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Fray Luis de León and Cabalistic Tradition: A Uniquely Spanish Alliance

Fray Luis de León is a quintessential Spanish Renaissance figure, scholar, churchman and mystic. Descended from a wealthy and influential family, there is no real discrepancy of sentiment in his desire to opt for the Christian religious life. As a *converso*, this decision offered him some semblance of protection in those turbulent times of inquisitional persecutions and *limpieza de sangre*. The Church often became the ideal refuge for many *conversos* who feared following a more prominent worldly career which often left them exposed and bereft of protection from the prying eyes of the Holy Office. Thus, as early as the fifteenth century, many *conversos* had begun to push their way forward as churchmen and there were many who attained distinction in Holy Orders.¹

In viewing León as a *converso*, we are better able to comprehend the role of undisputed importance played by the Hebrew writers, particularly the mystics, in his general education. They are of equal, if not greater, significance than the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle and the Christian Fathers (Durán 111). This combination of Hellenic tradition, medieval Christianity and Hebrew writings left their particular and peculiar mark on Fray Luis's mysticism.

The study of Cabala, best defined as a medieval Jewish occultism, was coincidentally enjoying its own renaissance in the sixteenth century. A highly complex and esoteric document, it is most simply understood as a system of Jewish theosophy. By the use of a mystical method of interpretation, including cyphers, it is believed to reveal hidden doctrines to its initiates (Cross 216).

At the end of the thirteenth century, a document which is considered central to the Cabala, the *Zohar*, or *The Book of Splendor*, was "discovered." Most scholars attribute these writings, or at least the compiling of these works, to a twelfth-century Spanish Jew, Moses de León. Whether all parts of the *Zohar* are completely the effort of Moses de León or represent a work without unity that grew anonymously in the course of time, the definitive book of Jewish mysticism is uniquely Spanish. It is the product of a Spanish-Hebraic mystical interpretation of the Scriptures and its most distinguished writers and adherents all came from the countries bordering on the Mediterranean (Blau 2).

Just as knowledge of the Hebrew language was an indispensable tool for a thorough and authentic study of the Bible, it was also a vital

prerequisite to the study of Cabala. Thus, as so many of the texts were transmitted through Hebrew sources, the study of these texts was included automatically in the program of the Spanish humanists who were engaged in studying and translating the Bible (Blau 183). Fray Luis specifically incurred the wrath of the Inquisition through his stubborn preference of the Hebrew text to that of the Vulgate.²

Merely having a sophisticated knowledge of Hebrew may not qualify León as a cabalist. Yet no other Spanish mystic, even reaching back through the centuries to Ramon Lull,³ had combined this knowledge of ancient languages with an active participation in the Hebraic circle of the University of Salamanca and an openly confessed *converso* background (Arkin 186). When these factors are viewed in conjunction, the possibility of some tendency toward Hebrew cabalism is possible, if not probable.

Jewish mysticism's greatest achievement is cabalistic doctrine. It is principally concerned with the interpretation of the idea of God as he is manifested in creation, revelation and redemption. When cabalism became interesting to Christian scholars, attempts were made to fuse a specifically Christian concept of the Divine Act of redemption through Jesus with the concepts of creation and revelation common to both Judaism and Christianity (Scholem 13). If we bear these differences in mind, we begin to discern these same cabalistic interpretations as they relate to the cardinal sentiments of Fray Luis's poetry. These feelings include solitude and intimate retiring in communion with nature; contemplation of the natural order, and, by virtue of this contemplation, escape from reality; desire for peace; and elation to the feeling of divine harmony in union with the supreme calm of his own soul (Del Río 192). Due to his Platonism, Fray Luis cannot be considered an experimental mystic as such term applies, for example to St. Teresa, although he achieved states of contemplation very like those of "true" mysticism (Del Río 194). But his classicism is also based, at least partially, on Philo's⁴ interpretations of Hellenism, views which were infused with a decidedly Jewish cast. León's dependence on Philo colors his own mysticism with a pre-Christian hue.

In his *Oda a Francisco Salinas*, we observe that the poem which gives us a feeling of being closest to mystical rapture does not depict a religious experience but a mainly intellectual one. If we seek to explain this poem in terms of "intellectualized" or "rational" mysticism, we must remember that it is precisely cabalistic doctrine that makes provision for rational rapture. Certain parallels are evident:

Salinas, cuando suena
la música extremada
por vuestra sabia mano gobernada . . .

Creation becomes that music which is the unique product governed by
"your skilled hand." He is enraptured by it:

A cuyo son divino
mi alma que en olvido está sumida,
torna a cobrar en tino
y memoria perdida
de su origen primera esclarecida.

A heavily-laden soul, incurring in the sin of forgetfulness, now suddenly
awakens to heavenly revelation:

de no perdedera
música, que es la fuente y la primera.

Ve como el gran maestro
a aquesta inmensa cítara aplicado,
con movimiento diestro
produce el son sagrado
con que este eterno templo es sustentado.

Thus reawakened, he recognizes the "music" that is the source of
everything, the Great Master whose eternal sustaining of the temple
may be seen as the redemption which precedes incorporation into
oneness or eternity. These are the principal interpretations of God.

To see the extent of León's Jewish mysticism we must return to
Philo. The philosopher espoused the theory that the ecstasy of the
spirit is a deep sleep which falls upon it. It becomes ecstatic when it
ceases to busy itself with the ideas which impinge upon it. Philo
maintains that one must literally "go out from himself" filled with a
divine frenzy such as those possessed in the mystical rites of the Cory-
bantes, the followers of Cybele, the Great Mother, as worshipped in
parts of western Asia. The philosopher insists that one's "mystical
inheritance" could only be attained when the mind is no longer self-
contained but rapt and frenzied with a spiritual or heavenly passion
(Ferguson 144). If Fray Luis's Hellenism was more Philonian than
Platonic, we can trace a direct line to his Jewish mystical roots. The
repeated concurrences among the writings of Philo, the *Zohar* and
León suggest the latter's use of cabalism as a natural progression in his
intellectual development (Blau 33).

Fray Luis arrives at his mystical experience through contemplation.
He creates a separation between the inner/outer, the tangible/abstract
qualities, that is extremely Zoharic in principle. The lower (tangible)
world is an exact reflection of the upper (abstract) world (Epstein 132).

But the most decisive influence is his reliance on and preference for Hebrew text: the Old Testament was his guide.

In the *décima*, *Al salir de la cárcel*, written upon his release from five years' imprisonment in an inquisitional jail, such contrasts are evident:

del sabio que se retira
de aqueste mundo malvado . . .

would seem to connote a physical being (self) who retires from a physical world:

y con pobre mesa y casa,
en el campo deleitoso . . .

emphasizes the tangibility of these modest objects which exist on the lower plane. However, in their humbleness and beauty they call to mind superior counterparts on the higher plane:

con sólo Dios
y a solas su vida pasa,
ni envidiado ni envidioso.

Everything has been plain, direct, bare; now he speaks of God as his sole reward (abstract redemption, with no allusion to Christian redemption through the Savior). He gladly anticipates this spiritual union, this oneness with God. We see an emerging relationship between him and the *Zohar*.

Zoharic mysticism is also observed in Fray Luis's poetic divisions. As in the Cabala, the world he enters is one of symbols and images and one in which the hard empirical reality of his environment melts into insubstantial shadows as he approaches the object for which he searches (Unterman 18). This is the true cabalistic mystic who, not unlike his Christian counterpart, fulfills all the qualities of experimental mysticism. But there is a still stronger link between León and this discipline. The cabalistic tradition, hidden teaching (*nistar*), is made up of a number of different components, many of which would not be associated with mysticism as understood in the Christian West (Epstein 182). Everything in the Bible is understood by the Cabala as an expression of its own esotericism. All aspects of the Bible, as interpreted by Zoharic tradition, have esoteric, i.e., mystical implications. Like León, a cabalist would be a non-experimental mystic.

Both Fray Luis and the mysticism of the *Zohar* have a singular affinity

for nature. But beyond this concurrence, León shares an even more remarkable similarity with Moses de León: an abiding concern for the social ills which beset Jewish society in this world. León must have been appalled by the continued attacks perpetrated by the Spanish State and the Inquisition against the *conversos*. No truce was in sight, and the persecution was poisoning Spanish social and cultural life. He saw that in destroying the *conversos* the Spanish monarchs were actually weakening and debasing themselves. But denouncing these social ills may have been an overt reaction taken in covert response to cabalistic teaching. Despite superficial misfortune the Cabala sees as ultimately fortunate the people of Israel because God has chosen them from among all the peoples and has entrusted to them the sign of his covenant. Whoever bears this mark does not descend into Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom, near Jerusalem, where refuse was dumped and perpetual fires were burned in order to prevent pestilence, "if he guards it properly and does not stray into alien precincts" (Scholem 19).

Fray Luis's poem *Al apartamiento* again demonstrates remarkable similarities with the *Zohar*:

¡Oh ya seguro puerto,
de mi tan lenguo error! ¡oh deseado
para reparo cierto
del grave mal pasado!

The long-sustained error, the graveness of the ill, newly revealed, may refer to previous beliefs or conclusions now seen as erroneous. He seeks relief, refuge from this ill in the mountain's tranquil ascent to the sky. The peace he longs for is one which the earth (*suelo*) does not share, as it is a place

adonde el vulgo ciego
ama el morir en vivo fuego.

Blind masses, jostling about, seem almost to relish the sinful life which leads them to the eternal flames. Disgusted, he desires flight from that commonality even as he fears a personal descent into Gehenna for having permitted himself to stray into the alien precincts of error.

It is true that we do not find in León's poetry the detailed description of mystical experience that we read in St. Teresa's or in the elaborate theoretical approach to mysticism in St. John of the Cross. Yet all the essential elements of a mystical experience can be found in his poems: the anguish and loneliness of a man deeply dissatisfied with earthly life. Lacking both the detailed description and theoretical approach (both

products, although not exclusively), of Christian mysticism, León's mystical experiences must draw upon an older tradition. Thus, his apparent dissatisfaction with earthly existence may also be fused, not unsubstantially, with a desire to return to the source of his ancient beliefs.

He berates his associations, the wasted time:

Recíbeme en tu cumbre,
recíbeme; que huyo perseguido
la errada muchedumbre,
el trabajar perdido,
la falsa paz, el mal no merecido.

Certainly his repeated reference to the erring crowd, the earthly life, or, more personally, his own persecution, can be construed as a general condemnation of those things. Yet we must note that *la falsa paz* is a many-faceted stone. To which fraudulent peace is he alluding? The false peace of men? a personal false or deceptive sense of security into which he had been lulled? or the uneasy peace of silence which characterized a hypocritical and corrupt society? And if we wish to take this statement one step further, it is not impossible that it has an esoteric connotation and refers to that false (erring) peace that attends misdirected belief.

Previously referred to as a grave ill, he continues to expand on the discomfort of doubt:

Y do está más sereno
el aire me coloca, mientras curo
los daños del veneno
que bebí mal seguro . . .

Here the phrase *mal seguro* not only bears a relation to an erring peace, as in the preceding example, but may also refer to a long-term error (*tan luengo error*) of faith. The poison may well mean mistaken or misguided beliefs, and not merely be an allusion to that corrupt earthly society from which León longed so desperately to escape.

It is evident that no mystic praxis can be definitive in separating the Christian cabalist from the covert Hebrew cabalist as that doctrine depends exclusively upon the interpretation that the individual brings to it. During the Renaissance, the humanists succeeded in creating an intellectual situation in which, for a time, every educated person knew something of the Cabala (Blau 113). But Jewish mystics, as León may have viewed himself secretly, drew private and special inspiration from these writings. Fray Luis's approach to mysticism was much the same as

that of the Baal Shem Tov's⁵ approach to the *Zohar*: when he opened the book he beheld the whole world.

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NOTES

1. Two celebrated sixteenth century examples were Pablo de Santamaría of Burgos, alias Rabbi Solomon ha-Levi, who rose to the position of bishop and was a member of the Council of Regency of Castile; Fray Vicente de Rocamora of Valencia attained fame for piety and eloquence as a Dominican friar and was confessor to the Infanta María.

2. Thirty accusations were propounded against Luis de León in 1571 and are found in Volume X of the *Documentos Inéditos para la Historia de España* (Madrid, 1847). The following refer to the use of the Vulgate: 4. "Que la edición Vulgata no es infalible"; 14. "Que el texto hebreo no está ahora corrupto y falsado como algunos han dicho."

3. Lull (c. 1232–1315) was a Spanish Christian mystic, a follower of St. Francis whose principal concerns were conversionary.

4. A Jew of the Diaspora (c. 30 B.C.–A.D. 50) who lived in Alexandria. He brought together the strands of Judaic religion and Hellenic philosophy, especially that of Plato and the Stoics.

5. The Baal Shem Tov was a great rabbi and scholar. Born in Poland in 1700, he founded the Chasidic movement.

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