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Prisca sapientia is the notion of a pristine hoary wisdom that is common to all of humankind. According to this concept, such wisdom has been passed down from generation to generation in an unbroken chain and is still known to an esoteric few. The concept of prisca sapientia is itself quite old, with roots in late antiquity with the early Church fathers, and was newly adopted and brought to the fore in the Italian Renaissance by the likes of Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Yehudah Abravanel, better known in the history of Renaissance literature as Leone Ebreo, has often been held up as a paradigmatic Jewish Renaissance proponent of the concept. Indeed,

1 For more on this concept (cast as “philosophia perennis”), see W. Schmidt Biggemann, Philosophia Perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought, Springer, Dordrecht 2004, especially pp. xi-ii-xv. Whereas Ficino and Pico generally utilize the terms “prisca theologia” and “prisca philosophia,” I prefer here to utilize the term “prisca sapientia” in order to highlight the centrality of the notion of wisdom within Leone Ebreo’s thought.

his magnum opus, the *Dialoghi d’amore*, is shot through with references to “gli antichi,” i.e., “the ancients,” and subjects such as Greek mythology and the antiquity of Mosaic theology even occupy a pride of place\(^3\). But what Leone precisely means by “the ancients” is not always entirely clear, and the meaning has been left to interpretation since the very publication of the *Dialoghi* in 1535. This paper will hash out and critique some of those interpretations, which were already proposed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and which have been revived in modern scholarship on Leone. By examining the text of the *Dialoghi* and the textual traditions that lay behind them, it will then attempt to uncover a more tangible understanding of the *prisca sapientia* tradition as expressed in the thought of Leone Ebreo.

In a manner that is hyperliterally related to the notion of *prisca sapientia* in that it concerns the beginning of wisdom itself, Leone’s protagonist Filone issues a critique of Aristotle’s understanding and a nod of support for Plato. In the third dialogue he states:

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Aristotle, whose view into abstract things was somewhat more short-sighted, not having the testimony of our ancient theologians as Plato did, denied that hidden territory that he could not see. He attained supreme wisdom, first beauty, which satiated his intellect, and without seeing anything else, he affirmed that this was the first incorporeal beginning of all things. But Plato, having learned from the elders in Egypt, could sense other things beyond, even if he was not able to see the hidden beginning of supreme wisdom or first beauty; and he made the latter into the second beginning of the universe, dependent on the supreme God, the first beginning of all things⁴.

An exploration of the notions of wisdom and beauty explicated here would take us too far afield, and I have treated that topic elsewhere⁵. What is important for our purposes here is the question that arises concerning the origin and transmission of pristine wisdom: Who were the “ancient theologians,” or “elders,” whom Plato purportedly encountered in Egypt? One intriguing answer recently proposed by Andrew Gluck in his recent extensive book on Leone is that this is a reference to the inheritors of the teachings of the purported Egyptian prophet Hermes Trismegistus⁶. Gluck writes: “Does esoteric religious knowledge come out of Egypt, the place that in Jew-

⁴ The translation here is mine, from Leone Ebreo (Yehudah Abravanel), Dialoghi d’amore, ed. G Manuppella, Instituto Nacional de Investigação Científica, Lisboa 1983 [hereafter: Dialoghi], I, p. 302: “Aristotle, la cui vista ne le cose astratte fu alquanto più corta, non avendo la mostrazione de li nostri teologi antichi come Platone, negò quello ascoso che non ha possuto vedere, e gionse a la somma sapienzia, prima bellezza, de la quale il suo intelletto saziato, senza vedere più oltre, affermò che quella fusse il primo principio incorporeo di tutte le cose. Ma Platone, avendo da li vecchi in Egitto imparato, poté più oltre sentire, se ben non valse a vedere l’ascoso principio de la somma sapienzia o prima bellezza, e fece quella secondo principio de l’universo, dependente dal sommo Dio, primo principio di tutte le cose.”


ish tradition was a cesspool of spiritual impurity? It seems obvious to me that Abrabanel [i.e., Leone – B.O.] is referring here to Hermetic teachings, which were indeed widely believed to have come from Egypt". Indeed, with the “elders in Egypt” as a foil for Aristotle in Leone’s passage, we should certainly keep in mind the teaching of Fabrizio Lelli that through the middle ages and into the Renaissance, “for Jews, Hermetism was an alternative to Aristotelianism.” Lelli goes on to state that for Jews, Hermetism was “the likeliest prospect, in fact, for integrating an alien system into their religion”.

Perhaps Leone was thinking along those lines in opposing Aristotelianism to the Egyptian wisdom gleaned by Plato.

Such a Hermetic reading of the Dialoghi is not entirely new, and in fact seems to be the position held by Mariano Lenzi, who wrote the opening dedication to the very first published edition in 1535. There Lenzi writes to a certain Aurelia Petrucci:

It was a very ancient custom amongst the scribes of the most holy books of Egypt to dedicate their books to Mercury, because they considered all arts, all sciences, and all beautiful things to have been founded by Mercury. And thus, as the inventor of everything, they agreed amongst themselves to give thanks to him for all that man had come to learn and know. For this reason, Pythagoras and Plato and many other great philosophers went to Egypt to study philosophy, and for the most part, they learned from the columns of Mercury, which were full of wisdom and learning.

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7 Ibid., p. 627.
9 Translation here is mine, from Dialoghi, Dedication: “Fu antichissima usanza de gli scrittori di Egitto i santissimi libri da loro scritti indirizzare a Mercurio, perciò che essi stimavano che tutte l’arti, tutte le scienze, tutte le belle cose fussero state da Mercurio ritrovate, e ch’a lui, come ad inventore d’ogni cosa, si convenisse render grazia di ciò che l’uomo imparava o sapeva. E per questo Pitagora e Platone e molti altri gran filosofi andarono per imparar filosofia in Egitto, e per lo più l’appresero da
It should be noted here that Mercury is the Romanized form of Hermes and that the Egyptian Mercury alluded to here is clearly a reference to Hermes Trismegistus. Moreover, Lenzi’s dedication indeed seems to be associated with Leone’s own claim, cited above, that Plato “learned from the elders in Egypt.” It is thus reasonable to surmise that Hermetism may have been at the heart of Lenzi’s own reading and understanding of the Dialoghi.

Nevertheless, the claim that Hermetism was at the heart of Leone’s implications, while intriguing, is far from definitively compelling. First, neither Hermes nor the Corpus Hermeticum makes any appearance anywhere throughout the Dialoghi, and while there is mention of Mercury, it is always within the context of either the zodiac or the Greek gods. If Leone indeed held that Plato drew his wisdom from the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, one would expect a greater position of prominence. Second, Leone’s Filone is explicitly drawing a parallel in the above passage (regarding the elders in Egypt) between Plato’s ideas of hidden and manifest beginnings and what he calls “Mosaic theology;” Sophia then immediately inquires as to how “Moses and the other holy prophets signified this platonic truth.”

Such would be a rather strange dialogue had Leone’s goal here been to elevate Hermes, and not Moses, to a position of prominence over Plato. Finally, Filone explicitly designates “the elders in Egypt” as “li nostri teologi antichi,” i.e., “our ancient theologians,” in the possessive form. This is after clearly stating that he follows Moses, i.e., that he is a Jew. Leone’s “elders in Egypt” who passed on the ancient wisdom to Plato concerning the beginning of wisdom itself thus do not

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le colonne di Mercurio, le quali erano tutte piene di sapienza e dottrina.”

10 Translation here is from Leone Ebreo, Dialogues of Love, trans. by C. Damian Bacich and R. Pescatori, University of Toronto Press, Toronto - Buffalo - London 2009 [hereafter, Dialogues], p. 325. For the Italian text, see Dialoghi, p. 302: “Moisè e gli altri santi profeti significarono questa verità platonica.”
seem to be Hermetic, but rather seem to be his ancient theologians connected to his own Jewish stock.

Yosef Baruk da Urbino, the sixteenth century translator of the *Dialoghi* into Hebrew, picked up on Leone’s use of the possessive here and explicitly transformed the latter’s “ancient theologians” into kabbalists. He translates Leone’s phrase “li nostri teologi antichi,” i.e., “our ancient theologians,” into *qadmonenu ha-mequbbalim*, literally, “our ancients, the kabbalists”\(^{11}\). This is despite the fact that in this specific instance, Leone seems to be advocating for an idea of *prisca theologia* as moored within the Jewish *prophetic* tradition, which, according to his historiography, intersected with Plato and his ilk in ancient Egypt. Not only is there no mention of kabbalists here, there is absolutely no clear allusion to kabbalah itself as either the foundation or the source of the ancient tradition. Nevertheless, Yosef Baruk was not alone in turning Leone into a kabbalist. In fact, the German historian and theologian Johann Pistorius the Younger included the *Dialoghi* in his 1587 Latin compendium entitled *Artis Cabalisticae*\(^{12}\). Of importance to note in this context is the fact that the *Artis Cabalisticae* contains works of great importance to Christian Kabbalah, such as Paulus Riccius’ Latin translation of Yoseph Giqatilla’s *Sha’are orah* (entitled *Porta lucis*), other works by Riccius, and the kabbalistic texts of Johann Reuchlin. This puts the *Dialoghi* in an important position for the development of Western Christian understandings of Kabbalah. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the Latin translation of the specific passage concerning the elders in Egypt does preserve the Italian connotation without inserting anything about Kabbalah or kabbalists\(^{13}\). Such a specific inference seems to be unique to the Hebrew translation of Yosef Baruk.


\(^{12}\) *Artis Cabalisticae*: hoc est reconditae *Theologia et Philosophiae Scriptorum*, I, Basileae 1587, pp. 331-608.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., pp. 577-578.
The kabbalistic reading of Yosef Baruk da Urbino has been revived in recent scholarship on the *Dialoghi*. In fact, in an important article from 1985 in support of a notion of a Hebrew *prisca theologia* tradition in the thought of Leone, eminent kabbalah scholar Moshe Idel quotes this very passage from the sixteenth-century Hebrew translation of the *Dialoghi*. While discerningly placing *ha-mequbbalim*, i.e., “the kabbalists,” in brackets, and while carefully noting that this was an addition to the text by the translator, Idel nevertheless reasons that the Hebrew interpolation is in the spirit of Leone’s original intent. In his more recent book *Kabbalah in Italy*, Idel is even more forthright. There he writes concerning Leone’s idea of the chain of transmission: “In my opinion we can describe the succession as follows: ‘Our ancestors’ (the Kabbalists) are the ‘Fathers’ or elders who taught Plato, and he subsequently taught Aristotle.” Here this is offered as a direct explanation of a more literal English translation of Leone’s text concerning the ancient theologians in relation to Plato and Aristotle, and absolutely no mention is made of Yosef Baruk da Urbino.

Idel’s reading may be right, and indeed, neither the kabbalistic interpretation as prompted by Yosef Baruk da Urbino nor the Hermetic interpretation as possibly prompted by Lenzi can be entirely dismissed off-hand. In fact, both could potentially be substantiated, and perhaps even conflated, through a cross-reading with another passage in the *Dialoghi* where Filone explicitly traces the chain of transmission regarding knowledge about the duration of the world. There the chain extends from Adam to Enoch to Noah to Shem to Eber to Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Levi, and then finally to “the Hebrew sages called ‘Kabbalists,’ who say that it was confirmed by Moses through divine revelation.”

16 *Dialogues*, p. 239; *Dialoghi*, p. 214: “Li sapienti de li Ebrei chiamati ‘cabalisti’, li quali da Moisè dicono per revelazione divina esser confirmata.”
Enoch’s key position here as the direct recipient from the first man is significant for a possible Hermetic reading since, as both Fabrizio Lelli and Moshe Idel have shown, Enoch was often identified with Hermes already from ancient times and throughout the middle ages\textsuperscript{17}. In Leone’s schema, Enoch is early in the chain of transmission. The Kabbalists, by contrast, are late, but their validity is significantly substantiated by the Sinaitic theophany. If the Kabbalists and possibly Hermes are implicated here, then it is possible that they are also implicated elsewhere within the *Dialoghi*, including in the passage with which we began.

The picture is indeed complex, and in this case, ambiguity breeds seemingly reasonable creative interpretation. Nevertheless, we should be careful. While allowing for the Hermetic appeal, we must not forcefully read it into the *Dialoghi* as based on Lenzi’s approbation; nor should we favor it as based on circumstantial, external associations between Hermes and Enoch, when the latter was an internally important Jewish figure in his own right. In regard to Kabbalah, we must be careful in regard to Leone’s use of the very term “Kabbalists” here. He is not applying this term to medieval Spanish or Provençal mystical sages, or even to Shim’on bar Yochay, or Nehunyah ben Ha-Qanah, or Rabbi ‘Aqiva and his ilk, as perceived authors of texts like the *Zohar*, *Sefer ha-peli’ah*, or *Sefer yetzirah*. Rather, Leone is specifically applying this term here to early inheritors of a tradition coming from the line of Levi, which may simply be his way of framing Mosaic and Aaronic prophecy, or priestly authority.

In this last regard, it is important to mention that Jeremiah the prophet was a priest, and that one theory held by Leone’s father Yitzchaq Abravanel and quite possibly picked up on by Leone was

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that Plato learned from Jeremiah in Egypt. In his commentary on the book of Jeremiah, Yitzchaq writes of that prophet that “after the destruction [of the Temple] he went to Egypt and stayed there for many years without prophecy, until his death […] and the Greek sages attest to the fact that Plato conversed with him in Egypt.” Based on the stark parallels, it would stand to reason that Jeremiah and his ilk were amongst the “elders in Egypt” invoked by Yitzchaq’s son Leone as the Jewish transmitters of supreme wisdom to Plato.

The idea is certainly not a novelty of Leone’s father Yitzchaq. Indeed, St. Ambrose already suggested that Plato was educated in Hebraic letters in Egypt by Jeremiah, which is an idea that was further drawn out by Augustine. In book two of his De Doctrina Christiana, Augustine writes of Ambrose that he “demonstrated that it was surely more likely that Plato had been introduced to our literature by Jeremiah, and that it was this that enabled him to learn and write the things for which he is justly praised.” Others clearly place Plato in debt to Moses, such as Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus on the Jewish side, and Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria amongst the

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18 Moshe Idel presents a detailed analysis of this topic in his Kabbalah and Ancient Philosophy, cit., pp. 77-78 and 99-100. Within Idel’s analysis, he indeed allows the kabbalistic element to enter into the picture, casting Jeremiah as a link in the kabbalistic chain. I take a different approach here by separating biblical prophecy from kabbalah. For some pertinent references to Plato as a student of Jeremiah in Yitzchaq Abravanel’s thought, see Abravanel, Mif’alot Elohim, cit., p. 172; Id., Commentary to the Later Prophets, B’nei Arbel, Jerusalem 1960, p. 205.

19 Commentary to the Later Prophets, 205:

ואחר החרבן הלך למצרים ועמד שם שנים רבים מבלי נבואה עד יום...


21 Philo, De opificio mundi (On the Creation of the World) 6.25; Flavius Josephus, Contra Apionem 2.36.257. For more detailed references, see A. Swift Riginos, Platonica: The Anecdotes Concerning the Life and Writings of Plato, Brill, Leiden 1976, p. 64.
early Christians. Given this history, a much more straightforward explanation exists for Leone’s “elders in Egypt” than either Hermetic authorities or Kabbalistic adepts. Echoing his predecessors as possibly filtered through the works of his father, Leone was most probably very simply trying to moor the thought of Plato within the Hebrew biblical tradition itself.

In a related move to fix Plato within the biblical narrative, Leone famously correlates the story of the first individual, who was created both “male and female” according to Genesis 1:27, with the Aristophanic narrative of the androgyne as recounted in Plato’s Symposium. Within that context, Leone’s Filone states: “The ancient Jewish commentators in their Chaldean language here say, «Adam was created of two persons, the one part male, the other female».” Here the idea is that ancient Jewish commentators, seemingly correctly in the thought of Leone, read the narrative of Genesis as an idea of the androgyne that well pre-dated Plato. Moreover, as a pre-modern Jewish thinker, Leone would have held to a proleptic notion of oral Torah as being given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Thus, in his thought, not only does the text of Genesis pre-date Plato’s Symposium, so does the ancient Jewish commentary that correctly interprets it.

Similar to our previous question as to the identity of the “an-

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22 The earliest sources to Plato in Egypt are Cicero and Diodorus Siculus in the first century BCE. For more on this tradition, see Swift Riginos, Platonica, cit., pp. 64-65.
23 Dialogues, p. 277; Dialoghi, p. 253: “Li comentatori ebraici antichi in lingua caldea, dicendo: «Adam di due persone fu creato, d’una parte maschio, da l’altra femmina». At first glance, the phrase “two persons” here seems like a strange deviation from the original Midrashic דו-פרצופין, “two countenances,” but the Italian word “persone,” originally meaning “masks,” is related to the Greek πρόσωπον (prosopon), from which the Aramaic partzuvin ultimately derives. For more on the subtle complexity being portrayed here, of the personae of man, and ultimately of God, see S. Kodera, Disreputable Bodies: Magic, Medicine and Gender in Renaissance Natural Philosophy, Centre for the Reformation and Renaissance, Toronto 2010, pp. 235-236.
cient theologians” who were “elders in Egypt,” here we are left with the question of the identity of the “ancient Jewish commentators” mentioned. Some scholars have forcefully claimed that the reference here is to none other than the Zohar. This assumption, which has become quite prevalent in recent scholarship, seems to be based on the inaccurate rendering in the Soncino English translation of the Italian “lingua caldea” as “Chaldean commentary”. The Soncino translation reads: “Adam, that is the first man, whom God created on the sixth day of the Creation, being a human individual, combined in himself male and female without division [...]. Wherefore the ancient Hebrew commentators in their Chaldean commentary here say, «Adam was created of two persons, the one part male, the other female».” It stands to reason based on this translation alone that an entire Aramaic translation was behind Leone’s thought here. Nevertheless, a more appropriate translation of “lingua caldea” would be “Chaldean language;” and while the Zohar as the source is a possibility, it does not seem probable.

In fact, I would caution against what I call the “over-Zoharization” of the Dialoghi. Although Moshe Idel posits the Zohar as a

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25 León Hebreo, The Philosophy of Love (Dialoghi d’amore), trans. F. Friedberg Seely - J. H. Barnes, Soncino Press, London 1937, p. 349. This translation is in fact the version cited by Idel in his various expositions, and Idel seems to have influenced other scholars with his attribution of the “Chaldean commentary” here with the Zohar.

26 Ibid.

probable source, he correctly states, “there is nothing intrinsically Kabbalistic in the concept”\textsuperscript{28} being discussed here by Leone; and he is right. But I would take this admonishment even a step further, and say that not only is the concept not kabbalistic, but that there is no mention of the \textit{Zohar} here, or anywhere within the \textit{Dialoghi} for that matter. Moreover, there is nothing inherently Zoharic in Leone’s thought, and there is no clear evidence that Leone utilized the \textit{Zohar} as a source.

In this instance, the “Chaldean language” mentioned by Leone’s Filone is most probably not a reference to an entire commentary written in Aramaic, such as the \textit{Zohar}, but it is more probably a reference to the specific term \textit{du-partzuvin}, i.e., “two persons,” or “two countenances,” which indeed shows up in its Aramaic form in a Midrashic text known as \textit{Vayikra Rabbah}\textsuperscript{29}. Moreover, this specific Midrash continues in part in Aramaic, and the tenor of Filone’s discussion is very much in line with the Midrash. For example, Filone recounts that God caused a sleep to fall upon Adam and, in Filone’s language, God “took one of his sides (the word in Hebrew being equivalent to rib, but here and elsewhere it stands for ‘side’), that is, the side or feminine person that was behind Adam’s shoulders”\textsuperscript{30}. This is classical Midrashic reasoning and there is nothing kabbalistic here.

In fact, the Midrash in \textit{Wayyiqra rabbah} states, perhaps not coincidentally in Aramaic, that an objection was raised to the idea of the evenly split androgyne, based on the verse in Genesis “\textit{And He took one of his ribs (mi-tzal’otaw)}” (Genesis 2:21). The Midrash continues with the same exact answer as that given by Filone: the term \textit{mi-tzal’otaw} should not be read here as \textit{one of his ribs}, but as “one of his sides”\textsuperscript{31}. It is 

\textsuperscript{28} Idel, \textit{Kabbalah and Eros}, cit., 89.
\textsuperscript{29} See \textit{Wayyiqra rabbah} 14,1.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Dialogues}, p. 278.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Wayyiqra rabbah} 14,1 and \textit{Bereshit rabbah} 8,1:
safe to assume that Leone would have been familiar with this Midrash, at least as much, if not more so than he was with Zoharic literature. This is especially so given the fact that the Zohar had not yet been printed and widely disseminated at the time of Leone’s writing, while this classical Midrash would certainly have been known to any Jew with Leone’s level of education. Moreover, given the proximity of Leone’s thought to the classical Midrash, as well as the usage of Aramaic (or Chaldean) within the Midrash itself, Occam’s razor would seem to cut the Zohar out of the picture. Leone is indeed Judaizing the myth of Aristophanes by reference to “ancient Jewish commentators;” but he is not necessarily zoharizing it, or even kabbalizing it.

Prisca sapientia as a notion of a pristine wisdom common to variant wisdom traditions typically involves a re-reading of the transmission of knowledge. In the cases drawn out from Leone Ebreo’s Dialoghi d’amore and drawn out above, for example, Plato is read as learning from the biblical prophets. Moreover, according to this reading, it is the Oral Torah as read proleptically that ultimately hashes out the biblical narrative and informs the Aristophanic myth of the androgyne. In these cases, the claim is that the source of the prisca sapientia lies, in its most pristine form, within the Jewish textual tradition. Leone re-reads the history of the flow of ideas in order to fit his own religious and national sensibilities.

When reading Leone himself on prisca sapientia, however, I would like to suggest that we exercise care. We should not be influenced by the transmission history of early readers such as Mariano Lenzi and Yosef Baruk da Urbino, nor should we attempt to force the text to fit our own sensibilities of the meaning of prisca sapientia as necessarily hermetically or kabbalistically informed. Leone does not invoke the Corpus Hermeticum at all within the Dialoghi, and in the very few places in which he does engage Kabbalah, it is in a cautionary manner or in a way that completely transforms it and brings it to a paradoxically

מטצעתיו אמר להם מַשָּׁמְרוֹדָם כְּדֶתֶבָּה (שמואל כ) הלָּצָלָל המשכּו השנָּׁה.
biblical form of universalism. In one instance of explicitly discussing kabbalistic transmission, for example, Leone’s Filone makes the telling statement to Sofia, his counterpart who embodies Wisdom: “I will tell you what they say, though I do not persuade you to believe it, because their evidence in the texts is not clear, but figurative.” Here I would suggest taking the admonition of Leone’s protagonist seriously. As far as the textual evidence in the Dialoghi shows, Leone was neither a Jewish Hermetic thinker nor a secret kabbalist. There is also no evidence that Leone was imbibing any insight from the Zohar. At most, Leone was a Jewish Platonist, and part of his project was to reconcile Plato with the Bible, as filtered through Rabbinic Judaism. To read Hermes and the Kabbalists too deeply into his thought is to transform it, in a similar manner in which he transformed both the thought of Plato and the narrative of the Bible.

32 For more on the universalistic transformation, see Ogren, The Beginning of the World, cit., pp. 77-98.
33 Dialogues, p. 239; Dialoghi, p. 214: “Ti dirò ciò che dicono, il che non ti persuado che tenghi, però che l’evidenzia loro ne li testi non è chiara, ma figurativa.”