Part II

Philosophy and the Humanities

D - Literature
MOSES ZACUTO POET OF KABBALAH
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Moses Zacuto gained his great fame as both kabbalist and poet. To what degree and in which ways did his poetry absorb his kabbalistic convictions? It was hardly possible to tackle this issue as long as most of his poems were left in manuscript. Now, printed in its entirety, his poetical corpus may be surveyed as a whole. Based on such a survey I would venture to describe his poetry as rooted in a kabbalistic world and expressing its views.

In fact, deciding whether any given poem is or is not kabbalistic is not an easy task. Kabbalah regarded every word and every letter in the scriptures as charged with secret meaning. It follows, then, that almost every word and expression in a Hebrew poem might convey a kabbalistic message. But we must allow that Hebrew poems, including liturgical poems, may have little to do with Kabbalah. When, then, can we look for kabbalistic messages in a poem without running the risk of imposing on it something that is not there?

Extra-textual evidence might be helpful for identifying a poetic corpus appropriate for such an inquiry. In Zacuto’s case, this sort of evidence is ample. Zacuto was immersed in the kabbalistic world. He devoted so much of his time to the Zohar – studying it daily, often with colleagues or students, editing it, writing a commentary on it and proofreading literature related to it – that he must have known it by heart. His correspondence with students and colleagues reveals him as a devout adherent and fierce advocate of the Lurianic belief. His painstaking, sometimes lengthy and often excited explanations of its ethos convey an

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2 His two dramas demand a special discussion with regard to their relation to Kabbalah and will be mentioned here only in passing.


4 See Essa Et Levavi (note 1 above), p. 7 note 7. For a basic overview of the Zohar see Lachover, F. and Tishby, Y., The Wisdom of the Zohar, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989. These and further references in the following footnotes do not necessarily exclude other relevant sources.