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42nd International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 10-13 2007

Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan

Magic and the Holy Book session, sponsored by Societas Magica

De Magia naturali and Quincuplex Psalterium by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples:

Kabbalah as Biblical Magic

Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples' 1493 De Magia naturali, On Natural Magic, and his 1513 edition of Quincuplex Psalterium, Fifefold Psalter, propound an anagogic, esoteric exegesis of the Bible¹. Like his associates of the Florentine Platonic Academy, Renaissance humanist Lefèvre imagined the unity of religions in a *prisca theologia*, ancient theology (Evans Ch.10 II:80, f. 213). French Catholic reformer Lefèvre chose not to publish his 1493 treatise in light of Catholicism's persecution of astrologers, Magicians, mathematicians, Chaldeans, and scholars of comparative religion like him, now called Renaissance Christian Kabbalists. Nonetheless, Lefèvre continued to write on what can be termed Kabbalah as Biblical Magic, with the 1513 edition of Quincuplex Psalterium heightening Catholic disapproval (Reformation Histories).

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Pythagorean School or from Gnostic doctrine. Also, the Kabbalistic link between *gematria* [or esoteric number symbolism] and angelology was either formulated in Babylonia, or within the Italian Jewish tradition (Kabbalah 27, 35). My dissertation on the De Magia treatise traces the tradition of early Christian Kabbalists in detail (Evans “De Magia Naturali, On Natural Magic, by Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples: Coincidence of Opposites, the Trinity, and *prisca theologia*”). Here I will simply point out that in De Magia naturali Book II Chapter 10 Lefèvre depicts this correlation between *gematria* and the angelic hierarchy, another clue in favor of this Kabbalistic link having originated in the Italian Jewish tradition. It is also what makes Lefèvre’s Quincuplex Psalterium a noteworthy Biblical exegesis, for as Guy Bedouelle has pointed out, that larger text makes extrinsic the theme of the mystery of numbers that is intrinsic in Book II of the treatise On Natural Magic (Lefèvre d’Étaples et l’Intelligence des Écritures 37).

Throughout Book II, Lefèvre depicts a Kabbalistic system, equating the topic—which he calls “Pythagorean philosophy”—to “Cabala” and prophetic teachings (Evans Ch.1 II:50, f. 198; Ch.14 II:89-90, f. 217-218v). As such, Book II can be categorized as a Neopythagorean work on Christian Kabbalah. Eugene Rice asserts that Lefèvre, in the Olomouc manuscript of De Magia naturali, makes the earliest recorded reference in France to the Kabbalah (“The *De Magia Naturali* of Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples” 27). Based on the prevalence of Medieval Jewish Kabbalists in France, I would amend that claim to read, “the earliest recorded Christian reference in France to the Kabbalah by that name.”

In “The Revival of Lullism at Paris,” Joseph Victor reminds us that, always a devotee of Christ, always a lover of Catholicism, Lefèvre cherished the teachings of the Spanish mystic Ramon Lull, who described the universe as a ladder of beings — stones, plants, animals, man, angels, God — a giant collection of symbols that led to the divine (Victor online). For the

metaphorical scaffolding of Book II, Lefèvre employs the numerical descending and ascending chains of angelic and planetary spheres on which man ascends to the divine. He depicts 10 descending spheres of the angelic hierarchy labeled “divine orders of the spirits,” 7 of which are paired with the ascending “planetary spheres” (Evans Ch.10 II:80-84, f. 213-215). Thus per Scholem’s model, Jewish Gnosticism as angelology interpenetrates with Neoplatonism in Lefèvre’s Book II where it melds also with Neopythagoreanism to form a truly Kabbalistic work. Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples might thus also be credited as the first French Christian Kabbalist to correlate the Trinity with the doctrine of the “*Sefirot*” (“numbers” or “spheres”).

The Prefatory Epistle to Quincuplex Psalterium delineates the four senses of Scripture that comprise Lefèvre’s hermeneutics: literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. Henri de Lubac, in Medieval Exegesis Volume I, enumerates the various hermeneutics that were employed in Biblical exegesis at the time, noting that this particular combination of literal, tropological, allegorical, and anagogical was a tradition among “the first generation of Protestants, notably Melanchthon in his *Rhetorica*” (96). Philipp Melanchthon was a Lutheran contemporary of Lefèvre’s, yet Werner Gundersheimer states in his French Humanism that Lefèvre’s 1512 Epistles of St. Paul is considered by some as the first Protestant book. “His reading of St. Paul was that of a mystic concerned with the interior life, and he was ever ready to use images and symbols to justify everything in the Church of his time which was not in harmony with the spirit of the apostolic age” (84). This corroborates my point that Lefèvre was deeply invested in interfaith, interdisciplinary Images and symbols that were cordoned off by the political Church. This symbolic, Magical Imagery is evident not only in Lefèvre’s treatise on Magic, but also in the Christian Fivefold Psalter.

In the title of De Magia naturali Book II Chapter 10, Lefèvre employs the Image, “Priscae velatae Theologiae” or “Ancient veils of Theology” (Evans Ch.10 II:80, f. 213). Throughout Book II, Lefèvre unveils or decloaks mythology, philosophy, astrology, literature and religion to reveal a scientific theory, practice and experience of number as Image. The primal architectural metaphor or Image of Book II is the exilic fall-genesis of lover from Beloved and return-ascension to Beloved through divine love. This unifying Spiritual force is the middle element between the theological duality, or binary code, the Image termed Coincidence of Opposites—the All of Father Above opposite the nothing of son below. Unified in Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ embodies the Trinity. Book II espouses this redemptive numerical ascension to Christ through the mythic rhetoric of Pagan Magic. As in Botticelli’s *Primavera*, painted for Platonic Academy patron Lorenzo de Medici, Lefèvre’s De Magia naturali Book II Chapter 1 portrays Mercury as longing, with Venus as love-nexus between the Moon and Mercury (Evans Ch.1 II:50-51, f. 198-199v).

Magic resolves exile esoterically in number symbolism through the mysteries of relationship between Above and below, between superior and inferior numbers. “Superiores adiuncti inferioribus numeris: superiores caelestes; inferiores terrestres; superiores sunt animae, inferiores sunt corporis; primus ergo binarius. The superior numbers are added to the inferior numbers: the superiors celestial, the inferiors terrestrial; the superiors are of the soul, the inferiors are of the body; the first is therefore the binary” (Evans Ch.7 II:68-69, ff. 207-208v). As in Lull’s The Book of the Lover and the Beloved, the Coincidence of Opposites between Above and below is the tension that drives Book II of the treatise On Natural Magic, and this *before* Lefèvre had read the Church-sanctioned Nicholas of Cusa’s *Ars Oppositorum*. Augustin Renaudet, in Préréforme et Humanisme à Paris: Pendant les Premières Guerres d’Italie (1494-

1517), dates Lefèvre's studies of Cusa during the first decade and a half of the sixteenth century (661). Therefore rather than Cusa, in the De Magia treatise Lefèvre cites many-another proponent of the Magic in esoteric number symbolism—Pythagoras, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Pindar, Orpheus, Ovid, Virgil, Narcissus, Rhea and Cýbele, Phoebus Apollo and Dionysus, Jupiter and Venus, Phillide and Flora, the three Charities, the three Graces—each of whom either expounds or metaphorically embodies a common theory of genesis through a Coincidence of Opposites, and a common practice of ascension to unity through a Trinitarian relationship intrinsic in the binary itself. “Magi ternarius Veneris esse numerus declaratur, et nexus amatoriumque vinculum. The ternary of the Magician is declared to be the number of Venus, and the nexus and amatorial chain” (Evans Chap.2 II:53; f. 200v).

Lefèvre thus equates Christian theology with the thoughts of pre-Christian philosophers, the words of pre-Christian myths passed down through the oral tradition by the poets of Classical Antiquity, and the actions of pre-Christian Magicians. Transcending religious boundaries, disciplinary boundaries, and the boundaries of time and space, he encapsulates all in Images meant to represent unity of religions. To reiterate what Rice has said, Lefèvre propounded utilizing arithmetical and geometrical symbolism to ascend to a vision of the Trinity. That Magic ternary was embodied, for Lefèvre, in the equilateral triangle, Image of *aequalitas*—equality (Rice 24, 27). To restate Gundersheimer's point, Lefèvre was concerned with interior religion, and he readily used Images and symbols (84). The symbolic, Magical Imagery inherent in the De Magia is also depicted visually in his Christian Fivefold Psalter. In utilizing universal Images of number and symbol, Lefèvre left himself open to the label of heretic.

At that time, the politicized Church rejected *previously interfaith* esoteric Images, seen for instance on the facade of the 13th century Franciscan *Basilica di Santa Croce*, where the form

of a hexagram is the central balance point over the entrance. The hexagram symbol was *also* associated with Jewish Magic or Kabbalah, yet in the 15th century began to symbolize Judaism as a whole, and was used as a means to demarcate Jews from Christians (“View of the Piazza Santa Croce” The Bridgeman Art Library online). Arguably, the hexagram depicts most universally the Image of union between Coincidence of Opposites: Above and below, Being and body, God and man, interpenetrating within Spirit. The two triangles symbolizing Above and below merge, coincide, balanced in an *aequalitas* of the Spiritual and the literal worlds, Spirit and letter.

For Lefèvre, Jesus Christ is an Image that embodies a hermeneutics where the Spiritual sense and the literal sense of the Bible interpenetrate as a unity. In comparing the Hebraic Old Testament Bible to the Christian New Testament Bible, that interpenetrating unity of Spirit and letter is the premise with which he begins Quincuplex Psalterium, the Fivefold Psalter comprised of *Gallicum*, *Rhomanum*, *Hebraicum*, *Vetus et Conciliatum* versions of Scripture. He introduces this Image of Coincidence of Opposites in the Prefatory Epistle: “[. . .] sensus igitur litteralis et spiritualis coincidunt, non quem allegoricum aut tropologicum vocant, sed quem spiritus sanctus in propheta loquens intendit.” “Therefore the literal and Spiritual senses are coincident, not spoken as allegorical or tropological, but as the Holy Spirit infused into the prophets’ utterances.” Thus Lefèvre propounds not only an anagogic or mystical interpretation of the Bible, but more exactly an esoteric, or wholly interpenetrating exegesis, with the Magical hexagram Image of Christ as Holy Spirit at the center: “Ad quod consequendum, brevem in psalmos expositionem Christo adiutore tentavi: qui est clavis David, et de quo illi in hac psalmodia per spiritum sanctum (ut dictum est) constitutum erat.” “To which consequence, in the psalms are held a brief exposition of Christ: who is the key of David from whom He in these psalms was constituted through the Holy Spirit” (Prefatory Epistle).

In the Prefatory Epistle to Quincuplex Psalterium then, Lefèvre conjures an esoteric Image that has been symbolized as the hexagram Magen David—shield, star, or key of David—inscribed with the Pentagrammaton IHSVH or name of Jesus. A *hexaplus* or sixfold genesis is exactly where Lefèvre begins De Magia naturali Book II. Chapter 1 delineates the flow from unity—“the first and absolute principle from which all other principles form”—of the binary—“the principle of alterity and the number of power” (Evans Ch.1 II:50, f. 198). In this juxtaposition of unity and binary, Lefèvre portrays the Coincidence of Opposites as the relationship from which this sixfold or hexagram genesis of creation ensues. The seventh day is always a sacrifice into rest or Silence. So by beginning with a numeric-geometric depiction of the genesis of creation, Lefèvre reveals in the first chapter of De Magia naturali Book II that the Natural Magic of number symbolism is identical to Biblical Scripture.

Pagan Magic becomes Christian Kabbalah fully in Chapters 14-17, where Lefèvre asserts that the numbers to the mystery of the Magicians and the numbers to the mystery of the prophets and David are the same. These chapters explain that the letter “s” sounded in the middle of the Tetragrammaton, or the number “300” counted in the middle of the numbers ascribed to the Tetragrammaton, completes the name Jesus through which mediating love-nexus, enjoined by Spirit, man is redeemed (Evans Ch.14-17 II:89-97, ff. 217-221). In Quincuplex Psalterium, Lefèvre continues to employ this Kabbalistic, esoteric exegesis that includes the sacred Hebrew alphabet alongside sacred numerology, *gematria*. In the commentary to Psalms 71, 72 and 94 he praises the teachings of Pico, Reuchlin and Cusa wherein the letter “s” is added to the Tetragrammaton to form the Pentagrammaton “*verbo mirifico*,” wonder-working word IHSVH, “IHESVHE” or the name Jesus, making the ineffable effable (104-107, 139-140). Lefèvre’s 1493 De Magia naturali actually preceded Reuchlin’s works on Kabbalah published in 1494 and 1517,

just as his investment to the Coincidence of Opposites had preceded his study of the Christian Church Father Cusa.

In Quincuplex Psalterium Lefèvre brings forward the 22 spiritual meditations of Psalm 118 inherited from ancient Hebrew “Rabinorum”, yet in the Prefatory Epistle he also claims the traditions of Pagans such as Homer along with Christian Church Fathers. The difference between Lefèvre’s hermeneutics and that of other Reformation Biblical exegetes is evident in his investment to ancient esoteric Image so negatively charged by the Church of his day. Envision the two interpenetrating triangles that comprise the hexagram Magen David, shield or star—“*clavis David*”, the key of David that Lefèvre reveres as Christ in the Prefatory Epistle to Quincuplex Psalterium. That symbol I argue is imbedded within his Psalm 118 diagram of the 8th spiritual meditation on the Ogdoad, “Octavae Ogdoadis Spiritualis Meditatio” (182).

Lefèvre’s departure from contemporary Christian Bible editions is that there *is* no Kabbalist alphanumeric-geometric Imagery depicted in the Biblia Latina: cum glossa ordinaria published in Basel in the year 1498, even though it includes the highly anagogic gloss of Nicolai de Lyra (UCSB Special Collections). There *are* no universal numeric-geometric Images in the 1480 Strassburg edition of the Biblia Latina: cum glossa ordinaria. In the introduction within the Turnhout 1992 facsimile of the 1480 edition, “The Glossed Bible” by Margaret T. Gibson, she cites the colophon title at the end of the 1498 Bible as touting that herein *is* no Jewish perfidy, forbidden in the Catholic faith (XVII).

As mentioned, in his 1513 Quincuplex Psalterium Lefèvre cites Cusa, Pico and Reuchlin in several Psalms key to his own Imagist exegesis, aligning himself with the Jewish Magical or Kabbalistic tradition followed knowingly by the latter two, and intrinsically by Cusa himself. In Psalm 118, verse VIII or the 8th spiritual meditation on the Ogdoad, Lefèvre includes the

repetitive chant of “Heth” before each line, with the alphanumeric symbols “h1” through “h8” along the margin. After the verse he asserts his own commentary about each line, then at the end follows with an “Adverte” deferring to Hieronymus. The Biblical Ogdoad perhaps can be traced to the Valentinian Gnostics or to Irenaeus, but is also arguably an ancient interfaith Image thought of in the Egyptian genesis or creation myth as pairs of opposites that when united as one give rise to the sun star Ra, or alternatively to a lotus (“The Trinity of the Upper Light World” Essenes.net; “Ancient Writers on Biblical Themes” Innvista.com; “Valentinus (Gnostic)”, “Ogdoad” Wikipedia). In De Magia naturali, Lefèvre alludes to the union of Ra and Horus in singing of Vulcan’s marriage to Hammisia (Evans Ch.5 II:63, f. 205v). In Quincuplex Psalterium, Lefèvre’s diagrammatic Image of the 8th spiritual meditation on the Ogdoad—the meditation uniting Above and below, Spiritual and literal, Spirit and letter—is a sphere encircling six smaller spheres that intersect at the center. This lotus-form Image creates a sixfold star in its center; and intrinsic within that Image is the hexagram *clavis David* formed at the points where the spheres Above and the spheres below intercept the greater circle encompassing them (182).

Thus, the Trinitarian *prisca theologia*, the Magic technique of numerical ascension through the 7 Astrological planetary spheres espoused in De Magia naturali Book II, continues its interpenetrating genesis and reunion in Quincuplex Psalterium through the 8th or Earth sphere meditation on the Ogdoad, when the Coincidence of Opposites is unified as One star. I assert that within the emerging interdisciplinary specialty of Western Esotericism, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples should thus be counted among his contemporaries as a founder of Christian Kabbalah, for he remained throughout his life an esotericist, a Christian Kabbalist who cherished Biblical Magic.

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