrew sources. By doing so he did not propose something that was totally new; the Jewish source for Pythagoras's philosophy, and even, according to some sources, his Jewish extraction were already somehow "documented" long before Reuchlin, as we had seen above. The introduction of the Kabbalah as the source for Pythagoras represents a decisive and influential turn in the status of Kabbalah, after Pico's eulogies to the address of this lore. It is part of a wave of interest in Pythagoreanism in the Renaissance, a phenomenon pointed by Heninger, which capitalized on the renewed interest in Pythagoreanism among some Middle and Neoplatonists, like Numenius, Iamblichus and Porphyrius.

15. Ficino has translated to Greek and Hellenistic corpora because of the invitation of de Medici family.

By advocating the paramount impact of the ancient Jews on Pythagoras, Reuchlin adopts explicitly the view of Eusebius of Caesarea,¹⁶ thus returning to a late antiquity attitude. Following the above sources, he concludes that "all the Jewish traditions and discoveries had been popularized by non-Jewish plagiarists, first in Greek and then in Latin; there is nothing in our philosophy that was not first by the Jews, though by this time they do not get the recognition they deserve."¹⁷

2. Kabbalah as Symbolic Theology in Reuchlin

Though Pico resorted to the term symbol both as a verb and a noun in his presentation of Pythagoras in his *Theses* on the Mathematics of Pythagoras, he did not resort to Kabbalistic topics in those *Theses*.¹⁸ It seems that only once in his *Heptaplus*, is Pico referring by the term symbol to an issue that can be understood as Kabbalistic: the allegory of the patriarchs.¹⁹ Even less plausible would be a contention of the Jewish Kabbalists that in order to understand Pythagoras better one should first study Kabbalah. For them the study of this Jewish existing lore was not conceived to be a tool for restoring another, Greek lost lore, even if the latter was deemed to stem from the former.

However we are concerned here not with Pythagoras *redivivus* in the Renaissance, neither with Kabbalah in the Renaissance. Even the more modest topic of Pythagoreanism and Kabbalah in general in Reuchlin, transcends the specific concern of this paper. Reuchlin was interested in Pythagoreanism and its symbolic valence when still young, long before he ever heard about Kabbalah. However, in his *De Verbo Mirifico*, the role of this mode of expression is minimal, even in the cases where he discusses Pythagoras esotericism.²⁰ I would like to focus on a topic that seems to me crucial for the relationship between the two kinds of lore in Reuchlin: his emphasis on their common symbolic nature. This topic had been address recently in a very general manner, in an otherwise important Italian translation of *De arte Cabalistica*.²¹

16. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 129.

17. *Ibidem*, p. 131.

18. S.A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)* (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Tempe, Arizona, 1998), pp. 334-337.

19. *Heptaplus*, 2th proem, *Opera*, pp. 6-7; Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, p. 81.

20. *De Verbo Mirifico*, p. 944.

21. See G. Busi in Johannes Reuchlin, *L'arte cabalistica*, a cura di Giulio Busi e Saverio Campanini, (Opus Libri, Firenze, 1995), "La Qabbalah come opzione simbolica," pp. VII-XXI.

Reuchlin's main contention in his late and most famous book on Kabbalah is rather simple though radical enough in comparison to the earlier authors who subscribed to *prisca theologia*. He put in the mouth of Philolaus, the representative of Pythagoreanism, the following statement:

*"Kabbalah is nothing else but (to speak Pythagorically) symbolic theology, where [not only] letters and names are signs for things, but such things are themselves [signs] for other things. This drew our attention to the fact that almost all Pythagoras's system is derived from the Kabbalists, and that similarly he brought to Greece the symbolic mode as a means of communication."*²²

Let me start with an analysis of this short but compact statement. "Cabala aliud nihil esse nisi (ut Pythagorice loquar), symbolicam theologiam." Despite the historical claims as to the origin of Pythagoreanism in ancient Kabbalah, as adduced above, the phenomenological description of the Jewish literature stems from Pythagoreanism. Only when resorting to the Pythagorean language he is able to understand what the nature of Kabbalah is, and he opts for a general description of it as *theologia symbolica*. Thus, this is quintessential - nothing else but - a theology. Indeed a special one, which operates by means of symbols but nevertheless a theology. This is the reason why he is concerned so much with Kabbalistic theosophy, namely the structure of the ten *sefirot*, basically under the influence of the quite recently printed *Porta Lucis* Gikatilla's book translated by Paulus Riccius, and the same Kabbalist's *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, *Porta Justiciae*. He explicitly refers to Riccius' book immediately after the above passage

However, this kind of theology is a peculiar one: it resorts to symbols, and the meaning of this term is defined immediately. Here occurs Reuchlin's major innovation in comparison to his predecessor Pico. While the latter never used the term symbol in order to describe the nature of Kabbalah, Reuchlin resorts to it tens of times, sometimes even in order to describe the proper manner for understanding the Koran.²³ In the statement that addresses the symbolic mode Reuchlin points to two broad forms of semiosis: one of linguistic elements point to other things, and are there signs for those referents, but also the things themselves point to other things. Thus there is a linguistic and a 'substantial' mode of reference, which means that symbols are, at least potentially, everywhere, beyond the symbolic nature of language. Or, to put it in a more concise manner, words and world altogether have

22. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 241. On this text see Andreas Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als Aesthetisches Paradigma* (J.M. Metzler, Stuttgart, Weimar, 1998), p. 107.

23. *On the Art of Kabbalah*, p. 203.

symbolic dimensions. Let me designate this broader attitude to symbolism as pan-symbolism. To return to Reuchlin's starting point, Kabbalah is a theology which operates not only by reading in a special manner a literary corpus, the Bible for example, but also the world, or at least things. The occurrence of the two terms together, *theologia* and *symbolica*, compels a reading of the referents, symbols, and their signifiés as strongly related: symbols point not to some human secrets, like political ones, or to natural secrets for example, but for divine matters. In other words, the supernal theology can be understood by resorting to the symbolic dimension of both words and things, because words and things altogether point to divine, or at least to theological topics. Indeed, already in *De Verbo Mirifico* he resorts to the syntagm *divinitatis symbola*, 'the symbols of divinity',²⁴ in one of the very few instances where he uses the term 'symbol' in this book. Symbols are therefore understood as all those entities which possess otherworldly forms of referentiality but at the same time point the way to achieve an experience of the spiritual worlds referred by them.

How did Philolaus, the Pythagorean persona in Reuchlin's imaginary dialogue, reached his conclusion: not by comparing the theology of the Kabbalists with Pythagoras but by understanding the affinities between what he called their symbolic modes: his attention has been drawn by understanding the modalities of reference used by Kabbalists. Again, in another context Philolaus, reminds his interlocutors that:

*"you should know and not forget that nearly all Pythagorean philosophy is full of signs for words, and cloaks for things, a form of communication that he, so it is believed, was the first to take to the Greeks from the Hebrews, as I have said, and the Egyptians."*²⁵

Though the wisdom of the Jews is not the only source from which Pythagoras allegedly borrowed, the Egyptian contribution – much more eminent than the Syrian one, according to the *Vitae* – was very poorly highlighted by Reuchlin, and is represented basically by the reference to hieroglyphs.²⁶ Elsewhere he speaks about "the symbolic philosophy of Pythagoras and the wisdom of the Kabbalah."²⁷ Indeed, Reuchlin was never tired to repeat his vision of Pythagorean symbolism as

24. p. 947. See also Elliot Wolfson, "Language, Secrecy, and the Mysteries of Law: Theurgy and the Christian Kabbalah of Johannes Reuchlin," *Kabbalah*, vol. 13 (2005), pp. 20-21.

25. *On the Art of Kabbalah*, p. 225.

26. See M. Idel, "Kabbalah, Hieroglyphicity and Hieroglyphs," *Kabbalah* vol. 11 (2004), pp. 11-47.

27. *On the Art of Kabbalah*, p. 357.

mostly stemming from or at the very least similar to Kabbalah. In another passage he links, again, his concept of history of knowledge with its phenomenology. He puts in the mouth of the other non-Jewish participant in the imaginary dialogue, the Muslim Marranus, the following confession:

"Pythagoras drew his stream of learning from the boundless sea²⁸ of Kabbalah, [and] has led his stream into Greek pastures²⁹ from which we, last in the line, can irrigate our studies. What Simon³⁰ says and thinks about the Kabbalists and what you say and think about the Pythagoreans seems to me to be exactly the same. What other intention has either Pythagoras or a Kabbalist, if not to bring men's mind to the gods,³¹ that is, to lead them to perfect blessedness? Another way in which they are similar lies in their means of passing on information, the equal interest they have in symbols, signs, adages, proverbs, numbers and figures, letters, syllables and words. Thus for Pythagoras the letter upsilon is a symbol of youth."³²

Just as in the case of Philolaus, also the other interlocutor starts with the historical transmission of Kabbalah from the ancient Jews to Pythagoras to Greece and then Italy, only in order to make the second statement that the Jewish mystical lore and Pythagoreanism share the same religious goal; to bring the mind of the contemplator to the supernal world by means of symbols. Here the theological aspect is not mentioned explicitly, but a rather mystical discipline is described. Common to Philolaus' passage and that of Marranus, is their resort to symbols and their effects. We had adduced in the previous passages the manner in which Reuchlin described participants. Let me turn to the testimony of Simon, the Kabbalist himself: how did he understand the nature of Kabbalah? After all according to the dialogue, he is the source of the information about this lore from which the other two participants drew. Simon describes Kabbalah twice in rather a clear manner. In the first book he refers to Kabbalah as follows: "Kabbalah is a matter of divine revelation handed down to [further the contemplation of God and the separated forms, contemplations bringing salvation. [Kabbalah] is a symbolic reception."³³

28. On oceanic metaphors see also *De verbo mirifico*, p. 942.

29. On pasture see also *ibidem*, p. 243.

30. This is the name of a fictional Spanish Kabbalist, one of the interlocutors in Reuchlin's book.

31. See also *ibidem*, pp. 99, 239, 243. *De verbo mirifico*, p. 944.

32. *Ibidem*, p. 233.

33. p. 63. "Est enim Cabala divinae revelationis, ad salutiferam Dei et formarum separatarum contemplationem traditae, symbolica receptio". Ed., Pistorius, (Basel, 1587), p. 620.

The Latin phrase *symbolica receptio*, assumes that the tradition that is received by the true Kabbalist consists of symbols, which facilitate contemplation, which at its turn, brings about salvation. The emphasis on the salvific nature of Kabbalah seems to reflect Reuchlin's interest in the topic. However, the hermeneutical aspect of the perception of Kabbalah as interpretation seems to reflect the impact of Paulus Riccius' description of Kabbalah. Riccius, describes this lore as follows:

*"That faculty is called cabala which imparts knowledge of human and divine affairs through the allegorical sense of the law of Moses; it is well-named cabal, which means reception, because it is revealed not in writing, but orally; not by argument, but by faith."*³⁴

However, while Riccius emphasizes the allegorical nature of Kabbalistic interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, Reuchlin inserts the term symbolic because of his Pythagorean bias. Elsewhere, he offers another definition:

*"I prefer to talk about and review whatever I read in Kabbalah that I think would not displease you. I will begin with the end for which they strive. All their drive, all their efforts are carefully directed toward this single purpose: that they may attain happiness in this life, the perpetual bliss of the age (insofar as it can be understood) to come... To possess this is a belief to those who achieve it and their rest is perfect."*³⁵

Simon presents therefore quite a regular religious philosophical approach to the nature of Kabbalah: peace of mind here, bliss in the afterworld. This description of the ultimate goal of Kabbalah corroborates that of Simon's first definition and of Marranus: Kabbalah is striving to induce a certain mode of spiritual experience. It is a philosophical discipline, though it surpasses philosophy, being a salvific form of knowledge. In all the important descriptions of Kabbalah we find therefore a common denominator: symbolism: *symbola divinitates, theologia symbolica, symbolica*

34. *De Coelesti agricultura*, Pistorius, p. 120: "Cabala ea facultas dicitur, quae divinarum humanumque rerum arcana, per Mosaicae Lei typum Allegorico sensu insinuat, quum quidem insinuandi modum; quia nullo rationis discursu nec calamo, sed auditu et fide tantum recipitur: cabalam (id est, receptionem) appellare libuit." tr. Blau, *The Christian Cabala*, p. 67. For another description of Kabbalah- again resorting to the term allegory, but basically under the impact of Abulafia, see ibidem, *De Coelesti agricultura*, pp. 115-116

35. p. 243.

philosophia, or *receptio symbolica*. A perusal of his influential book shows that Reuchlin is fond of the term *symbolon*. In fact he adopted a concept crucial for Pythagoreanism in order to describe Kabbalah.³⁶

Even Simon the Kabbalist, who first contended that he does not know what Pythagoreanism is, is slowly taught to use the term 'symbol' in his subsequent expositions of Kabbalah. For Reuchlin, symbols are bringing the Kabbalist's mind to the gods and induce as state of blissfulness. Therefore, in addition to the information imparted by symbols, they are capable of elevating the mind to the divine, in a way very similar to some forms of philosophy.³⁷ This is why symbolism is not different from philosophy, and Pythagoras is described as a symbolic philosopher. How does symbol work according to Reuchlin? He once describes the ultimate achievement of the Kabbalists as follows

*"It is a life of absolute, unimpeded blessedness; by means of symbols, all earthy things are thrown away, and the stuff of matter is cast off; we strip form from form, until we reach the primal form, that is both the form of all things, and yet without form."*³⁸.

We may assume that by being able to find out the more spiritual reference to which a symbol points, the symbol himself allows the elevation of the mind toward the spiritual realm. According to another passage, Reuchlin claims, again resorting to shedding the corporeality, that

*"The elements are named in turn: fire is seraph, air is cherub, water tharsis, earth - Ariel³⁹ and whatever is in the lower world is very much better named in the upper. Things in the lower world can be grouped together and called copies of truths, shadows⁴⁰ of things above, pictures, signs, marks or symbols, by which we are moved to consider heavenly angelic essences, virtues and works, by using a process of abstraction or some other method, so far as we can while still embodied."*⁴¹.

36. For the Pythagorean understanding of *symbola* see Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, tr. Edwin Minar, Jr. (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 166-192. On symbols in Neoplatonism, probably under the impact of Pythagoras see Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul, The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, (Penn State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1995), pp. 48, 84, 85, 110, 162.

37. See *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, e.g., pp. 45, 99, 231.

38. p. 45.

39. It should be 'Erelin.

40. See also *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 123.

41. Ibidem, p. 103. On abstraction see also later on, pp. 123, 231.

Here, the Pythagorean and Neoplatonic understandings of the lower elements as copies and shadows are obvious. Symbolism is therefore part of the valorization of the supernal and the understanding of the lower world as important only insofar as it is capable to elevate the mind toward the spiritual sources. By and large, this is the application of a most important Pythagorean vision of the ideal life, as expressed at the end of the *Golden Verses* and adduced by Reuchlin in *De Arte Cabalistica*:

*"When you cast aside the body you come to the free aether, you will be a god and immortal. When the things of this life are overcome you will know the dwelling together (which he elegantly termed sustasis,⁴² because the "stand together") of immortal gods and mortal man."*⁴³

Reuchlin's vision of Pythagoreanism as stemming from an ancient Kabbalah is not totally new, as we may learn from several Jewish sources adduced above. However, his resort to phrases like 'a symbolic philosophy of the art of Kabbalah' found in the one of the quote adduced above, and the 'symbolic theology' found in another is, in my opinion, are novel additions and they are quite relevant for many of the subsequent understandings of Kabbalah, and perhaps also of the essence of symbols in Europe.

Before addressing the details of Reuchlin's understandings of Kabbalah as symbolism let me survey succinctly what was conceived to be a symbol in the sources which might have informed Reuchlin's views on this term. I propose to group these meanings into five major ones.

a) The most ancient of the meanings of symbol in Pythagoreanism seems to be 'password', namely a secret code that helped men or gods to recognize an initiated. In the mystery religion it was an initiated in the respective sort of ritual.⁴⁴

b) The *symbola*, or the *acousmata*, the Pythagorean sayings, are originally "ancient magical-ritual commandments." Therefore, they are statements related to deeds, and not meanings extracted from some statements.⁴⁵

42. On this term see Johan C. Thom, *The Pythagorean Golden Verses*, (Brill, Leiden, 1995), pp. 182, 184-18.

43. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 197. See also ibidem, pp. 173, 201, 205, 231. On these verses and their background see Thom, ibidem, pp. 181, 223. Reuchlin brought together verses which are not a sequel in the *Golden Verses*.

44. Burkert, *Lore and Science*, pp. 177, 179. See Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 187.

45. Burkert, ibidem, pp. 177-176.

c) The *symbola* took, in the literatures subsequent to Pythagoras, the exegetical significance, namely the speculative interpretation offered to the enigmatic Pythagorean sayings, revealing some form of spiritual discipline.⁴⁶

d) The most important case of *symbolon* in Pythagoreanism is the *tetractys*, the sacred tetrad that stands at the core of this type of philosophy.⁴⁷

e) Symbols are understood, at least in Iamblichus, as modes of revealing the scientific meaning of some images and similitudes formulated in order to first convey those meanings for a wider audience.⁴⁸

Let me be more specific as to the manner in which Reuchlin uses the term symbol insofar as Kabbalistic material is concerned. I propose to distinguish between two main forms of symbols that permeate *De Arte cabalistica*: the vertical and the horizontal. By vertical symbolism I propose to see the semiotic process that transforms the given linguistic material into hints at higher worlds, and this covers exactly the vision of Kabbalah as a "symbolic theology." By doing so, Reuchlin follows the steps of the theosophical aspect of Kabbalah, especially R. Joseph Gikatilla's *Gate of Light*, a book translated by Paulus Riccius and printed one year before his own book.⁴⁹ The assumption is that symbols, by referring to the sublime realm inspire a certain form of elevation of the soul or intellect to these realms. This is therefore less a way to acquire information but a technique to disclosing a new realm that is not perceptible by the regular intellectual acts of cognition. According to such a stand, the word, or sometime the individual letters, stand alone and are not understood in accordance to other worlds or letters

The horizontal symbolism, however, is part of Reuchlin's acquaintance with another body of Kabbalistic literature, mainly represented by another book of Gikatilla's *The Garden of the Nut*, which apparently he read in a manuscript, which is found in the British Library, Margoloth Catalogue 740.⁵⁰ Though written by the same Kabbalist this book represents an early and quite different stage of Gikatilla's Kabbalistic thought, when Gikatilla was under the spell of linguistic Kabbalah.

46. See above note 12.

47. Burkert, *Lore and Science*, pp. 187-189 and Thom, *The Pythagorean Golden Verses*, pp. 174-176.

48. See O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived*, p. 99; Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 207

49. See Bernd Roling, *Aristotelische Naturphilosophie und christliche Kabbalah im Werk des Paulus Riccius*, (Tuebingen, 2007), pp. 358-362.

50. This manuscript was sent in 1495 to a friend of Reuchlin's. It is written in an Ashkenazi rabbinic script.

When writing in this vein Gikatilla did not yet accept the theosophical vision of the divinity, and did not attribute to the term *sefirah* the meaning of a divine attribute. For the young Gikatilla, Kabbalah was basically a set of rules for manipulating language, informed by three main methods, *Gematria*, *Notaricon* and *Temurah*. These methods had been described by Reuchlin and, following him, by a host of Christian Kabbalists, time and again as the main thrust of Kabbalah. According to the young Gikatilla and Reuchlin, one word or set of words is related to another by the virtue of some parasemantic qualities, basically related to the structure of the word and the numerical values of its consonants. Thus, one word symbolizes another word, and so on. Thus, in lieu of pointing upward to the divine sphere, Kabbalistic symbols are understood by Reuchlin as pointing to other words. Or, to put it in post-modern terminology: while the vertical symbolism is logocentric, as it assumes the presence of a metaphysics that is the source of meaning, the second type of using the term symbol in Reuchlin is much closer to Derrida's general understanding of dissemination. Horizontal symbolism can work, in principle, even without resorting to theosophy or even metaphysics, because meaning is created by establishing a relationship between two words. This double meaning of the term *symbolon* as either mystical or exegetical stems from ancient Pythagoreanism, as we have seen above. However, according to many Pythagorean authors, symbols were part of Pythagoras' strategy to keep his theory from being understood by the uninitiated. It is the need for secrecy that compelled the Pythagoreans to resort to modes of expression that are esoteric.⁵¹ Esotericism was, as we know part and parcel of Kabbalah. However, it is extremely rare that Kabbalists resorted to idiosyncratic terminology in order not to be understood by others.⁵² The Pythagorean *symbola* had the nature of incomprehensible message that need a clue known only by the members of the sect. They were invented by Pythagoras himself. In Hebrew all the three meanings of Pythagorean *symbolon* were deemed to be represented in Kabbalistic texts by the same word: *sod*. It implies from the very beginning the concept of secrecy, and it was used by the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists in order to point to vertical symbolism, and it was used by the young Gikatilla in order to designate the numerical equivalence between two words. Thus, the polyvalent Pythagorean *symbolon* has been used by Reuchlin in a manner reminiscent of the different Kabbalistic resorts to the term *sod*. However, I would like to emphasize that Reuchlin never translated the term *sod* as symbol, but always as *mysterium*. He was

51. See Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life*, par. 104, pp. 127-129; par. 227 p. 223.

52. Nevertheless such an approach is found in the writings of R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid or Nahmanides' circle.

apparently aware that he is introducing the Greek term into the discourse, and approximating as its meanings are those of *sod*, he did not conflate between them by translating one by the other. If Reuchlin understood *sod* as the Hebrew term for *symbolon*, as I shall try to show below, there was no reason for him not to see Kabbalah as a whole as being a 'symbolic' lore. However, let me clarify, this understanding is a misunderstanding. The semantic field of the medieval term *sod* is multifaceted, and it incorporates as diverse forms of secrecy as R. Abraham ibn Ezra's astral secrets, Maimonides' Aristotelian understanding of the Bible, the Hasidei Ashkenaz numerical equivalences and, later on, also the vertical symbolism. Even the medieval Kabbalists were far from being able to clearly distinguish between these different meanings. So, for example, while Abraham Abulafia accepted by and large the Maimonidean type of secrecy, he rejected symbolic theosophy.⁵³ Let me exemplify the above observations in a more detailed manner.

3. Categories of Symbols in Reuchlin

a. Symbol stands for Gematria. The numerical use of symbol appears when pointing to the numerical equivalence of the consonants *YHW* conceived to be a divine name, or seal, in *Sefer Yetzirah*, to those of the consonants of the name *'eHeYeH*: both amount to 21. This is a simple exercise in gematria. However, Reuchlin designates this form of numerical relationship by the name symbolism: "...quod est symbolum ipsius Ehieh hoc est entis, que equalitatem numeris."⁵⁴ This is the case also elsewhere, when Reuchlin points out that the consonants of *MaKaBY* amount to seventy two, thus this name is a symbol of the name of seventy-two.⁵⁵ He resorts to a gematria found in Hebrew sources *'etz* = 160 = *tzelem*.⁵⁶ He reads this equation as the two words symbolizing the figure 150, (actually 160).⁵⁷ This is a rather peculiar attitude since the normal Kabbalistic stand is looking for relations between words on the basis of gematria, without assuming that a certain number in itself has an independent value which is symbolized by the words. From this point of view Reuchlin imposes a Pythagorean theory of numbers as pointing to principles, a certain type of numerology, on the Kabbalistic computation devices.

53. See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988), p. 202.

On secrecy in the Middle Ages see Moshe Halbertal, *Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications*, tr. Jackie Feldman, (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007).

54. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 198.

55. *Ibidem*, p. 313

56. See e.g. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 774, fol. 153a.

57. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, pp. 353-355.

b. *Symbolism is related, according to Reuchlin, also to the permutation of letters*, and he exemplifies this method, the *Temurah* or the metathesis by simple examples like *Ysmah* may become *Mashiah*, and *mal'akhi* becomes Michael.⁵⁸

c. The substitution of letters for other, in accordance to some specific laws, has also been called symbolism. So, for example the consonants of the Tetragrammaton had been substituted by *MZPZ*, according to a specific system.⁵⁹ In general it should be mentioned that Reuchlin calls all the three numerical techniques of interpretation 'symbolic paths'.⁶⁰ These three exegetical techniques may be described as horizontal symbolism, or what we had approximated by Derrida's term dissemination, since one word is substituted by another according to different rules. The following usages of the term symbolism belong to what I called logocentric symbolism.

d. *Symbol stands for a Magically Functioning Name*. When dealing with the name of seventy-two letters Reuchlin writes

*"These hallowed signs are in the present days stored in memories and by these symbols the angels are summoned and bring help to men to the praise and glory of the ineffable God, according to Gerundensis in his introduction to Genesis, who quotes what rabbi Solomon wrote in his exposition of the Talmud. These are the letters that compose those symbols which I trace for you with my finger."*⁶¹

Then he adduces, in Hebrew characters, all the combinations of letters constituting the name of seventy-two letters. Thus there are symbols that stand for some form of talismans or amulets. Though they may be connected to an angelic or sefirotic power, they consist in linguistic units that are not functioning in a semantic manner, even according to the Hebrew language. Though Reuchlin gives the impression that Nahmanides is the source of his second mentioning of the term "symbol", nothing like that is found in the Introduction to the Commentary on the Pentateuch or in Rashi, whom Nahmanides quotes. The "symbolic" description of the entire topic is purely an addition of Reuchlin's. We can describe this type of symbolism as a descending one, because it aims to have an effect on the lower entities by summoning the higher ones.

58. Ibidem, pp. 295-297.

59. Ibidem, p. 297.

60. Ibidem, p. 297.

61. Ibidem, p. 261. See also p. 265.

e. *Symbol as a Representation of the Supernal World*

Let us turn to another type of symbol, closer to the more widespread Kabbalistic symbolism:

"The Sabbath is a mystery⁶² of the living God.⁶³ The Sabbath stands out as a symbol of the supernal world, the eternal Jubilee, where all works ceases...this is to be interpreted as referring for the joining of the powers of the soul to the mind, to achieve direction of contemplation towards the world to come."⁶⁴

In this passage the term "symbol" stands for the relationship between a lower entity, process or ritual, and a supernal one belonging to the divine realm. The symbol is here the Sabbath, a mode of behavior in a certain moment, which teaches, as a *pars pro toto*, for the joy and delight which are constant in the personal eschaton. This view is found already in Rabbinic literature.⁶⁵ However, what the theosophical Kabbalah added to this stand is the identification of the term 'world to come' with a specific divine attribute or divine hypostasis: the third *sefirah*, that of *Binah*, which is identical also with the eternal Jubilee. This stand differs from the first statement in the passage, which sees in the ninth *sefirah*, *yesod*, the divine hypostasis that is symbolized by Sabbath.⁶⁶ We should not be puzzled by this ambiguity, since it is part of a certain development in the semiotic processes characteristic of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah in Castile at the end of the 13th century, a process that can be called a transition from a symbolic univalence to a symbolic polyvalence. This means that the same word was conceived of as having more than one symbolic meaning, thus referring to more than one *sefirah*. However, the main gist of Reuchlin's view is not so much the cognitive aspect of the referential relationship but the mystical one: following some Kabbalistic stands Sabbath is understood by him as representing the cessation of mundane work and concentration of the spiritual faculties of man in order to reach the supernal spiritual world.⁶⁷ As we had seen in earlier quotes,

62. *Mysterium*, translating the Hebrew *sod*. See also *ibidem*, p. 308.

63. *Gate of Light*, ch. 2, ed. Ben Shlomo, I, pp. 106, 111-112.

64. On the Art of the Kabbalah, pp. 237-239.

65. See *BT. Berakhot*. fol. 57b.

66. On the various symbolism of Sabbath in the schools of Kabbalah see Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah*, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1989), and Moshe Idel, "Sabbath: On Concepts of Time in Jewish Mysticism," in *Sabbath, Idea, History, Reality*, ed. Gerald Blidstein, (Ben Gurion University Press, Beer Sheva, 2004), pp. 57-93.

67. See Idel, *ibidem*, pp. 66-67. The ascent of the mind on high is found indeed in Reuchlin in several instances. Let me point out that the disagreements that Wolfson mentioned between my description of Reuchlin and his own are based on a terminological fallacy. I indeed deny the theurgical as-

Kabbalah is understood by Reuchlin as predominantly a contemplative discipline: Symbols guide therefore the soul to higher spheres and thus to individual salvation.⁶⁸ By attributing such a role to symbolism Reuchlin is following again Pythagoreanism.⁶⁹ This is another type of vertical symbolism, but it is an ascending one.

f. Symbol as Cognitive Referent

In several instances, especially when dealing with the secret meanings of the Hebrew letters, Reuchlin designates the referential function as evoking not only the divine realm but also other supernal levels, like the celestial. Capitalizing on a commentary on the Hebrew alphabet found in Ms. New York JTS 1887 (Halberstamm 444), fols. 39b-43b, Reuchlin inserts the term "symbol" in his renderings of the Hebrew original in order to point to the cognitive relation between a letter and a planetary body. So, for example, he resorts to the term symbol when dealing with the letter *daleth*, in order to point to the *Hashmalim*, understood as some form of angels,⁷⁰ or *lamed* which stands for the planet *Sabbatai*, namely Saturn⁷¹, or *mem* as a symbol of Mars.⁷² In other cases, letters described as symbols point to lower entities. *Tzadeh* symbolises the heavenly and lower matter,⁷³ the inanimate things, while *Thau* is a symbol of the human nature.⁷⁴

pects of Christian Kabbalah including Reuchlin, as I define in my writings, and Wolfson himself followed this understanding of theurgy, in many cases in his studies, as the effect of commandments have on the inner structure of the divine realm. However, in his article on Reuchlin he switched – without pointing out this shift – to another understanding of theurgy – to be sure legitimate too in Neoplatonic sources – as the operations causing the ascent of the soul to the supernal realm, and in this sense Reuchlin is indeed a theurgian thinker. Thus, the divergences he "put in relief" between my different stand – as implicit in Wolfson, and his views disappears. See Wolfson, "Language, Secrecy, and the Mysteries of Law," pp. 8-9 especially note 4. Without being aware of these two diverging meanings of theurgy, and without defining first how someone uses the term – a definition that is absent in Wolfson's article – is it hard to appreciate the differences between the Jewish and the Christian Kabbalah. Indeed Wolfson is inclined to blur the difference between the two forms of Kabbalah in many cases, an issue that I cannot address here in detail.

68. *On the Art of Kabbalah*, pp. 99, 133, 147. For a more messianic reading of Kabbalah see his first part of the book in general, especially p. 87. On Sabbath in Reuchlin see Wolfson, "Language, Secrecy, and the Mysteries of Law," pp. 30-32.

69. See Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, pp. 85, 110. It should be pointed out that the ascent on high in the context of symbols is found also in Pseudo-Dionysius. See Barash, *Icon*, pp. 172-179.

70. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 321.

71. *Ibidem*, p. 323.

72. *Ibidem*.

73. p. 325.

74. p. 325.

4. The Tetraktys and the Tetragrammaton as Symbol

One of the most important usages of the term symbol in Reuchlin stems already from his earlier *De Verbo Mirifico*, where he compared the Tetragrammaton to Pythagoras' *tetraktys*, and described them as the symbol of everything.⁷⁵ In *De arte cabalistica*, this relationship is described as follows. Marranus tells Philolaus that

*"It seems to me that Pythagoras took from the Jews' Tetragrammaton, or rather the four letters which go to make up the name of the savior, and changed it into the Greek Tetraktys symbol."*⁷⁶

As we know, the *tetraktys*, what the Pythagorean called the holy quaternity, and the Tetragrammaton, are quintessential issues in Pythagoreanism and in Kabbalah, respectively. Here there is an important comparison proposed by Reuchlin, which though historically incorrect, touches important points in the phenomenology of the two religious phenomena. What is new in this contention? The first to have started with such an emphasis on the quaternity in the context of the Hebrews seems to be Marsilio Ficino:

*"Why does everybody call God by four letters? The Hebrews by the four vowels 'he ho ha hi'; the Egyptians by 'Theuth'; the Persians by 'Syre'; the Magi by 'Orsi' whence 'Oromasis'⁷⁷; the Greeks by 'Theos'; ourselves by 'Deus'; the Arab by 'Alla'; Mahomed by 'Abgdi'. Again, we accepted 'Jesu' from Gabriel,... Surely such diverse races would not otherwise have agreed on the one name of the unknown God, unless they were divinely inspired? And if they received it from Adam, it was by divine inspiration they received that name rather than others."*⁷⁸

Two theoretically different explanations were proposed for the "universally" use of the fourfold divine names: Either all these nations received the various names separately or they have received these names from Adam. However, even according to the second explanation, each nation selected the characteristic divine name by the means of inspiration. Thus, a special revelation was bestowed on each and every

75. Pistorius, p. 941.

76. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 157.

77. Plausibly it is Ormuzd.

78. *Commentary on Philebus, Marsilio Ficino: The Philebus Commentary*, critical edition and translation by Michael J.B. Allen, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975), pp. 142-144. See also *ibidem*, pp. 270-272. See my "*Prisca Theologia* in Marsilio Ficino and in Some Jewish Treatments", in eds. M.J.B. Allen, Valery Rees, *Marsilio Ficino, His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, (Brill, Leiden, 2001), pp. 137-158.

nation; moreover, even if we accept the second explanation, the Jews have no priority as they also would be conceived as having received their revelation later on. Thus, the basic structural similarity between the divine names, on whose source we shall have something to say immediately, does not reflect the influence of the Mosaic tradition, but a common denominator which transcends the peculiar forms of the names in each and every nation. The very idea that the divine name constituted the content of an Adamic tradition was already known among the Jews;⁷⁹ I am not aware of a similar Christian view before Ficino. Hence it is possible that Ficino was influenced by a Jewish, or more exactly, a Kabbalistic tradition, though he was also acquainted with the Pythagorean *tetraktys* as discussed in Jamblicus' *De Vitae Pythagoraca*⁸⁰ there the divinity of the tetrade is expressed in an explicit manner, and it is possible that the Pythagorean concept of the tetrad was the leading idea for the whole discussion of the Florentine thinker. However, Ficino does not mention Pythagoras in this context. Moreover, Reuchlin contradicts everything we may learn from the Pythagorean literature, by assuming the Pythagoras was not the thinker who first discovered the core of his philosophy, the *tetraktys*, but he just adopted a Jewish view. According to ancient Pythagoreanism, Pythagoreans were swearing by the oath which included the formula describing Pythagoras as the person "who brought the *tetraktys* to our generation."⁸¹

Last but not least in this context: The Cross is conceived to be a symbol of the Savior, just as the Tetragrammaton is the symbol of God.⁸²

5. The Totalizing Quandary: From Reuchlin to Modern Scholarship

I took pain in order to survey the variety of usages of the term 'symbol' because it is a central concept which was featured in an important book and we shall see later its reverberations in a variety of influential authors. However, before turning to the reception of the symbolic description of Kabbalah, let me address the problems involve in Reuchlin's adopting such a broad spectrum of meanings for this term.

79. On this issue see Idel, "Transmission in the Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," in eds. Y. Elman - I. Gershoni, *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality, and Cultural Diffusion*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 2000), pp. 138-164.

80. *The Pythagorean Life*, par. 150, p. 167, par. 162 p. 177. On the tetrade as divine in late antiquity and Renaissance sources related to Pythagoras see Henninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony*, pp. 195, 152, and Burkert, *Lore and Science*, pp. 72ff.

81. Burkert, *Lore and Science*, pp. 72, 186-188.

82. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 353.

By applying the term 'symbol' to so many different forms of Kabbalah, which operate according to different sorts of semiosis, Reuchlin acted perhaps as a good Pythagorean thinker. He apparently did not dream that he is imposing a totalizing attitude upon diverging semiotic strategies characteristic of Kabbalistic corpora which differ from each other. How could he assume something like that if the same Kabbalist, namely Gikatilla, one of the chief sources for his understanding and exposition of Kabbalah, had changed his mind from his early linguistic Kabbalah and adopted in his latter books another Kabbalistic vision, the theosophical one? Reuchlin fell prey to a common misunderstanding, which regards all the books that claim that are Kabbalistic, as conceptually homogenous. This tendency is well-known among the Kabbalists themselves since the 13th century and emerges from the adoption of the same term, Kabbalah, by a diversity of schools. The term Kabbalah as an esoteric doctrine stems from sources that precede what we call Kabbalah by two centuries at least, and is connected to a practice of secret transmission of the divine name. This is quite explicit in the Gaonic period, and in this sense the view is adopted by Hasidei Ashkenaz and by linguistic Kabbalists, like R. Barukh Togarmi and the young Joseph Gikatilla, and by the ecstatic version of linguistic Kabbalah: Abraham Abulafia's writings.⁸³

However, since the 13th century, Kabbalists were concerned not so much with the divine name, or names, as with the theory of ten *sefirot*, the theosophical Kabbalah, adopted this term in order to describe their doctrine. Those two main meanings of the term Kabbalah are represented by distinct bodies of literature, which entered, from time to time, even in sharp conflicts. However, the state of conflict was not always overt. Two major representatives of the theosophical Kabbalah, the young Gikatilla and the young Moses de Leon, for example, embraced the linguistic understanding of Kabbalah, but later on changed their mind and adopted the theosophical Kabbalah. This is not a developmental change, which is natural and understandable in any dynamic thinker, but a dramatic turn which ignores the earlier phases. So, for example, none of the earlier writings of Gikatilla or de Leon had been mentioned in their later writings. However, they did not criticize their earlier views, but they simply ignored them, and adopted other forms of making sense of the religious and speculative material at their disposition. De Leon's earlier writings which are quite close to those of the young Gikatilla did not come to the

83. See Moshe Idel, "Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names," *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, & Typology*, ed. R. A. Herrera (Peter Lang, New York, 1993), pp. 97-122, and "Ashkenazi Esotericism and Kabbalah in Barcelona," *Hispania Judaica* vol. 5 (2007), pp. 69-114

attention of Christian Kabbalists. They had to wait for the detailed philological analyses in our century in order to be identified at all. However, this is not the case of Gikatilla's book *Garden of the Nut*, *Ginnat 'Egoz*, which not only became a classic of Kabbalistic literature, but was known and influential on the later Kabbalistic book of Reuchlin. Shortly before composing *De arte cabalistica*, he became acquainted with the late Gikatilla's *Sha'arei 'Orah* in the Latin version of Paulus Riccius.⁸⁴ Together with another book of the late Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, quoted as *Porta Justiciae*, Gikatilla's three books constitute the most important cluster of sources for many of Reuchlin's discussions in *De arte cabalistica*. If we add to these books most of the Kabbalistic material known by Reuchlin from a manuscript similar to Ms. New York JTS 1887, Halberstam 444⁸⁵, we may come to the conclusion that something significant happened in the history of Christian Kabbalah. This shift is important since it involves the different nature of the Hebrew sources that nourished the second phase of Christian Kabbalah.

Unlike Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's basic reliance on Flavius Mithridates' Latin translations, which drew heavily on Italian Kabbalah, basically the writings of Abraham Abulafia and Menahem Recanati, Reuchlin is acquainted mainly with works of Spanish Kabbalists, in addition to the Italian ones. He certainly knew some of the works of the Italian Kabbalists as he quotes them by name.⁸⁶ However, in *De arte Cabalistica* they moved to the backfront, allowing the forefront to Spanish material, especially to R. Azriel of Gerona, to Nahmanides and the towering Kabbalist higher than anyone, R. Joseph Gikatilla. I assume that this change, which is a dramatic one for the entire physiognomy of Christian Kabbalah, is related, among other reasons, also with the arrival of Spanish Kabbalistic material due to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. It may also have something to do with the presence of Reuchlin in Germany, remote from the Kabbalistic library translated from Hebrew to Latin by Flavius Mithridates, which remained in Italy to this very day. In any case, whatever the reasons for this shift may be, the dominance of the Spanish Kabbalah in *De arte cabalistica* is paramount. This means that Gikatilla, indeed a Kabbalist who had an incredible gift for organizing Kabbalistic material in all his books, becomes directly and via the Latin translation of Riccius,

84. Roling, *Aristotelische Naturphilosophie und christliche Kabbalah im Werk des Paulus Riccius*, especially pp. 362-365.

85. See my introduction to *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, pp. XVI-XIX. More on the Jewish sources of Reuchlin see Wolfgang von Abel und Reimund Leicht, *Verzeichnis der Hebraica in der Bibliothek Johannes Reuchlins* (Thorbecke, Ostfildern, 2005).

86. See, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, pp. 93, 355.

his main source, and Reuchlin become acquainted, in a relative short period of time, with the two different kinds of Kabbalah in books composed by the same Kabbalist..

Thus, we may draw a substantial dividing line between the first stage of Christian Kabbalah as represented by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who adopted or at least repeated, R. Abraham Abulafia's distinction between the ecstatic and the theosophical Kabbalah, or between the Kabbalah of names versus that of *sefirot*, and Reuchlin's unified vision of this lore in his *De Arte Cabalistica*.⁸⁷

For a harmonistic set of mind characteristic of later Kabbalists, the two forms of Kabbalah must, however, agree if not coincide, and Kabbalists used different strategies of mediating between the different forms of thought. Very rarely would they resort to a hierarchical distinction, like Reuchlin's strategy of mediation between the different positions. For him, Kabbalah was symbolic in both the vertical sense, and horizontal one. In other words, by operating with a term that was used in at least two main but different ways Reuchlin believed, *bona fide*, that he was doing justice when describing Kabbalah in general as a symbolic theology. Or, to put it differently: by resorting to the term "symbol" as a homonym, Reuchlin was confident that he touched the very core of Kabbalah, either in its Abulafian or its theosophical forms. This comprehensive symbolic move has generated what I would call a strong homogenization of the much more variegated literature of Kabbalah, namely created a reading of conceptually different corpora, as if they constitute a conceptually unified field. There is nothing bad about introducing new terms in order to describe an older phenomenon. That is part and parcel of the positive and creative aspects of academic activity, but also part of its danger. The danger consists in introducing connotations of later phenomena – anachronism - or different phenomena, designated already by the new term, into the phenomenon that is referred by it. Danger of simple explanations plague more those who attempt to offer unifying terms than those who attempt to introduce a variety of terms intended to distinguish between phenomena that seem to be close. Reuchlin chose the first avenue, and offered a unified vision by resorting to the concept of symbol as an organizing principle. Being the first to have opened this avenue, he becomes also the most important phenomenology of Kabbalah as we are going to see below. However, he united all the forms of Kabbalah by resorting to the term symbol only in order to link Pythagoreanism with this Jewish literature and so to overtly judaize Pythagoreanism. *De facto*

87. See Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., Jerusalem, 1989), p. 63, Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, pp. 518-521.

he Pythagorized - perhaps inadvertently - Kabbalah. However, the Judaization of Pythagoreanism was just one step toward his final destination, its Christianization, as we learn from the transformation of the Tetragrammaton (and implicitly also the *tetraktys*) into a Pentagrammaton, conceived of as the secret name of Jesus, as proposed in *De Verbo Mirifico*, and corresponding, according to Reuchlin, to what the Pythagoreans called the symbol of the pentagram.⁸⁸

Let me summarize this part of the discussion: In my opinion Reuchlin was basically wrong on the two main points we addressed above: historically it is hard to believe that Pythagoras or his school could be influenced by ancient Jewish mystical speculations and if there is an affinity between the two distinct forms of lore it may stem either from the impact of Pythagoreanism on Kabbalah. Again, in my opinion Reuchlin was, at least in part, problematic as a phenomenologist, as he conceived the Kabbalistic literature as a unified conceptual field, and because he attributed so great an importance to the mystical-informative symbol. How such a mixing together of different types of Kabbalah has taken place? This is part of what I would call the Italian situation of some forms of Kabbalah in the second half of the 15th century. Kabbalah become much less a tradition, studied in a group that was continuing a certain school, with its own ideals and practical aspects: nomian or anomian techniques. Kabbalah become a literature, which was circulating among intellectuals as books arriving from other centers of Jewish culture, sometimes from other centuries, and from contexts that were unknown to the young Jewish scholars who consumed them, understanding them in different manners. It was an intellectual lore, *qabbalah sikhlit* or *muskkelet*, something that can be understood by a non-instructed individual, only by his own studies.⁸⁹ This is the situation in the group of younger intellectuals active mainly in Italy like R. Yohanan Alemanno, David Messer Leon or Abraham de Balmes, the first two of the three studied Kabbalah against the negative attitude to this lore of their teacher, and for David even of his father, R. Yehudah Messer Leon. This process started sometimes in the seventies of the 15th century. In this milieu, Kabbalah *qua* philosophy, or as a philosophically oriented lore Reuchlin could offer his version of a profound conceptual agreement between Kabbalah and Pythagoreanism.

88. See Burkert, *Lore and Science*, p. 176, Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, p. 353, Wirszburski, *ibidem*, p. 218, Idel, "Introduction", p. XV-XVI, and see also Wolfson, "Language, Secrecy, and the Mysteries of Law," pp. 11-15.

89. 'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1580, fol. 90a. See also *ibidem*, fol. 136a: "We have Kabbalistic ways which are bringing us to the *intelligibilia* in an easy manner [*be-qalut*], without their [the philosophers'] ways."

In itself, Reuchlin's view is a simplification of the much broader spectrum of Kabbalistic phenomena, which consist of a diversity of factors like the mythological, Neoplatonic, Aristotelian, Hermetical or magical elements, which are hardly reducible to the principles of Pythagoreanism. However, his reduction of the content of Kabbalah in its entirety to some aspect of Pythagoreanism can be easily understood as part of his rhetoric, intended to create for his book a special field of contribution, different from that of Ficino's and D'Étapes's. Moreover, this vision of Kabbalah as a kind of occult philosophy possessing a symbolic mode, is reminiscent of the more modern visions of myth and Kabbalah as a certain type of 'narrative philosophy', according to Schelling and Scholem.⁹⁰ The Renaissance philosophical understandings of Kabbalah, both of Jewish and Christian thinkers, have been reverberated in modern scholarship.⁹¹ I believe that this is major clue for Scholem's pansymbolic attitude.⁹²

He once remarked that would he believe in metempsychosis, he would perhaps see Reuchlin's soul as having transmigrated in himself.⁹³ This may well be merely a metaphor, although it may nevertheless disclose something more profound about Scholem's self-perception as a scholar. It may disclose his understanding that the line of research in modern Jewish studies does not only start with Reuchlin as a founding father, "der erster Erforscher des Judentums" as the first of the systematic exponents of Kabbalah, but also that the late scholars still follows his conceptual vision, at least insofar Kabbalah is concerned. Reuchlin's decisive influence is conspicuous in Scholem's and his followers' overemphasis on the paramount importance of the symbolic language and thought, as representative of and essential to the entire Kabbalah.⁹⁴ Moreover, at least once, shortly before his death, Scholem mentioned explicitly Reuchlin's view of Kabbalah as *receptio symbolica*.⁹⁵ From the

90. See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, tr. R. Manheim, (Schocken Books, New York, 1969), p. 87.

91. On this phenomenon in general see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 5-6.

92. Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time & Other Essays*, ed., A. Shapira, tr. Jonathan Chipman, (JPS, Philadelphia, Jerusalem, 1997), p. 140. See also his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken Books, New York, 1967), p. 27.

93. *Die Erforschung der Kabbala von Reuchlin bis zur Gegenwart*, (Pforzheim, 1969), p. 7.

94. See ibidem, pp. 23-24; idem, *Major Trends* p. 26. To be sure Scholem had also other sources for his view on symbolism. See my article mentioned in the following footnote.

95. "Die Stellung der Kabbala in Europaischen Geistgeschichte," *Berlin Jahrbuch*, (1981/1982), pp. 283-284. See the Hebrew translation in Gershom Scholem, *'Od Davar, Explications and Implications*, ('Am 'Oved, Tel Aviv, 1989), p. 323. The pertinent passage in Reuchlin has been quoted above note 33. See also a more complex description of Scholem's understanding

first scholar of Judaism in the Renaissance to the greatest scholar of Jewish mysticism in our times, the symbolic mode in Kabbalah is attributed a fundamental role.⁹⁶ Without always knowing it, modern scholarship of Kabbalah speaks, following Reuchlin, Pythagoreanism, when symbolism is attributed the decisive role in the structure of Kabbalah.⁹⁷ However, this Pythagoreanism has been put in the service of Christianity, and the two trends of thought, have been used as an important grid for interpreting Kabbalah in a unified manner. This is one of the reasons why symbolism, as understood by Scholem and some of his followers, often involves a cognitive approach, emphasizing less the impact of human deeds on the divinity.⁹⁸

of symbolism in M. Idel, "The Function of Symbols in G.G. Scholem," *Jewish Studies*, vol. 38 (1998), pp. 43-72 (Hebrew).

96. On the reticence of attributing a seminal role to symbolism in Judaism see Abraham J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, Essays*, ed., Susannah Heschel, (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1996), pp. 83-84. More on Heschel and symbolism see Edward K. Kaplan, *Holiness in Words, Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety* (SUNY Press, Albany, 1996), pp. 75-89. For my reservations concerning the exaggeration of the status of the symbols in Kabbalah see my detailed discussion in *Absorbing Perfections*, pp. 272-294.
97. On symbolism and Kabbalah see more recently Boaz Huss, "Rabbi Joseph Gikatilia's Definition of Symbolism and Its Influence on Kabbalistic Literature," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. 12 (1996), pp. 157-176.
98. For a more diversified vision of Kabbalistic symbolism see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 200-234, and Abraham Elkayam, "Between referentialism and performativism: Two Approaches in Understanding the Kabbalistic Symbol," *Daat* vol. 24 (1990), pp. 5-40 (Hebrew).