

## The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury Van Helmont (1614-1698)

"If he had lived among the Greeks, he would now be numbered among the stars." So wrote Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in his epitaph for Francis Mercury van Helmont. Leibniz was not the only contemporary to admire and respect van Helmont, but although famous in his own day, he has been virtually ignored by modern historians. Yet his views influenced Leibniz, contributed to the development of modern science, and fostered the kind of ecumenicalism that made the concept of toleration conceivable. The progressive nature of van Helmont's thought was based on his deep commitment to the esoteric doctrines of the Lurianic Kabbalah. With his friend Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, van Helmont edited the *Kabbala Denudata* (1677-1684), the largest collection of Lurianic Kabbalistic texts available to Christians up to that time. Because the subject matter of this work appears so difficult and arcane, it has never been appreciated as a significant text for understanding the emergence of modern thought. However, one can find in it the basis for the faith in science, the belief in progress, and the pluralism characteristic of later western thought. The Lurianic Kabbalah thus deserves a place it has never received in histories of western scientific and cultural developments. Although van Helmont's efforts contributed to the development of religious toleration, his experience as a prisoner of the Inquisition accused of "Judaising" reveals the problematic relations between Christians and Jews during the early-modern period. New Inquisitional documents relating to van Helmont's imprisonment will be discussed to illustrate the difficulties faced by anyone advocating philo-semitism and toleration at the time.

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