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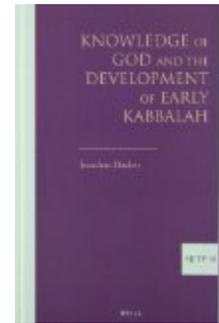
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Dauber. *Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah*. Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy Series. Leiden: Brill, 2012. 275 pp. \$156.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-23426-0.

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The Philosophical Ethos of the Early Kabbalists

Jonathan Dauber's book *Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah* is an excellent example of how changing the questions scholars ask of their material can lead to new and intriguing answers. In this work, Dauber investigates early Kabbalah's literary emergence in thirteenth-century Languedoc and Catalonia as it relates to newly available philosophical materials in the Kabbalists' cultural environment. The book's central claim is that although previous scholarship has revealed that the medieval kabbalistic and philosophical worldviews were quite different, both Kabbalists and philosophers shared a common ethos: the active investigation of God as a central religious value. (Dauber's definitions of "worldview" and "ethos" are drawn from anthropologist Clifford Geertz.) Furthermore, Dauber demonstrates that the two groups' embrace of this ethos represents a dramatic departure from traditional rabbinic culture that ultimately resulted in the production of a new kind of Jewish intellectual. This shift in focus from worldview to ethos allows Dauber to reveal fresh insights into classic texts.

In chapter 1, Dauber explores innovation and creativity among the early Kabbalists of Isaac the Blind's circle, explaining that their "most prevalent type of innovation ... stems from the readiness of all the members of the circle to bring their received traditions into conversation with other forms of discourse" (p. 29). These other, non-kabbalistic forms of discourse include both Neoplatonic and Maimonidean philosophy, as well as

midrashic rabbinic materials that the Kabbalists reinterpreted for their own purposes. Dauber demonstrates that the Kabbalists of Isaac the Blind's group employed all these source materials as part of their new ethos of investigating God. The main text examined in this chapter is Ezra of Gerona's famous *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, which Dauber reveals as a creative investigative work.

Chapter 2 looks at how philosophical literature available to the early Kabbalists interpreted the biblical proof texts Deuteronomy 4:39, Jeremiah 9:22-23, and 1 Chronicles 28:9 to support the ethos of investigating God. Dauber finds that these verses commonly were used to support the four main values that characterize the ethos of divine investigation, which he summarizes as investigating God as a centrally important religious value, committing to active investigation, insisting on intellectual effort, and incorporating epistemological analysis. This chapter also includes fascinating looks at the philosophers' characterization of investigating God as an halakhic obligation and at their depiction of the relationship between knowing and loving God. Among Dauber's source texts for this chapter are works by Maimonides, Judah ibn Tibbon, Abraham bar Hiyya, Bahya ibn Pakuda, and others.

Chapter 3 is devoted to an explanation of rabbinic literature, which Dauber claims in general does not reflect the philosophical ethos or place investigating God

at the center of religious life. Returning to the biblical proof texts from the previous chapter, he shows how they were employed in rabbinic writings to stress acceptance of divine truth, rather than intellectual investigation. Dauber also demonstrates how the Kabbalists of Isaac the Blind's circle reinterpreted rabbinic literature to promote their investigative ethos. This chapter is something of a catchall, but it is a useful one, since Dauber uses it to characterize other intellectual trends in the Kabbalists' milieu. He examines Hekhalot literature and finds it revelatory, rather than investigative, while describing medieval German Pietism as a parallel phenomenon to early Kabbalah that also incorporates the philosophic ethos. In this chapter, Dauber additionally challenges prior scholarship by contending that the Kabbalists of Isaac the Blind's circle were not the intellectual successors of Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari*, a notably anti-philosophical work, but rather that their ethos was more closely akin to the philosophers' investigative mind-set.

In chapter 4, Dauber addresses the manner in which the early Kabbalists associated with Isaac the Blind, including Abraham ben David, Ezra of Gerona, Azriel of Gerona, and Asher ben David, incorporated the philosophical ethos' core values of investigating God into their writings. In many ways, this is the book's keystone chapter, since in it Dauber provides his strongest evidence for the argument that he has so carefully constructed. While presenting a great number of examples that demonstrate these Kabbalists' incorporation of the philosophical ethos, Dauber is careful not to conflate the Kabbalists' and philosophers' worldviews. For example, Dauber provides a fascinating discussion of how Ezra of Gerona incorporated the philosophical ethos into his writings as a precondition for kabbalistic theurgy, demonstrating that Ezra's insistence on divine investigation was in agreement with Maimonides's, though the two writers' worldviews were quite different. Dauber explains, "the first Kabbalists lived their life as Kabbalists under the rubric of the philosophic ethos. From the perspective of this ethos, the differences between various philosophic schools and the first Kabbalists are insignificant" (p. 188). He ends the chapter by stressing that both groups, in adopting this ethos, made the same "sharp break" with previous rabbinic tradition (p. 189).

The book's final two chapters refine and extend Dauber's argument. Chapter 5 identifies the philosophi-

cal ethos' influence on the latest layer of *Sefer ha-Bahir*, which was incorporated into this complex work in late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century Languedoc and Catalonia. The Bahir's earlier layers, however, do not manifest the investigative impulse, furnishing further proof for Dauber's claims of a new intellectual order's emergence during the early kabbalistic period. Chapter 6 highlights Isaac the Blind's circle's embrace of the philosophical ethos by revealing that their contemporary Nahmanides was profoundly ambivalent toward investigating God. Dauber understands Nahmanides to be the intellectual inheritor of rabbinic ideals of knowing God, which he explains emphasize a more passive acceptance of God and divine providence. In this sense, he demonstrates that Nahmanides was also an inheritor of ha-Levi's tradition.

Dauber concludes his volume by observing that the Kabbalists of Isaac the Blind's Circle "are notable for the fact that their scholarship focused entirely on matters of Kabbalah and not on the traditional fields of Talmud and Jewish law" (p. 246). He notes that this type of scholarship provides yet another area in which the early Kabbalists mirror the philosophers, "who devoted their primary scholarly efforts to the study and propagation of philosophy" (p. 247). In this sense, Dauber observes, the philosophic ethos produced not only a new kind of Kabbalah but also a new kind of Kabbalist.

This book is well written and absorbing. Dauber's argument is clear and carefully laid out, with each chapter building on the next in logical order—a stylistic trait that helps to make his very persuasive case. The work lays the foundation for an important shift in scholarly views of the relationship between Kabbalah and philosophy in the cultural milieu of thirteenth-century Languedoc and Catalonia. The only aspect of the book that occasionally distracts from its quality is an excessive signposting of the argument, both between and within the volume's chapters. However, it is difficult to complain about someone making their point *too* clearly, and many readers will find this signposting a benefit rather than a distraction. All in all, *Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah* provides a welcome contribution to the field of early kabbalistic studies. It is grounded in a productive, refreshing methodology that makes it a "must read" volume for those interested in both medieval Jewish philosophy and early Kabbalah.

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