

ABSTRACT

MAIMON THE KABBALIST

Gideon Freudenthal

The autobiography of Salomon Maimon (1753-1800) recounts his life as a process of self-improvement: beginning as a kabbalist, he develops into a rationalist philosopher. He conceives this as a path from superstition to enlightenment and science. A collection of Maimon's early kabbalistic manuscripts has reached us and enables us to compare this autobiographical report to the actual content of his juvenile manuscripts. The most important of these is *Ma'aseh Livnat ha-Sapir* (מעשה לבנת הספיר), *The Account of the Whiteness of Sapphire*, published here for the first time.

In his autobiography, Maimon ascribes a naive belief in practical Kabbalah and theurgy to his younger self and also a critique of Kabbalah in Maimonides' spirit. A study of *Ma'aseh Livnat ha-Sapir* shows that the alleged early critique of kabbalistic notions is a projection onto the past. In fact, the rationalistic critique voiced in *Ma'aseh Livnat ha-Sapir* does not go beyond reservations vis-à-vis some daring images of Lurianic Kabbalah and a preference for Cordovero. It certainly does not adopt Maimonides' rationalism. Moreover, the essay also extensively and favorably discusses astral magic, while Maimon does not at all mention this topic in his autobiography.

Maimon's opposing accounts of the place of Kabbalah in his intellectual life satisfy two opposing interests: On the one hand the wish to deepen the gap between his former and his present self, and thus to magnify the development he experienced; and on the other hand the wish to produce a continuous narrative on which his self-identity depends. Maimon explicitly names these two concerns in the introduction to the second volume of his autobiography.

Later in life, Maimon returned to some themes of his early years. However, he now formulates them on the basis of modern science rather than on Kabbalah. Symbols are now understood as conventional signifiers rather than as naturally and causally connected to their referents. The development from Kabbalah to Enlightenment retains some basic kabbalistic (or rather: Neoplatonist) ideas and some of its terms, but the concepts have assimilated scientific and not mythical content and therefore significantly changed. He now understands theory as a hypothesis whose validity depends on whether it successfully unifies and explicates the bodies of knowledge subsumed under it.