

Kohoutová, Kamila, Rabi Jehuda Liva ben Becal'el a kniha Zohar

opponentský posudek

doc. Tamás Visi, MA, Ph. D. (Centrum judaistických studií, FF UPOL)

I recommend accepting this work as a doctoral dissertation in Jewish studies, despite the fact that I see very serious problems with it. The problems can be summarized thus:

(1) The researches presented in the text of the dissertation do not seem to follow a convincing strategy or a well-designed project. It is declared on p. 29 that one of the purposes of the dissertation is to address the question whether Maharal was a kabbalist. One would expect that the author defines what a kabbalist is, attempts to determine the basic criteria that make someone a kabbalist and then proceeds to examine whether Maharal met any of those criteria. Nothing of the sort is done in the dissertation. Not even a reflection on the various types of Kabbalah (eg. theurgic kabbalah, prophetic / exstatic kabbalah, practical kabbalah) which has been identified by Gershom Scholem, Moshe Idel and others, is offered. If academic researches on Kabbalah are taken into consideration – and they *should be* taken consideration in a doctoral dissertation! - then the question “whether Maharal was a kabbalist” should be broken down into at least three subquestions: (a) was Maharal a follower of theurgic Kabbalah? (b) was Maharal a follower of prophetic Kabbalah? (c) did he ever attempted to do practical Kabbalah? I cannot identify any serious attempt in this dissertation to approach the problem in systematic manner. One cannot but wonder whether the Candidate received sufficient instruction in research methodologies.

(2) A significant part of thesis exhibits a very low degree of originality. Topics that have been analyzed by several scholars are discussed again without any significant innovation. A doctoral dissertation should explore a primary source material in an original way, rather than summarizing what others wrote about it. For example, in the chapter about the issue of wine consumption (pp. 77-110), I was unable to discover any significant new idea. I do not deny that the Candidate may have original ideas about this topic – but these ideas, if they exist, are not expressed with sufficient clarity in the text of the dissertation. The author should have made it clear in what way her research differs from earlier researches and in what way her results increase our knowledge of the subject matter. The same can be said about chapter 5 (pp. 54-58) and chapter 6 (pp. 59-76).

(3) The dissertation often describes various features of Maharal’s thought but seldom attempts to investigate the reasons or causes behind the features. For example, Maharal struggled against the consumption of non-Jewish wine. Why? His contemporary, Moses Isserles had a much more tolerant attitude towards this issue – this is registered correctly in the thesis. So why did these two eminent rabbis differ so much in this important question? Similar questions can be asked about the other topics covered in the dissertation. The opinion of Maharal is registered correctly but not much work is done to understand the underlying reasons and causes and thus, the deep structures of Maharal’s intellectual world.

(4) Maharal’s thought is contextualized to an insufficient degree and relevant researches and publications are not taken into consideration. For example, the chapter on “masturbation” does not take into consideration important publications on the history of sexuality in the early modern period, not even such a classic as Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, nor important studies on early modern Kabbalah and sexuality by Moshe Idel, Lawrence Fine, Shaul Magid, and others. The author could have realized that Onan’s sin in the Bible was not masturbation at all (it was *coitus interruptus*, and it was considered sinful because Onan refused to procreate children with Tamar – this is, at least, the *pehsat* of the biblical text), and “wasting semen” in rabbinic literature is a much broader category than masturbation (it includes, eg. anal intercourse). On the other hand, it is true

that masturbation became an important category during the early modern period, and the story of Onan served as a proof-text for both Christian and Jewish moralists to support the idea that it was sinful. How masturbation became an important topic in early modern discourses on sexuality has been discussed by Foucault in his aforementioned work, and others have written about it in the Jewish context too (see eg. L. Fine's monograph on Isaac Luria). It is a major shortcoming of this dissertation that these important researches have been disregarded and thus the early modern worries about masturbation and the history of the concept are not taken into due consideration when the relevant texts by Maharal are analyzed. Similarly, Jacob Katz' *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, another classic, is disregarded too, although it would be quite essential for understanding the social context of Maharal's ideas concerning the relationship between Jews and non-Jews, which is quite relevant for chapter 7. Another important monograph ignored is Moshe Idel's *Absorbing Perfections* (2001), which is an indispensable study on the various forms and features of kabbalistic hermeneutics, and as such it would have been essential to utilize it in chapters 6 and 9. Idel's work offers useful conceptual tools, such "arcanization" and "intercorporal hermeneutics" which would have helped the author to make more sense of Maharal's hermeneutic ideas. In sum, one cannot but have the impression that the Candidate has not received sufficiently deep training in early modern Jewish intellectual history.

(5) The dissertation fails to address a topic of key importance: the reception and development of Kabbalah and kabbalistic literature in Central and Eastern Europe during late medieval and early modern times. Gershom Scholem in his classic monograph on Shabbati Tzvi outlined the basic characteristic of the Polish reception of Kabbalah. Although Scholem's outline includes authors who lived after Maharal's time too, his discussion covers, for example, Moshe Isserles, who was an elder contemporary of Maharal, and in any case, Scholem's analysis is highly relevant for understanding what Kabbalah in 16th-17th century Central Europe was. Unfortunately, Scholem's aforementioned book is not utilized in the dissertation at all. Since the time of Gershom Scholem several interesting studies have been published about the reception of philosophical and kabbalistic ideas in Central Europe. One must mention Jacob Elbaum's monumental book on Ashkenazi reception of ideas, including kabbalistic ideas, from Italy and the Mid East during the 16th-17th centuries. Also, the seminal paper of Ephraim Kupfer "on the cultural portrait of Ashkenazi Jews" in *Tarbiz* 1972, Joseph Davis, "Philosophy, Dogma, and Exegesis in medieval Ashkenaz" (*AJS Review* 1993), several papers by Yisrael Yuval on Yomtov Lippmann Muehlhausen and other late medieval Ashkenazi intellectuals who experimented with kabbalistic ideas and more recent studies by Milan Žonca about a circle of philosophers and kabbalists in late medieval Prague. None of the aforementioned studies are taken into consideration. As a consequence, the thought of Maharal is analyzed without due attention paid to its immediate historical context.

(6) On pp. 48-52 we do find a piece of original research: the author compares a quotation from the Zohar in a work by Maharal to two different editions of the Zohar, and attempts to decide which edition was used by Maharal. This is a piece of genuine contribution to Jewish studies in this dissertation. Unfortunately, only one passage of the Zohar is analyzed this way; although the author identifies several other quotations from the Zohar in the works of Maharal, no attempt is made to carry out a similar comparison and thus, this project is not pursued to the end. It is a pity; this could have been an important and original contribution, which other scholars could have genuinely appreciated (even if the question turns out to be unanswerable).

For the reasons stated above I do not recommend giving a good grade for this dissertation.

Having stated all these serious problems with this dissertation I am still in favor of accepting it as a doctoral dissertation in Jewish Studies. There are two reasons for doing so. First, on pp. 47-53, and 111-139 we do find serious attempts at original analysis of primary sources and topics which have received little attention so far. Despite the weaknesses mentioned above the Candidate proves that

she is capable of performing complex analysis of difficult primary sources in an independent and original manner. And although her contribution is far from being adequate (eg. it would not be accepted by a peer-reviewed journal in the present form) it is, at least, a first step. I am confident that the Candidate is capable to develop these chapters into a publishable work and would like to encourage her doing so – after reading the secondary literature mentioned above and keeping in mind the critical points above. Second, the dissertation documents enormous efforts on the part of the Candidate, and the work invested into this dissertation should be acknowledged and appreciated.

For the reasons stated above I recommend accepting this work as doctoral dissertation in Jewish Studies.

Tamás Visi

Brno 2019-08-25