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Elke Morlok. *Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's Hermeneutics.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011. xiii + 360 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-16-150203-3.

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Textuality in Medieval Kabbalah

Joseph Gikatilla was one of the most important kabbalists of the late thirteenth century. Living and writing in Castile, he was a central figure in an important moment in the history of Jewish mysticism–indeed, in the history of Judaism–during which kabbalistic literature flourished. Many important texts were composed during this period, including the literary units that came to be known as the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, on which Gikatillaâs writings had an important influence. Renaissance thinkers and Christian kabbalists made ample use of Gikatillaâs works, even translating some of them into Latin. Surprisingly, until now there has been no monograph dedicated to the study of this important kabbalist and his works. Elke Morlokâs *Rabbi Joseph Gikatillaâs Hermeneutics* admirably fills this lacuna, bringing a much-needed contribution to the field.

Drawing on the methodologies of Jacques LeGoff, Ioan Couliano, and Rudolf Bultmann, among others, Morlok provides a wide ranging and comprehensive examination of Gikatillaâs thought and hermeneutics in relation to Neoplatonic, Pythagorean, and Gnostic texts, as well as the full spectrum of Jewish and medieval kabbalistic sources. By drawing comparisons between âtextual strategiesâ and âlinguistic techniquesâ found in multiple corpora of literature, Morlok brings an impressive array of sources into conversation in order to tease out the hermeneutical principles at work in Gikatillaâs many compositions. Morlok does not resort to a reductive argument of simple âinfluenceâ to explain Gikatillaâs thought, but instead makes the intriguing argument that, âin this period of Jewish mysticism, we observe a significant interaction between textual corpora from different religious, cultural and philosophical backgrounds–a kind of literary intercorporeality. My working hypothesis is that creative cultural ambiances produce similar phenomena even when there is no positive evidence of direct borrowing by the minority culture from the dominant oneâ (p. 2).

For example, Morlok notes the similarities between Gikatillaâs ideas about divine names and Neoplatonic sources, including those found in Pseudo-Dionysius and reports of such traditions by Origen. Morlok also ex-

plores the similarities between Gikatillaâs discussions of *tzerufei âotiyyot*, or letter permutation, and Pythagorean thought. For Gikatilla as well as a number of other medieval kabbalists, notably, Abraham Abulafia, this linguistic aspect is an important element of their understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine, since âthe permutation of the letters is the medium between the divine and the human energy as exercised in Gikatillaâs linguistic magicâ (p. 104). Morlok also considers the Gnostic and Pythagorean influences on the idea of the primordial âpointâ or *niqqud*, which plays an important role in Gikatillaâs thought and medieval Kabbalah more broadly (pp. 83-84). Morlok points out that this intellectual cross-fertilization helps to âexplain Gikatillaâs early, smooth absorption into Christian kabbalah in the 15th century … by such Christian thinkers of the Renaissance as Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlinâ (p. 11). The extended discussion of the role of divine names in Gikatillaâs thought is particularly helpful, noting that the âdeep interest in the divine names by Spanish kabbalists such as Gikatilla may be regarded as a âreturnâ to the Greek sources and traditions of âname theologyâ as exemplified in the writings of Neoplatonic authors such as Iamblicus, Proclus and Nicomachus on the one hand, and ancient Jewish traditions on the otherâ (pp. 55-56). By reading Gikatillaâs works in light of these other bodies of literature in addition to Jewish sources, Morlok provides a helpful framework both for assessing Gikatillaâs hermeneutics and for understanding the positive reception that Gikatillaâs writings enjoyed in the Italian Renaissance.

In her extensive discussion of Gikatillaâs approach to unlocking the meaning of the biblical text, Morlok argues that, for Gikatilla, âthe Torah is described as a map of signs representing the whole spectrum of beingâ (p. 136). The aim of biblical exegesis for Gikatilla was to uncover the relationship between the text and the sefirotic realm. In this sense, contra the position adopted by Gershom Scholem, Morlok argues that for Gikatilla, âthe symbol is the means of explaining the correspondence between the biblical words and the sefirot and not an expression of an ineffable truthâ (p. 19). The discussion of Gikatillaâs approach to symbolism leads to important observations regarding medieval kabbalistic linguistic theory and hermeneutics in relation to other schools of thought. For example, Morlok points out that âthe difference between the âallegoryâ of the philosophers and the symbolic nature of the theosophic kabbalah lies in the reduction of the whole Torah to the divine names and their availability for magical use by the mystic. The divine names represent the hidden layer of the Torah and the pure word can change natureâ (p. 70). In Gikatillaâs later writings, most notable, *Shaâarei Orah*, he famously described the text of the Torah as literally a *textus*, a fabric woven from the names of God. Morlok takes this notion and uses it to understand Gikatillaâs own works, noting that âin his later writings the metaphor of the text as a woven structure … allows for an âintegrative hermeneutics,â the creation of a new narrative within his theosophic system.â This tendency to understand the text as an incorporation of multiple strands into a unified system lends itself to âan inherent openness towards other philosophical and theological schools,â thereby paving the way, Morlok suggests, for the embrace of Gikatillaâs works by both Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers in subsequent periods (p. 310).

Through an analysis of Gikatillaâs work in conversation with other schools of thought, Morlokâs book makes an important and much-needed contribution to multiple disciplines, bringing medieval Kabbalah into conversation with the study of Western Esotericism, Renaissance philosophy, and even current literary theory. In her discussion of possible directions for further research, Morlok observes that it would be fruitful to âsearch for kabbalistic âinfiltrationâ into Western thought from the Renaissance on, which in modern days are not categorized as specifically âkabbalistic,â but have been absorbed into modern theories of language. In view of Gikatillaâs early incorporation into the thinking of such writers as Pico and Reuchlin, it is possible that his ideas may have had a far greater impact on modern thought than may hitherto have been assumedâ (p. 312). Recent scholarship on Kabbalah has sought to situate Jewish mystical discourse within the broader intellectual history of the West and the tradition of esotericism that has played an underappreciated role in shaping Western culture and giving rise to new forms of thought. *Rabbi Joseph Gikatillaâs Hermeneutics* brings a well-documented and fresh analysis of these questions in relation to medieval Kabbalah. The extensive bibliography and index make the volume user friendly, and the inclusion of all of the Hebrew passages in their original in an appendix is of particular value for more specialized scholars.

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