

***Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, by Allison P. Coudert. International Archives of the History of Philosophy. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995. 218pp.**

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Anyone interested in Leibniz, the Kabbalah, the Cambridge Platonists, Gnosticism, Platonism, or seventeenth-century metaphysics will want to read Allison P. Coudert's *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*. Coudert argues that core features of Leibniz's mature philosophy were directly influenced by the Kabbalah in general and Francis Mercury van Helmont's (mostly) Lurianic Kabbalah in particular. This is a provocative thesis to which Coudert brings an impressive amount of scholarly detective work. Her argument in brief goes as follows: (1) there are important differences between the philosophy of Leibniz's middle period and that of the late; (2) some of the most distinctive features of the late philosophy are very similar to key aspects of the Lurianic Kabbalism of van Helmont, with whose works and ideas Leibniz became increasingly familiar after 1687; (3) therefore, Leibniz's late philosophy was significantly influenced by the thought of van Helmont.

Coudert's argument for premise (2) is the most impressive part of her book and probably the part that will be of greatest interest to scholars. She presents a very helpful sketch of the Kabbalah and especially Lurianic Kabbalah. She proves that Leibniz and van Helmont had a more significant relation than has previously been recognized and she argues convincingly that, among the many intellectuals orbiting around Henry More, it was probably van Helmont who had the greatest influence on Leibniz. In her argument for premise (1), Coudert's discussion of the differences between Leibniz's middle and late philosophy is not always as perspicuous as it might be, but she does show some obvious similarities between the Kabbalism of van Helmont and the late philosophy of Leibniz. Thus, Coudert convincingly argues for a weak version of her conclusion, viz., that van Helmont had some influence on Leibniz's later development.

However, as every reader of this *Review* knows, the lines of Leibniz's thought are enormously difficult to discern and the sources of them even more so. Coudert is admirably correct in her recognition of both the Gnostic and Kabbalistic elements in Leibniz's thought. Scholars have ignored Leibniz's indebtedness to these intellectual traditions for much too long. But Leibniz drank from these fountains long before he studied the Kabbalism and Gnosticism of van Helmont. It was as a student in Leipzig (1661-64) that Leibniz first imbibed the strange concoction of Platonism, Kabbalism, and Gnosticism brewed by so many philosophers (especially in Protestant Germany) in the seventeenth century. Throughout the 1660s and 1670s Leibniz studied the works of a number of his contemporaries whose texts are soaked in this

brew (e.g. Johann Adam Scherzer and Johann Henrich Alsted). It is safe to say that many of the philosophers who most interested the young Leibniz were prepared to combine Gnostic and Kabbalistic doctrines with their own version of Platonism. In other words, Leibniz's use of Platonic and Kabbalistic teachings reaches back to his youth and is very much overdetermined. But despite the fact that many of the features of Leibniz's late Platonism can be found in his early work (see, e.g., the theological essays of the late 1660s and the *De summa rerum* notes of 1676), others cannot. That van Helmont may have been the source of these late revisions in Leibniz's thought is enormously interesting. For those of us foolhardy enough to want to trace the development of Leibniz's thought, Allison Coudert's book offers a tantalizing piece of the story.