MENASSEH BEN ISRAEL, HENRY MORE AND JOHANNES HOORNBEECK ON THE PRE-EXISTENCE OF THE SOUL

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In the thought of the leading Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614-1687) as well as in that of two of his friends and admirers, George Rust (d. 1670) and Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680), the idea of the pre-existence of the soul took an important place. The same holds true for Menasseh ben Israel, who expounded his views on this point in several of his publications. When, between September 1655 and October 1657, Menasseh was in London, he discussed these views with the author of the "Annotations" on two tracts by Glanvill and Rust, which appeared in the second edition of the tracts in 1682. There can be no doubt about the attribution of the "Annotations" to More: his biographer Richard Ward, who had known More personally and who was well informed, mentions "his excellent Annotations on Lux Orientalis" in the (unpublished) sequel to The Life of the Learned and Pious Dr More (1710). Speaking of the idea of pre-existence (the main topic of the two tracts) More wrote in the "Annotations":

"That this was the common opinion of the wiser men amongst the Jews, R. Menasseh Ben Israel himself told me at London with great freedom and assurance,

* I thank Dr. Norma E. Emerton, Cambridge, for the correction of the English text.
1 *Two choice and useful Treatises: the one Lux Orientalis or an Enquiry into the Opinion of the Eastern Sages concerning the Preexistence of Souls. Being a Key to unlock the Grand Mysteries of Providence. In relation to Mans Sin and Misery. The other, a Discourse of Truth, by the Late Reverend Dr. Rust Lord Bishop of Dromore in Ireland. With Annotations on them both* (London, 1682). The first tract, by Glanvill, first appeared in 1662; the tract by Rust was first published in 1677.
2 R. Ward, "Some Account of Dr More's Works", *Christ's College*, Cambridge, MS 20, f. 129 (quoted with the permission of the Master and Fellows of *Christ's College*, Cambridge); cf. *DNB* s.v. Glanvill and More. I thank Dr. Alan Gabbey, Belfast, for his kind assistance in this matter. In the More correspondence I have found one place where the "Annotations" are mentioned. More had drawn the attention of Henry Hallywell (who some years later edited Rust's *Remains*, see n. 41) to the "Annotations", as appears from Hallywell's letter to More of 14 May 1683: "... I thank you for giving me notice of the Annotations upon Lux Orientalis, the Author of which seems to be of a very gay, pleasant and airy temper, and as he says of himselfe a Person not unexercised in those speculations": *Christ's College*, Cambridge, MS 21, f. 33. Probably this sentence contains a hidden compliment to More, though of course it is also possible that Hallywell really was unaware of the identity of the author.
and that there was a constant tradition thereof; which he said in some sense
was also true concerning the Trinity, but that more obscure. But this of Pre-
extistence is manifest up and down in the Writings of that very ancient and
learned Jew Philo Judaeus, as also something toward a Trinity, if I remember
right".3

Apart from this passage, nothing is known about a possible personal
contact between Menasseh and More – but from the "Annotations" we
know that More, like his friend and fellow Platonist Ralph Cudworth4, met Menasseh
during the latter’s stay in London. That at this meeting
Menasseh and More discussed the idea of pre-existence in a spirit of mutu-
lar understanding is quite feasible, as they had a common interest in this
matter, which resulted from partly similar motives.

Menasseh mentions the idea in passing in his Conciliador (1632), when in
a passage on Gen. 1:26 ("...and God said: let us make men"), he referred
to a rabbinic opinion, to be found in Bereshi Rabbah (cap. 3)5, that God had
consulted with the souls before uniting them with a body, because he did
not want to join them with matter against their will. In this context he
remarks that according to most of the Hebrews the souls had been created
on the first day6.

Starting from this belief, Menasseh gives a broad exposition of the idea
of pre-existence in his De Creatione Problemata XXX (1635)7. In his answer to
the question (Probl. XV) whether the souls have been created in the begin-
n ing of the world or together with the body, he states again that according
to all Hebrews the souls of men were created before the body. This opinion
was also held by Hermes Trismegistos, Pythagoras, Plato and several oth-
ers from the gentiles; Menasseh points out that it had certainly reached
them from the Hebrews and that, apart from all other testimonies, it can
very well be proved from some places of Holy Scripture.

The first text quoted by Menasseh is Deut. 29:14, 15, of which he gives
the following translation: "Neque vobiscum solis ego pango foedus meum . . . sed cum eo qui adstat hic nobiscum hodie . . . et cum illo qui non est
hic nobiscum hodie". He adds a commentary of the "ancients", a quotation from Tanhuma 8: "All the souls which existed from Adam onward, and
which will exist until the end of the world, all these were created in the six

3 Two choice and useful Treatises, "Annotations", p. 27.
4 See: David S. Katz, Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England 1603-1655 (Ox-
5 An old midrash on Genesis: Encyclopaedia Judaica 7, c. 399 ff.
6 I used the Latin ed. of 1633, Conciliator, sive De convenientia Locorum S. Scripturae, quae
pugnare inter se videntur . . . (Francofurti [?], 1633), p. 12.
7 De Creatione Problemata XXX . . . (Amstelodami, 1635), pp. 61-68 (Probl. XV), 68-69
(Probl. XVI).
8 A midrash on the Pentateuch: Encyclopaedia Judaica 15, c. 794 f.