

MS198: R. Jacob Lagarto's Collection of Kabbalah and Hekhalot Texts

An introductory note by Jeremy I. Pfeffer

Paper (ff. 83), in quarto: OX 2456; IMHM Film No. F 15587.

The codex contains a collection of esoteric texts transcribed by R. Jacob Lagarto in 1635 on the eve of his departure from Holland for the newly acquired Dutch settlement in Recife, Brazil.

The titles of twelve texts are listed on fol. 1v in Latin and Hebrew under the heading *Collectanea Cabbalistica* (Fig. 198.1). The entries in Kitchin's catalogue¹ are English translations of these Latin inscriptions with the inclusion of the Hebrew in a number of cases (Fig. 198.2). The texts themselves are all in a cursive Sefardi script.

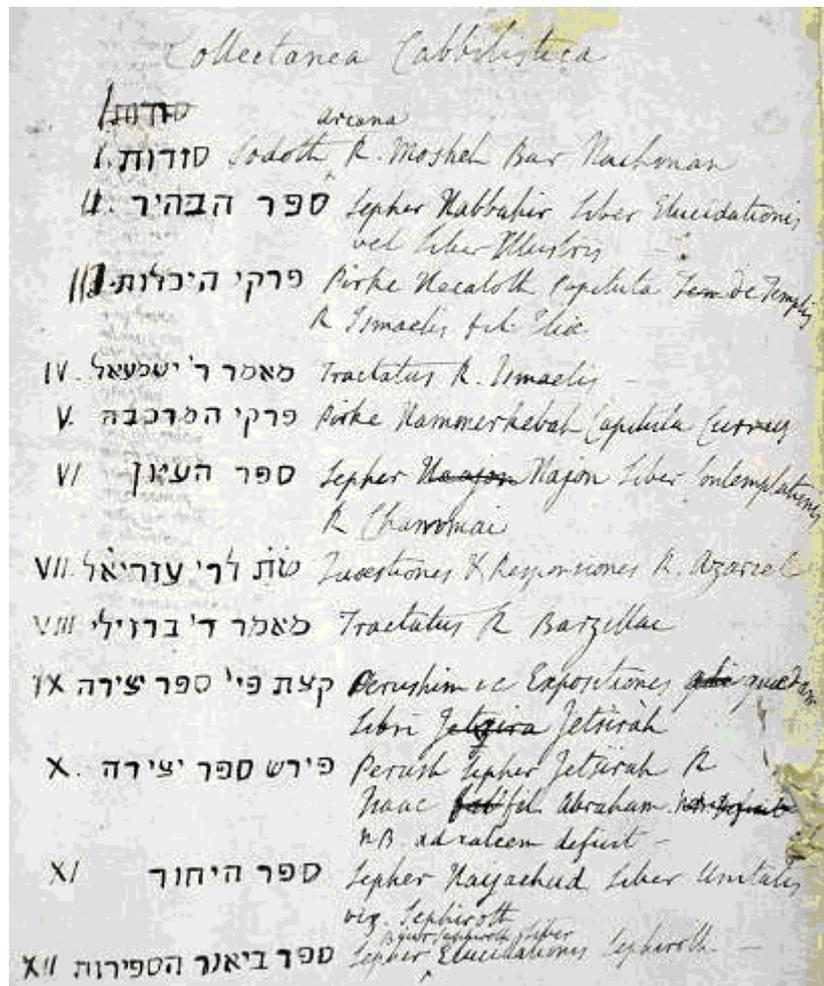


Fig.198.1: The Latin and Hebrew list of the texts under the heading *Collectanea Cabbalistica* (A Collection of Kabbalah) on fol. 1v.

¹ The catalogue of the Library's manuscripts, *Catalogus codicum MSS qui in bibliotheca Aedis Christi*, prepared by G.W.Kitchin in 1863,

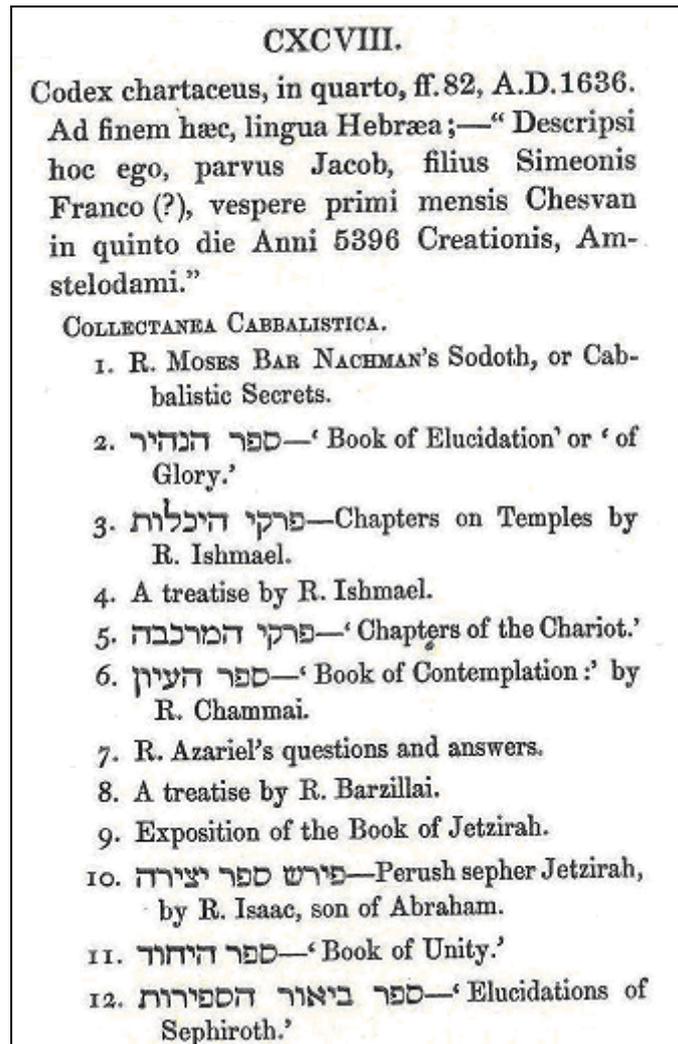


Fig. 198.2: The entry for Ms.198 in the catalogue of the Library's manuscripts prepared by G.W.Kitchin in 1863: *Catalogus codicum MSS qui in bibliotheca Aedis Christi.*

The colophon, which is repeated eleven times in the codex, reads (in translation): "I, the youngster² Jacob ben Simon Franco, copied it [on] Thursday, eve of the New Moon of the month of Heshvan 5397 (1635), here in Amsterdam." The person who entered the inscription on fol. 1v also added a copy of the colophon in Hebrew block letters, together with a Latin translation, at the foot of fol. 83v (Fig.198.3).

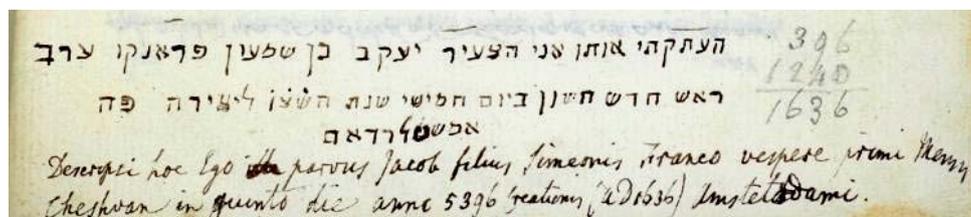


Fig. 198.3: The copy of the colophon in Hebrew block letters and the Latin translation at the foot of fol. 83v from which Kitchin evidently took the Latin version that appears in the catalogue entry.

² A self-deprecating euphemism that is a common feature of rabbinical signatures. This entry and the inscription on fol. 1v are in the same handwriting.

The only watermark in the codex is from 1635 and is in the back endpaper; the date matches that in the colophons (Fig. 198.4).

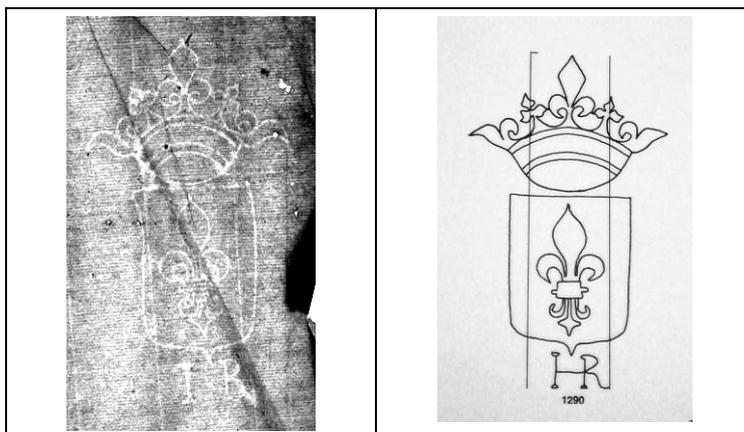


Fig. 198.4: The watermark in the crumpled back endpaper of codex 198: Piccard 1290 (Nyköping 1635).³

According to the catalogue of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, the codex actually contains the following sixteen esoteric texts and not just the twelve listed on fol. 1v and in Kitchin's catalogue:

1. 1r–25v: Selections from Provençal and Gerona Kabbalah. Kitchin's entry, "R. Moses bar Nachman's Sodoth or Cabbalistic Secrets," is taken from a handwritten note in the top left-hand corner of fol. 1r. The text, however, also includes remarks by R. Azriel (see below) and R. Abraham Ḥazan, both of Gerona.
2. 26r–39v: *Sefer HaBahir* (*The Book of Brightness*), one of the oldest Kabbalistic texts. An anthology of midrashic dialogues on the first chapters of Genesis attributed by traditional Kabbalists to the 1st century sage R. Nehunya ben Ha-Kanah, but thought by modern scholars to be of medieval origin.
3. 40r–50v: *Hekhalot Rabati* (*The Greater Palaces*), an account of the ascent of R. Ishmael into the heavenly palaces. The *Hekhalot* literature is a genre of Jewish esoteric texts produced between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.
4. 52r–56v: *Shiur Komah* ((Divine Dimensions). An account in anthropomorphic terms of the secret names and measurements of God's supposed corporeal limbs and parts. The text is in the form of sayings or teachings revealed by the angel Metatron to Rabbi Yishmael. Doubts have been expressed as to its origins and authenticity: Maimonides

³ Gerhard Piccard, *Wasserzeichen Lilie*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart (1983).

considered it a Byzantine forgery. There is no agreement amongst scholars regarding the date of its composition.

5. 57r–57v: *Harugei Malkhut* (Martyrs of the Realm), a version of the account found in various *Midrashim* of the martyrdom of ten eminent Talmudic Sages.
6. 57v: *Tzaluta DeEliyahu* (Elijah's Prayer), a short piece of *Hekhalot* literature that features the two biblical immortals: Elijah the prophet and Enoch the son of Jared (Metatron), neither of whom died: Enoch was "taken away by God" (*Genesis* 5:24) and Elijah "went up to heaven in a whirlwind (*2Kings* 2:1)."
7. 58r–59v: *Pirkei HaMerkabah* (Chapters of the Chariot).
8. 60r–67v: *Sha'ar Shamaim* (Heaven's Gate) by Yaacov ben Sheshet Gerondi.
9. 68v–69r: *Sefer Haiyun* (The Book of Contemplation) attributed to Ḥammai Gaon.
10. 70r–73r: *Shaar HaShoel* (Gate of the Questioner), theological queries put to R. Azriel ben Shlomo of Gerona, a pupil of Isaac the Blind (R. Yitzhak Saggi Nehor), and his replies.
11. 73v–75v: *Perush Esser Sefirot* (An Interpretation of the Ten Sefirot). The text attributes the work to a Rabbi Barzilai, possibly the 12th century Talmudist and Kabbalist R. Judah ben Barzilai Albegeboni.
12. 76r–77v: *Ketzat Perush Sefer Yetzirah* (A Brief Commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*) by R. Moshe ben Naḥman (Naḥmanides).
13. 77r–79v: *Perush Sefer Yetzirah* (A Commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah*) by the Provençal R. Yitzhak Saggi Nehor, also known as Isaac the Blind (c.1160–1235).⁴
14. 80r–82r: *Sefer HaYihud* (An Interpretation of the Ten Sefirot).
15. 82v–83v: *Sefer Biur HaSefirot* (A Book on the Elucidation of the Sefirot) by Yaacov ben Yaacov HaCohen.
16. 83v: *Perush Esser Sfirot* (An Interpretation of the Ten Sefirot)

An entry dated 1 Adar 5387 (17 February 1627) in the annals of the Jewish community held by the Stadsarchief in Amsterdam,⁵ records the admission of Simão Franco, alias Simão Fernandez Lagarto, into the Dotar Society.⁶ A later entry, dated 30 Shevat 5397 (27 December 1636), records the admission of his son Jacob into the Society.⁷ A third entry, this time in the

⁴ The Aramaic epithet *Saggi Nehor*" (Lit. a bright light) is an ironic euphemism for one who is blind.

⁵ Archive 334; Inv. no. 1142, p. 90.

⁶ A Jewish charity that collected and distributed dowries for orphan girls.

⁷ At a meeting with the Parnassim (Community Wardens), he stated that he had an older brother living in Spain of whom nothing had been heard for a long time. They agreed nevertheless to admit Jacob on condition

records of the Beth Haim cemetery in Ouderkerk, states that a woman named Ester Franco Lagarto was buried there in 1698 and that she was the wife of Haham (Chief Rabbi) Jacob Franco Lagarto who died in 1667 and was buried in Middelburg.

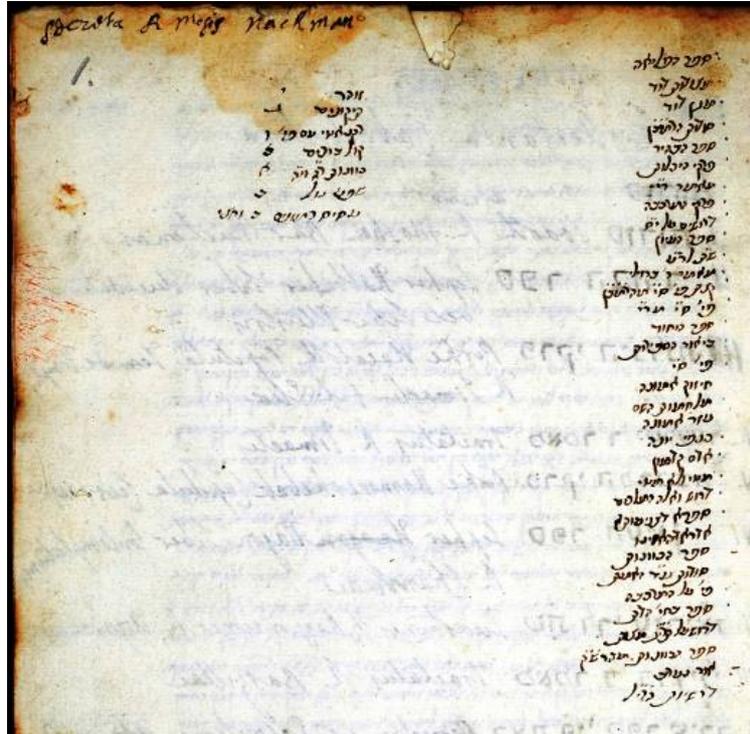


Fig. 198.5: Folio 1r with the list of forty one titles.

R. Jacob Lagarto’s keen interest in Kabbalah and Hekhalot literature is evinced by the forty one titles listed in the two columns on fol. 1r (Fig 198.5). The one from last in the left-hand column is *Sefer Shefa Tal*, an esoteric work by R. Shabtai Sheftel Horowitz of Prague (1565-1619); it was first printed in Hannau in 1612. The copy of this edition in the Yosef Goldman collection in New York has a handwritten note of Lagarto’s ownership in the same handwriting as the manuscripts in codex 198 (Fig.198.6).

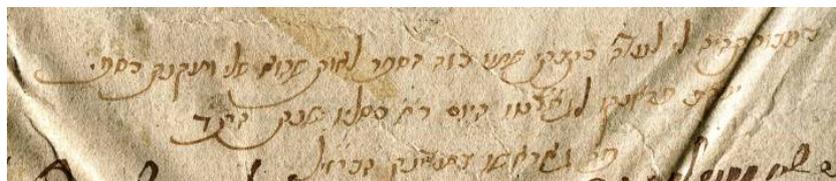


Fig. 198.6: The Hebrew ownership note written by Jacob Franco Lagarto in a copy of *Sefer Shefa Tal* by R. Shabtai Sheftel Horowitz. It reads (in translation), “As proof of my ownership and that it was purchased with my money, I have written my name in this book, Jacob Franco Lagarto Rosh Hodesh Kislev 5404 (November 12, 1643) here in Garasho(?) of the State of Brazil” (Fig. 198.4).

A comprehensive analysis of the esoteric texts in Lagarto’s collection is far beyond the remit of this note but there is one item on fol. 75v which, by virtue of its enigmatic references

that should his brother reconvert to Judaism, he would be admitted instead, a rider that Jacob accepted (Archive 334; Inv. no. 1142; fol. 115/p.229).

to London and Toulouse, cannot be passed over. It purports to be the contents of a letter on the subject of the Seven Canopies that await the souls of the righteous in the Hereafter (Paradise),⁸ sent by “the great Rabbi Yekutiel from the town of London (לונדר”ש)...to his pupil Rabbi Yedidyah from the town of Toulouse (טולוש”ה)” (Fig. 198.7).

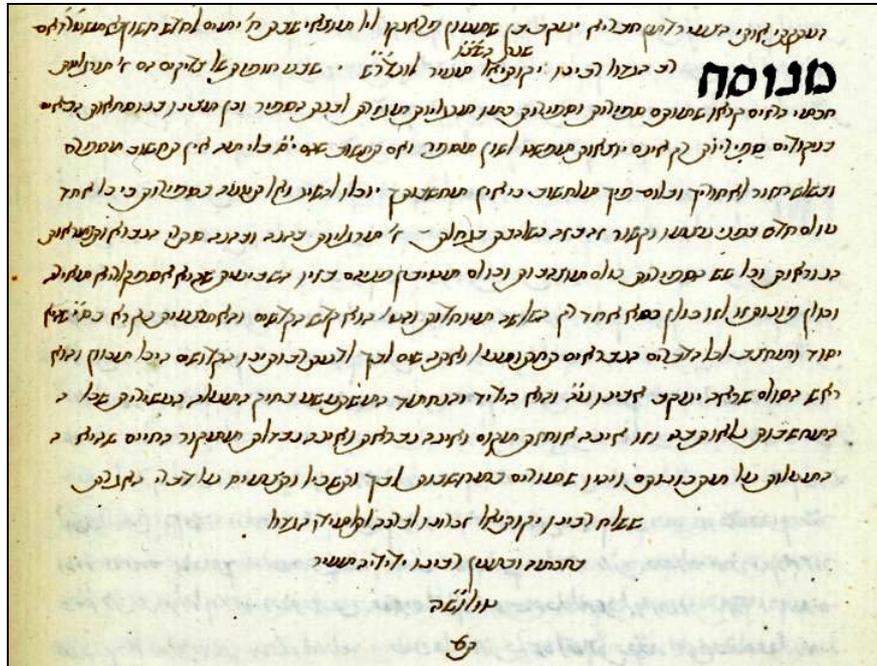


Fig 198.7: The account of the letter sent by Rabbi Yekutiel of London (לונדר”ש) to his pupil Rabbi Yedidyah of Toulouse (טולוש”ה) in the paragraph that starts with the word מנוסה. The line above is the colophon at the end of the previous item, one of the eleven such instances in the codex.

A text attributed to a Rabbi Yekutiel and which is identical to that above appears in *Sefer HaEmunot* (The Book of Beliefs) by Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov (c.1390-c.1440)⁹ first printed in Ferrara in 1556.¹⁰ There is, however, no reference there to London or to a Rabbi Yedidyah from Toulouse; it is simply referred to as “the *responsum* of R. Yekutiel.” Lagarto’s source for the addenda in his copy of the text is a mystery. If there ever was a Rabbi Yekutiel in London with a pupil in Toulouse, it must have been before the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290 and the wiping out of the Jewish community in Toulouse but there is no historical record of either of these persons.

R. Jacob Lagarto played a part in the early history of Latin American Jewry. In 1630, the Dutch West India Company captured the Brazilian city of Recife from the Portuguese and the religious freedoms enjoyed in Holland were extended to the colony; Jews could now openly practice their religion there and Jewish settlers started arriving from Holland. The community formed at Tamarica (Itamarica), an island not far from Recife, appointed R. Jacob Lagarto as

⁸ TB Baba Batra 75a

⁹ A Spanish Kabbalist and fierce critic of rationalist Jewish philosophy.

¹⁰ The particular passage is on fol. 100r. See: www.hebrewbooks.org/45915

its own Haham.¹¹ But the settlement was short-lived. In a bitter war, the Portuguese took back Recife in 1654 and expelled the Jews. Those who did not return to Holland made their way to Curacao, Barbados and Jamaica, taking their capital and the technology for sugar production with them; the first Jews to settle in New York in 1654 (New Amsterdam as it was then) also came from Brazil.

¹¹ Graetz, Heinrich, *History of the Jews, Vol.4*, (1894) p.693.
See also: *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society No. 3*, Papers presented at the Third Annual Meeting, held at Washington, Dec. 26 and 27, 1894. Published by the Society 1895 [Second edition, 1915] pp.16-17.