The History of Gentile Wisdom
According to R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin

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In the late hasidic system of R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin the great Lurianic drama of cosmic catastrophe and slow rebuilding takes on a decided epistemologic cast. The niggagot qedoshot, the “holy sparks” are, to mix a metaphor, nuggets of true wisdom, exiled within the essential falsehood of non-Torah wisdom. Vivified by them, however, this foreign wisdom takes on a life of its own and becomes the subject of R. Zadok’s historiosophy. It is that historiosophy which is the subject of the following remarks.

R. Zadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz (1823–1900) was born to a rabbinic/mitnagdic family in Latvia; a prodigy, he reportedly began the study of Talmud at age three-and-a-half, and completed it for the first time at eight. As a young man he became a hasid, and a follower, of R. Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica, the “Izhbitzer,” one of whose successors he eventually became. He was incredibly prolific, and many of his works, none of which was published in his lifetime, were presumably lost in the destruction of the Lublin ghetto, though some seem to have been

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saved and brought to Tel Aviv; little of this latter treasure has been published. What remains, though, runs to thousands of closely-printed pages in a terse, elliptical style, and permits a fair reconstruction of much of his thought, for most periods of his life, including his prehasidic, early hasidic, and late work. The major gap in documentation seems to be for the two decades before he become Rebbe.

His teachings have had a great impact on a number of twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, among them the late R. Eliyahu Desser, R. Yitzhak Hutner and R. Gedalah Shorr, but systematic research and analysis of his thought is in its infancy.

The strongly historiographic bent of R. Zadok’s thought has often been remarked. The observation is true as far as it goes, but it must be emphasized that to R. Zadok, the only history worth tracing is that of the rise and diffusion of knowledge. Elsewhere I have delineated R. Zadok’s view of the history of Halakhah, or, more precisely, the Oral Torah, which is a product of the intellection of the sages of Israel, the successor to the Written Torah of the First Temple period. If the dominant figure of the First Temple period was the prophet, that of the Second was the sage. The “mirror image” of this process also occupied R. Zadok a great deal, though full scale treatments of it are scarce. In this paper, I propose to examine his history of the rise of human knowledge (“the wisdom of the Nations”).

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1 According to Prof. S.Y. Leiman; Prof. Simcha Fishbane has succeeded in obtaining from the Kott family a xerox of part of the manuscript of Zidqat ha-Zaddiq used in preparing the “Alef” edition (see next note); my thanks to all concerned. Despite various attempts, no more material has come to light.


This list is not at all exhaustive, but merely records essential bibliographical information on the works cited below. For precision, references are to the Arabic numbered page and column rather than the more usual Hebrew number and obverse/reverse.

4 For R. Hutner, see my “History,” (see below, n. 5) pp. 20–22. For R. Shorr, see the posthumously published Or Gedaliahu: Sihat w-Ma’amurim ‘al Mo’adim, Brooklyn, 1981, esp. the talks on Hannukah. For R. Desser, see Mikhtav me-Filzohn, vol. 3, Brav Brak: Committee for the Publication of the Writings of E. L. Desser, 1964, pp. 277–278. For the question of the relationship of R. Zadok’s thought with that of R.A.I. Kook, see I. Hadari, “Sherei Kohanim Gedolim” (see n. 5).