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Four Trees, Some Amulets, and the Seventy-two Names of God

Kircher Reveals the Kabbalah

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Although it is the work of a Kabbalist precisely to read one thing but understand it in a different way, nevertheless he will keep to the inviolable rule that good must be understood as good and bad as bad, lest he apply black to white or day to night.

—Johannes Reuchlin, *On the Art of Kabbalah*¹

The Kabbalah occupied a privileged position in the reconstruction of ancient wisdom underlying Athanasius Kircher's interpretation of the "hieroglyphic doctrine." Although his syncretic method tended to equate the traditions of all cultures, he believed in an especially close relationship between Egyptian and Hebrew wisdom. "The Hebrews have such an affinity to the rites, sacrifices, ceremonies and sacred disciplines of the Egyptians," he wrote, "that I am fully persuaded that either the Egyptians were Hebraicizing or the Hebrews were Egypticizing."² According to Kircher, the true Kabbalah preserved the same Adamic wisdom that Hermes Trismegistus encoded in the hieroglyphs, while the "Rabbinic superstitions" found in many kabbalistic treatises were closely related to Egyptian idolatry. On this ground he believed that he could use the Kabbalah to interpret hieroglyphic inscriptions, and his works frequently drew on kabbalistic sources. The second volume of his magnum opus, *Egyptian Oedipus (Oedipus Aegyptiacus)* (1652–55), contains a 150-page treatise on the *Kabbalah of the Hebrews*, a systematic treatment of the Kabbalah that deals in turn with the mystical nature of the Hebrew alphabet and various hermeneutic methods based on its manipulation; the kabbalistic names of God and their use in mystical prayer; the doctrine of the ten sefirot or divine numerations; and what Kircher calls the "natural Kabbalah," which, as with the other divisions, contains both a true doctrine and a false one, the latter corresponding to what Kircher calls kabbalistic magic and kabbalistic astrology.

This essay looks at Kircher's treatment of the Kabbalah through the investigation of a single diagram (Figure 6.1). The plate in question, labeled the "Mirror of the Mystical Kabbalah," is placed at the conclusion of Kircher's

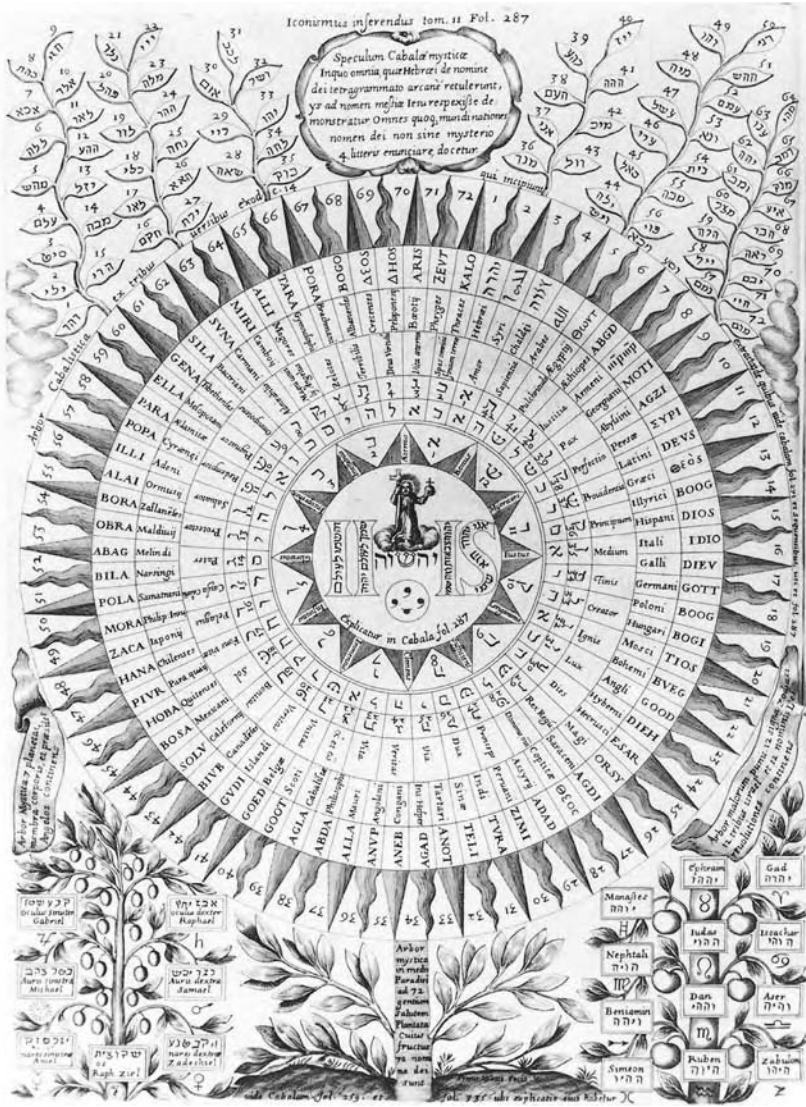


Figure 6.1. *The Mirror of the Mystical Kabbala*. Source: Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 287. By permission of Stanford University Libraries.

lengthy treatment of the divine names, of which it is a kind of visual summation or distillation, although parts of it also relate to his later discussions of kabbalistic astrology and magic. In analyzing this image, I aim to bring out in an encapsulated form several themes relevant not only to Kircher’s study of the Kabbalah but also to his studies of esoteric traditions more generally. Kircher’s representation of the seventy-two names of God provides an out-

standing example of the congruence of Kircher's studies of non-Christian wisdom (despite their frequent heterodoxy) with the universalist ideology of the early modern Catholic Church. The emphasis on amulets, evident in the diagram and throughout the treatise, is indicative of the idiosyncratic marriage of early modern antiquarianism and occult traditions that shaped Kircher's hieroglyphic studies. Finally, the analysis of Kircher's sources—visual as well as textual—shows how he crafted his work from a pastiche of borrowed materials and nonetheless made an original interpretation.

Kircher's monumental interpretation of the Egyptian hieroglyphs appeared in a series of volumes published in Rome in the first half of the 1650s, though he had begun the project almost twenty years earlier. First off the press was the *Pamphilian Obelisk* (*Obeliscus Pamphilius*), a preliminary study published in the Jubilee Year 1650 to celebrate Pope Innocent X's reerection of an ancient obelisk with hieroglyphic inscriptions in the Piazza Navona. This was followed by the three volumes (the second bound in two parts) of the *Egyptian Oedipus*, funded by Emperor Ferdinand III, which presented Kircher's full treatment of the "hieroglyphic doctrine." The final volume contained translations of most of the known hieroglyphic inscriptions in Rome—where many obelisks and other Egyptian artifacts had been imported in the days of the Roman Empire—as well as examples communicated to Kircher from other parts of Europe and the world.

Kircher believed that the hieroglyphs had been invented after the Flood by the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus to encode the pure wisdom he had revived from the antediluvian patriarchs. But later generations of Egyptian priests corrupted Trismegistus's teaching, mixing it with superstitious magic, and thereby created an ambiguous hieroglyphic legacy that was passed on to other civilizations, where it was preserved in scattered texts. Thus Kircher's interpretation of the hieroglyphs involved lengthy expositions of various non-Egyptian traditions supposed to contain elements of the pure Hermetic wisdom, as well as the corrupt Egyptian superstitions, including the Chaldean Oracles, Pythagorean verses, Orphic hymns, Arabic magic, and the Hebrew Kabbalah. According to Kircher, the purest core of the Kabbalah was unlike the other strands of the "ancient theology" (*prisca theologia*) in that it did not depend on Egyptian wisdom but rather constituted an independent tributary of the same antediluvian tradition. As for the superstitions found in both traditions, the vectors of influence were bidirectional, leading Kircher to declare that the beliefs of the Egyptians and the Hebrews are so similar that "whoever borrowed from whom, they can scarcely be told apart."³ In "The Mirror of the Mystical Kabbalah," Kircher dramatically depicts both the pious and superstitious dimensions of the Kabbalah as they pertain to the doctrine of the names of God.

Kircher based his diagram on an earlier work by the French Jewish convert turned Christian Kabbalist, Philippe d'Aquin, called the *Interpretation of the Tree*

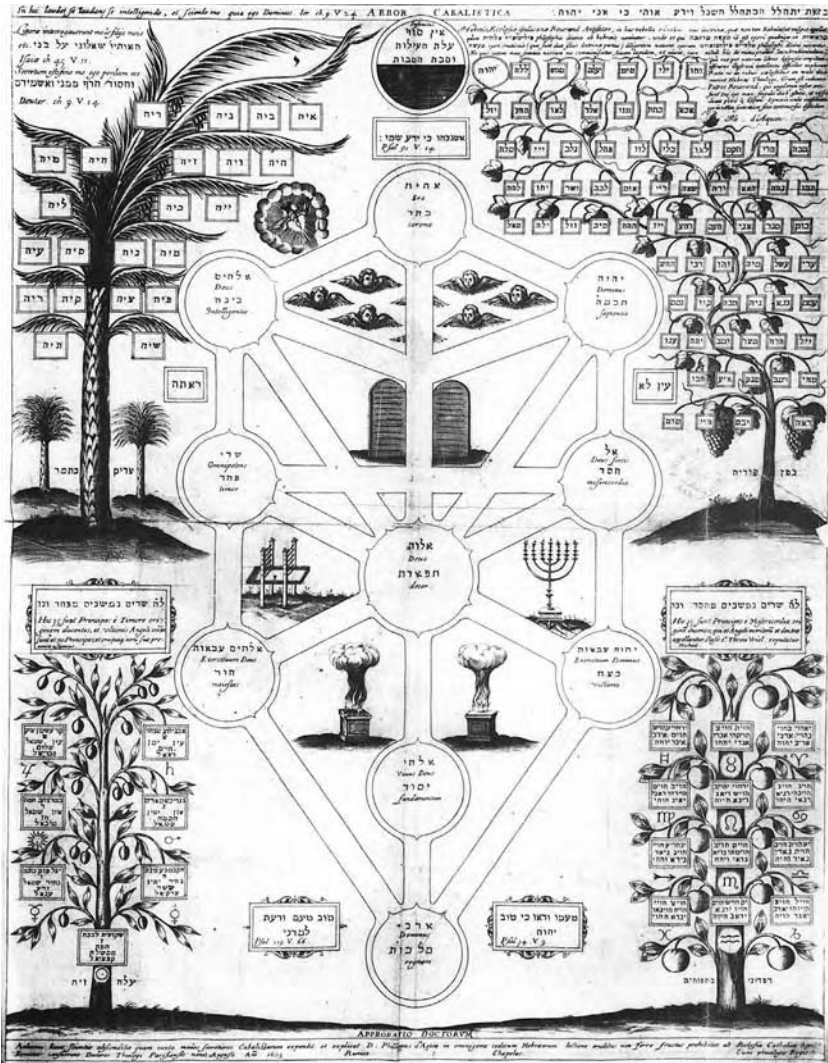


Figure 6.2. Philippe d' Aquin's *Tree of the Kabbalah*. Source: D'Aquin 1625. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

of *Kabbalah*⁴ (Figure 6.2). But Kircher has taken great liberties, using the original diagram as a template in which to insert his own rather different kabbalistic interests. D'Aquin's figure is dominated by a diagram of the ten sefirot—the kabbalistic tree *par excellence*—surrounded in the corners by four trees symbolizing various kabbalistic doctrines. Kircher's diagram removes the sefirotic tree, which he treats separately in a later section of the treatise, and replaces it with a man-

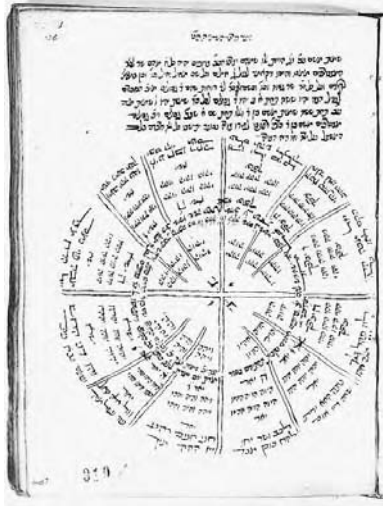


Figure 6.3. Kabbalistic diagram of the Hebrew names of God, from the manuscript of Moses Cordovero's *Pardes rimmonim* used by Kircher. *Source:* Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV) Neofitti 28, fol. 319r. © Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Vatican).

dala-like sunflower bearing the names of God. (The central part of Kircher's diagram was probably inspired instead by a diagram in Moses Cordovero's *Pardes rimmonim* [Garden of pomegranates], which, although much simpler, likewise shows the different divine names radiating in a circular pattern from the Tetragrammaton in the center and culminating in the seventy-two names of God arrayed along the circumference⁵ (Figure 6.3). The central image also suggests the influence of James Bonaventure Hepburn's *Virga Aurea*. This broadside, printed in Rome in 1616, contains an engraving of the Virgin Mary inside a stylized, radiating sun, beneath which are displayed seventy-two alphabets, many of a fantastic or magical nature.⁶) He also does away with d'Aquin's palm tree, for which he has no need. But Kircher's use of a vine to hold the seventy-two divine names, an olive tree associated with the seven planets, and a fruit tree⁷ with the signs of the zodiac—all are dependent on d'Aquin. Kircher does not, however, follow d'Aquin's discussion of the symbolic significance of the different species of trees, which consequently come to seem arbitrary. It is characteristic of Kircher's citation techniques that he never mentions d'Aquin.⁸

The central, sunflower-shaped part of the diagram illustrates key parts of Kircher's exposition of what he considers the good, pious part of the Kabbalah of divine names, which is expounded in chapters 4 to 7 of *Kabbalah of the Hebrews*. The first five rings represent what was by Kircher's day a standard Christian interpretation of the Kabbalah, which purported to discover

confirmations of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ in Jewish kabbalistic doctrines about the names of God.⁹ Emphasis on the four-, twelve-, forty-two-, and seventy-two-letter names of God was a common feature of Christian treatments of the Kabbalah, already found in influential early works by authors such as Pietro Galatino and Johannes Reuchlin.¹⁰

The centermost circle contains the Tetragrammaton, the most sacred and ineffable four-letter name of God, understood in the Kabbalah as the origin of all other divine names, which are depicted in the diagram as radiating outward from the Tetragrammaton (Figure 6.4). The attentive viewer will note, however, that the Hebrew name of God in the middle of the diagram contains five, not four, letters. In the Christian Kabbalah the Tetragrammaton, (YHWH), was equated with the so-called Pentagrammaton, (YHSUH), a variant of the name of Jesus formed by inserting the Hebrew letter *shin* (printed in the diagram in openface) in the center of the Tetragrammaton. According to this Christianized interpretation of the Kabbalah, the name of Christ, the true Messiah, made the ineffable name of God pronounceable. “Jesus Christ,” Kircher writes,

the center of all nature, in whose name all the other divine names are concentrated, God and man, has shown the four-letter name, which was formerly secret and concealed but is now revealed and explained by the Teacher himself, to the future world. Here the figure shows the diffusion of the divine name יהוה whose figure (*typus*) was formerly the four-letter name יהוה. Just as the Sun illuminates, makes fruitful, and animates all things by diffusing its rays through all the world, so the power and efficacy of the name JESUS, who is the Sun of justice, vivifies and preserves all things by diffusing itself through all things.

Just as the word took on flesh through the incarnation, the letter *shin* in the middle of the Tetragrammaton “connects the divine and the human on equal terms.”¹¹ The ineffable Tetragrammaton is associated with the Old Dispensation and is described as the *typus* of the five-letter name, which represents the universal New Dispensation. Kircher here is closely following a line of interpretation originally put forward a century and a half earlier by Johannes Reuchlin, one of the first Christian students of the Kabbalah, and subsequently widely diffused.¹²

Since the Messiah, Jesus Christ, is synonymous with the Tetragrammaton, their representations are interchangeable, and the circle devoted to the Tetragrammaton contains, in addition to the Hebrew Pentagrammaton יהושׁוה, the monogram of Jesus IHS in Latin characters, and three *yods* written above the Hebrew vowel *qamats*, which Kircher explains as a form of the Tetragrammaton symbolizing the Trinity.¹³ Written inside the openface letters of the IHS are four Hebrew phrases taken from the Bible, which are taken to refer to the Tetragrammaton.¹⁴ The equation of Christ with the Tetragrammaton is reinforced by the image of Jesus placed among the divine names.

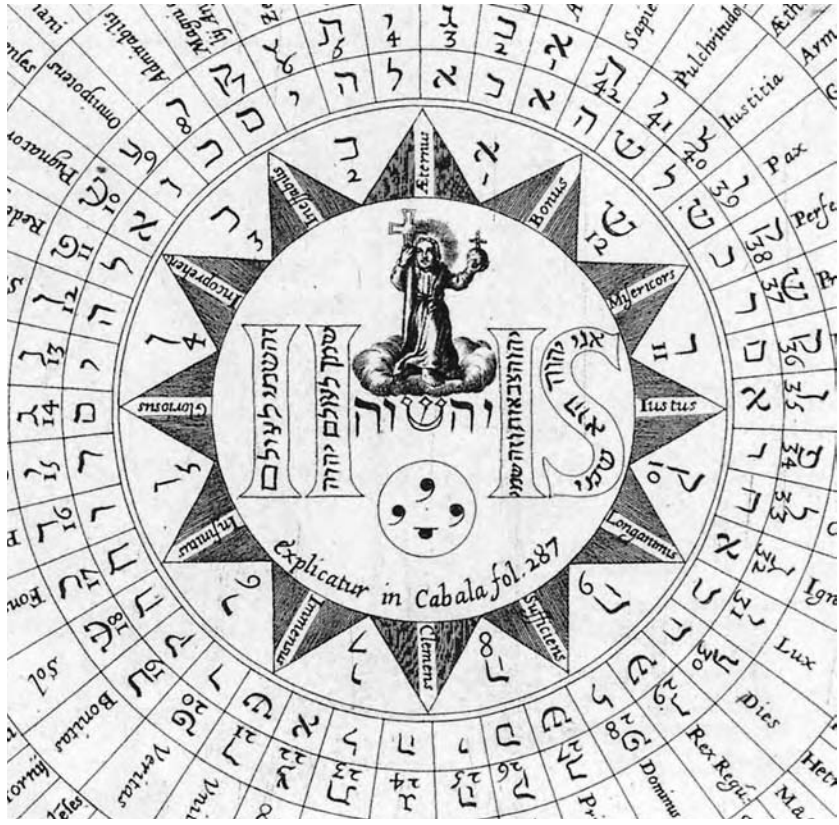


Figure 6.4. The four-, twelve-, and forty-two-letter names of God. *Source:* Kircher 1652–55, p. 287, vol. 1, detail. By permission of Stanford University Libraries.

The first name to radiate from the Tetragrammaton is the twelve-letter name of God, which Kircher gives as *יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד*: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Figure 6.4).¹⁵ Between these twelve letters are interspersed the names of twelve divine attributes. From the twelve-letter name emanates the forty-two-letter name, which Kircher gives in two versions, the first of which is very similar in meaning to the twelve-letter name. In English it reads: “God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, Three in One, One in Three.” In his exposition of the twelve- and forty-two-letter names, Kircher attributes these Trinitarian interpretations—which he prefers to those based on the superstitious letter combinations of more recent rabbis—to a certain “Rabbenu Hakadosch.”

Unlike Reuchlin’s doctrine about the name of the Messiah, which is based on the application of genuine kabbalistic techniques to Christian apologetic

ends, these interpretations of the twelve- and forty-two-letter names of God are based on forgeries. The Trinitarian teachings of Rabbi Haccados first appeared in a small book published in Rome in 1487 by a Spanish Jewish convert named Paulus de Heredia. The *Letter of Secrets* supposedly contained Latin translations of letters exchanged by Rabbi Nehuniah ben Hakanah (a great rabbinic sage of the first century A.D. and, according to medieval legend, a master of the Kabbalah) and his son. The texts are filled with bogus quotations from Jewish sages and authoritative texts like the Zohar, which are made to expound the Kabbalah's supposed Christological and Trinitarian core. Among the forgeries within the forgery are numerous passages from a nonexistent treatise called *Galerazaya* or *Secretorum revelator* (Revealer of secrets) attributed to Rabbi Haccados, editor of the Mishnah, which set forth the Trinitarian interpretations of the names of God. These doctrines became widely diffused through quotation in later works, in particular Agostino Giustiniani's 1516 polyglot psalter and the works of Pietro Galatino.¹⁶

The second forty-two-letter name displayed in Kircher's diagram, is authentically Jewish-kabbalistic, being derived from the first two verses of Genesis according to a method of letter substitution, and is devoid of Trinitarian or Christological significance (Figure 6.4). It is surprising that Kircher includes this name in this part of the diagram, which otherwise appears to be meant as a representation of good, non-superstitious Kabbalah, because in chapter 4 of *Kabbalah of the Hebrews* he derides and condemns the method by which it is derived, calling it "the lowest of the combinatory arts."¹⁷ A third ring contains forty-two "grades of being" (*gradus entium*), corresponding to the letters of the forty-two-letter names.

Up to this point, Kircher's representation of the names of God has been entirely conventional and derivative. From the forty-two-letter name, however, emerges the seventy-two-letter name of God—or more properly, the seventy-two names of God—and here things become more interesting. In place of the traditional seventy-two 3-letter Hebrew names of God that one would expect to find in this place, Kircher gives seventy-two 4-letter names of God associated with seventy-two nations that make up humanity (Figure 6.1). As one would expect from Kircher, the roster is truly global, including New World inhabitants such as the Mexicans, Filipinos, Canadians, and Californians, as well as the Japanese, Chinese, Ethiopians, and so forth. Philology—as so often—falls victim to Kircher's greater purpose. The English, for instance, worship "Good," not God; the Italians *Idio*, not *Iddio*. This part of the diagram illustrates an argument set forth in chapter 7 of *Kabbalah of the Hebrews*, which contains the treatise's most concentrated exposition of the Christian Kabbalah. Here Kircher places the claim that all the nations of the world possess a divinely-inspired four-letter name of God on par

with the classic argument about the wonder-working, five-letter name of Christ and its identity with the Tetragrammaton. “Since the world was created for man,” Kircher explains,

and all mankind is divided into seventy-two families, as attested by holy scripture, hence arose the name of seventy-two letters, or the seventy-two names, in which the whole order of nature is aptly expressed together with the seventy-two names of the Angels presiding over all nature.¹⁸

A label identifies the tree in Kircher’s diagram as “The Mystical Tree Planted in the Middle of Paradise for the Salvation of the 72 Nations, whose fruit are the 72 Names of God.”

Traditionally, the seventy-two names of God refer to a series of three-letter Hebrew names that are generated from three verses of Exodus 14, which each, mysteriously, contain exactly seventy-two letters. When the three verses are written in three rows, seventy-two 3-letter names can be read in the vertical columns. (The resulting names appear in the leaves of the vine at the top of Figure 6.1.) Kircher discusses the mystery of these names in chapter 6 of *Kabbalah of the Hebrews*, mostly following Moses Cordovero’s exposition in *Pardes rimmonim*.¹⁹ He explains that these seventy-two divine names of God, and the equal number of angel names produced by adding the suffixes *-iel* or *-iah*, represent different divine virtues or attributes—the multifarious effects in the created world of the one, undivided God represented by the Tetragrammaton. These seventy-two powers or intelligences correspond to an equal number of classes of created things and preside over the seventy-two families that make up humanity. Thus, in Kircher’s words, they aptly express the whole order of nature. According to Kircher, there is no danger in these names, inasmuch as they accurately describe the attributes of God; it is only their abuse in the practice of superstitious amulets that must be shunned and condemned. Nevertheless, when it comes time to present the seventy-two names in the central diagram, Kircher replaces the classic Hebrew names derived from Exodus 14 with the polyglot seventy-two 4-letter names supposedly revealed to all mankind.

A Hebrew passage quoted by Kircher from the *Pardes rimmonim* (but ultimately dependent on the *Sefer bahir* [Book of illumination]) describes the seventy-two 3-letter names as branches of “a great tree in the middle of paradise,” which draw their power and sustenance from the three verses of Exodus. Kircher calls this “the tree planted in the middle of paradise for the salvation of the seventy-two peoples and nations of the world,” thus identifying it with the tree bearing the seventy-two 4-letter names that appears in the diagram in the following chapter.²⁰ In the Jewish sources, the seventy-two names of the angels that preside over the same number of families composing humanity have a

theurgical and magical significance: the angel names are supposed to possess the power to influence corresponding supernal forces.²¹ For Kircher, who rejects these magical practices, the significance of the divine names lies instead in their representation of the totality of humanity. By replacing the esoteric Hebrew names with names for God in seventy-two languages representing all mankind, he has turned the Kabbalah of divine names into a universal revelation and a promise of salvation to all peoples.

A first step toward such a universalizing interpretation of the Kabbalah of divine names had been made a century earlier in a work published by the Franciscan kabbalist Arcangelo da Borgonovo. In an interpretation of one of Pico's kabbalistic conclusions, Borgonovo describes how the Israelite priest of the Old Testament was commanded to carry a golden plate inscribed with the Tetragrammaton, in order that the sacred rites would be performed in the name of God, the source of "every influence and favor." Furthermore, Borgonovo explains,

he used to carry a mantle with seventy-two pomegranates because, being the only legal, true, and legitimate priest among all the priests of the world, he alone could beseech [God] not only on behalf of the Israelites, but on behalf of all the peoples of the world, of which there are seventy-two. He also used to carry seventy-two bells, in alternation with the pomegranates, with which he would call forth the seventy-two princes who preside over the seventy-two languages.²²

Kircher—whose familiarity with this passage is revealed in a section of the *Oedipus* manuscript that was removed from the printed work—leaps from Borgonovo's description of the Israelite priest calling on the power of the divine name on behalf of all the world to the claim that all the nations of the world have known the name of God.²³ It is to be noted, Kircher asserts, that the name of God among all nations typically has four letters, the result not of human decision but of "a certain divine instigation." Kircher took this notion from Marsilio Facino, who observes in his commentary on Plato's *Philebus* that "everyone calls God by four letters," and gives several examples of God's four-letter name in different languages that are also found in Kircher's diagram.²⁴ These names emanate from the Tetragrammaton in the same way as the twelve- and forty-two-letter names Kircher explains:

So by this it seems to be indicated that everything in the world receives sustenance by the power and efficacy of this name; and thus all the peoples and nations of the world are bound to respond to so many gifts of divine goodness under the true cult of one religion diffused through the world.²⁵

Along similar lines, Kircher argues that the Hebrew Tetragrammaton itself was known to ancient pagan wise men. The Egyptians received the doctrine of the Tetragrammaton directly from the Hebrew patriarchs and encoded it in a hieroglyph (Figure 6.5). Likewise, Pythagoras expressed the doctrine of the

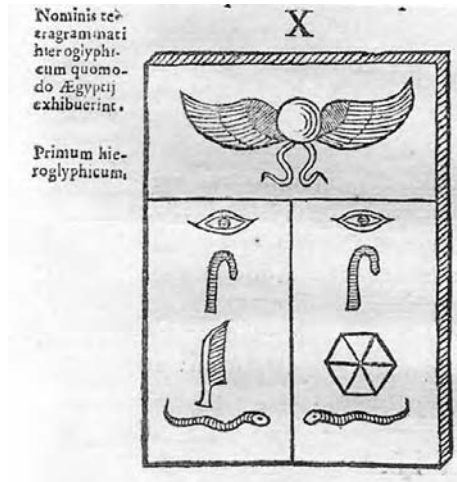


Figure 6.5. The Tetragrammaton encoded in an Egyptian hieroglyph. *Source:* Kircher, 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 282. By permission of Stanford University Libraries.

Tetragrammaton in the tetractys, or mystical set of four (here Kircher again follows an argument first made by Reuchlin²⁶), and Orpheus did so allegorically through the figures of Muse, Dionysus, Apollo, and Venus. In its totality, Kircher’s tree of divine names depicts the dissemination to the entire world of the names of God emanating from the primordial Tetragrammaton, which itself encodes the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ.

The central figure of Kircher’s diagram is thus a symbol of the universality of Christian truth. As such, it can be advantageously compared to another tree-shaped diagram, the image of the “universal horoscope of the Society of Jesus” in Kircher’s *Great Art of Light and Shadow* (*Ars magna lucis et umbrae*) (1646), which graphically depicts the global reach of the seventeenth-century Church, and the Jesuit Order in particular, by simultaneously displaying the time of day in every Jesuit outpost around the world²⁷ (Figure 6.6). Kircher’s kabbalistic tree is a kind of Jesuit emblem—note again the oversized Jesuit monogram, IHS, which Kircher has placed at the center with the other names of Christ. It can be read as a map of the original, universal distribution of truth to humanity, which served as the preface and ideological basis for the early modern missionary campaign depicted in the “map” of the tree of the universal horoscope. Though this ancient heritage of truth and piety was obscured and corrupted over time, vestiges of it remain amid the idolatry and superstition of heathen peoples. This claim is one of the central arguments of the *Egyptian Oedipus*. The notion of such a common religious past suggested the existence of a relatively receptive groundwork on which Christian teachings

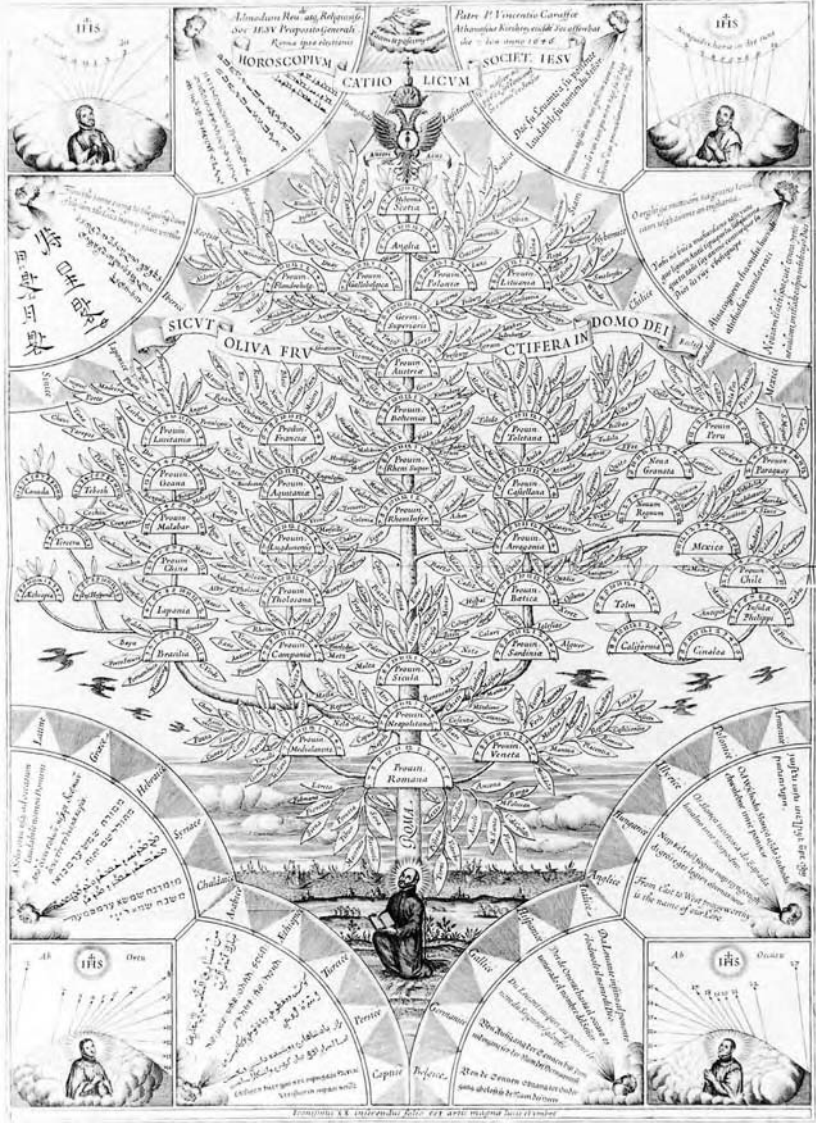


Figure 6.6. *The Universal Horoscope of the Society of Jesus.* Source: Kircher 1646, p. 553. By permission of Stanford University Libraries.

could be cultivated among distant races of infidels. It thus offered a justification for the proselytizing missions of the Jesuits, whose “accommodationist” missionary strategy allowed a considerable degree of syncretism in interpreting native traditions and adapting them to Catholicism.²⁸

It is worth pointing out that in this interpretation, the historical uniqueness of the ancient Jews is greatly diminished if not obliterated. The teachings of the Kabbalah and the possession of a four-letter name of God belong to all humanity. This is just one example of Kircher’s tendency to undercut Jewish historical uniqueness—the unintended and heterodox consequence of his emphasis on the common origins of human cultures. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Moses and the revelation at Sinai are almost entirely absent from Kircher’s histories. Most Christian interpretations of the Kabbalah described Moses as the source of the Kabbalah, just as most versions of the *prisca theologia* derived pagan wisdom from Moses and the Pentateuch.²⁹ Kircher, however, preferred to trace both to Adam and located the dispersion of the primeval wisdom to the gentiles in a pre-Mosaic biblical past. This interpretation undercuts the significance of the Old Dispensation to the Jews by robbing them of their unique role as guardians of pre-Christian truth. In addition, Kircher’s implicit depiction of a universal Old Dispensation takes away from the significance of the New Dispensation, whose universality no longer appears novel. The claim that a continuous tradition of true wisdom and religion begins with Adam, the common father of mankind, may support a Catholic universalist vision, but it could suggest a disturbing question: What more had God to teach mankind by the revelation of the Law or the incarnation of Christ?³⁰

Kircher’s diagram is completed by three additional trees. Here, in the margins, we enter the territory of *nugae Rabbinorum*, “Rabbinic rubbish.” In the left-hand corner is an olive tree, identified as “The Mystical Tree Containing the 7 Planets, the Members of the Body and the Presiding Angels.” The right-hand corner depicts “The Pomegranate Tree Containing the 12 Signs of the Zodiac, the 12 Tribes of Israel, and 12 Revolutions of the Name of God” (Figure 6.7). Kircher reveals the meaning of both trees in his discussion of “Kabbalistic Astrology,” in which he explains that they represent kabbalistic amulets meant to attract the beneficent influences of the heavenly bodies and their presiding angels. The olive tree depicts seven planetary seals, each composed from one of the seven 6-letter names that make up the forty-two-letter name of God (the second of the two versions discussed above), together with a corresponding part of the human body and the corresponding planetary angel. Thus the seal of Saturn contains the first part of the forty-two-letter name of God, _____, the right eye, and the name of the angel Raphael who rules over them.³¹ This seal is supposed to ensure long life, while others ensure peace, wisdom, grace and beauty, wealth, and so forth. The pomegranate tree represents similar

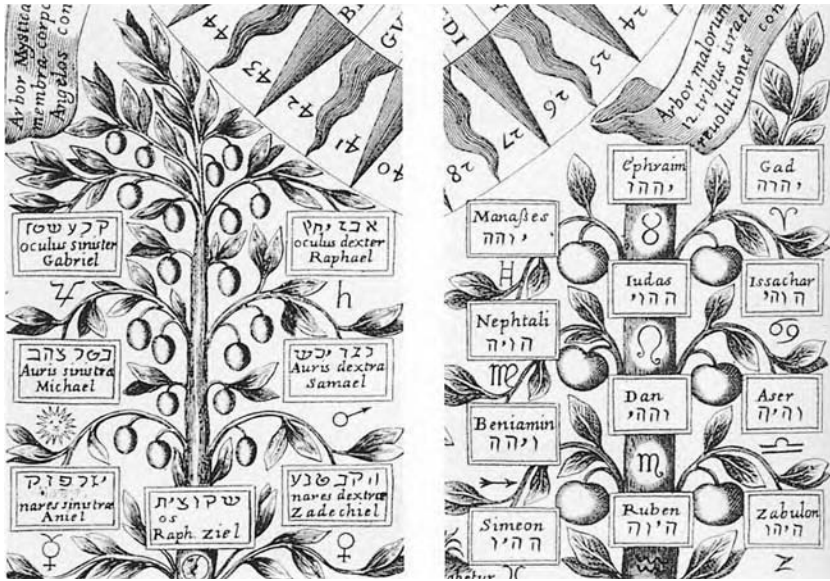


Figure 6.7. Trees representing kabbalistic amulets. *Source:* Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 287, details. By permission of Stanford University Libraries.

seals, which, Kircher explains, are based on the signs of the zodiac matched with the twelve permutations of the letters of the Tetragrammaton. He attacks these practices as superstitious and warns the Christian reader to avoid them.

Kircher's third tree (in truth, a vine) at the top of the image depicts the seventy-two 3-letter names of God derived from Exodus 14 (Figure 6.1, top). As we have seen, Kircher's attitude toward these names is ambivalent. As representations of divine attributes they present no danger, and he refers to the seventy-two angels presiding over all nature in his description of the part of the diagram that is meant to represent the pious doctrine of the divine names. But, according to Kircher, superstitious rabbis also use these names to construct impious amulets. In a way, the diagram of the vine is doing double duty, representing both pious and impious doctrines of the names derived from Exodus 14. The caption beneath the vine is keyed to two pages: one corresponds to Kircher's approving discussion of the divine names that emerge from the Tetragrammaton/Pentagrammaton; the other corresponds to his disapproving discussion of their abuse in amulets meant to appease guardian angels.³² "Let the reader know," Kircher writes before explaining, in detail, how the amulets are constructed, "that sometimes under a shining Angel a black tail is found, when there is nothing so holy that the enemy of the human

race will not use it under the pretext of divine worship in order to destroy souls.³³

All three of the outerlying trees thus represent bad Jewish magical practices involving amulets. Strictly speaking, such practices are not part of the Kabbalah proper. Rather, they belong to an independent tradition of Jewish popular magic based on the power of divine and angelic names, though, as we have seen, they absorbed kabbalistic elements.³⁴ Kircher identifies his source for these practices as a Hebrew book entitled *Shimmush Tehillim* or the *Use of the Psalms*, which is not a kabbalistic treatise but a popular manual for performing this kind of Jewish magic. When the Vatican Library (which possesses several manuscripts of *Shimmush Tehillim*) catalogued Hebrew manuscripts in the 1660s, such treatises were listed separately from other kabbalistic treatises under the rubric of “Practical or Magical Kabbalah,” revealing an awareness of the difference between such practices and the speculative and mystical traditions, even if Jewish popular magic was associated with the term “Kabbalah” in a broad sense.³⁵

Thus it is worth asking why such magical practices involving amulets, which were relatively marginal to the Kabbalah, receive so much attention from Kircher, more attention than either his Jewish or Christian sources would warrant. An important part of the answer lies in Kircher’s fascination with amulets and talismans in and of themselves, a fascination indicative of the motivating role that ancient and exotic objects played in his study of esoteric traditions. The primary purpose of these objects in Kircher’s work was not to provide evidence of kabbalistic theories, much less to show how to put such theories into practice. Rather, it was the theories that were brought into discussion in order to explain the objects, whose illumination was the primary task. The objects came first, the theoretical framework followed.

This puts Kircher’s studies in a markedly different context from that of Renaissance Neoplatonism and Hermetism—though Kircher is usually viewed simply as an untimely continuation of those traditions. It is not that Kircher was uninterested in the possibility of finding profound truths in these traditions, but this was not his chief motivation for studying them. His study of the hieroglyphs and esoteric traditions is best understood in the context of the passion for studying inscriptions, artifacts, and old and exotic manuscripts that was shared by many contemporaneous scholars—that is to say, antiquarianism.³⁶ Kircher had staked out a reputation as an interpreter of exotic objects, and his perceived expertise in esoteric traditions constituted part of his credentials to be such an interpreter.³⁷ That is to say, he studied these traditions in large measure because they offered a framework for interpreting objects and thereby illuminating distant cultures—a goal that had antiquarian value independent of any profound wisdom they may or may not contain. Thus, for Kircher, esoteric traditions were tools of antiquarianism, even if the

results were different from what we normally associate with that term. In this light, the side of Kircher's studies that reached its apex in the *Egyptian Oedipus* may be seen as the offspring of an encounter between early modern antiquarianism and Renaissance occult philosophy.

To a large extent, the *Egyptian Oedipus* represents Kircher's peculiar implementation of a research program he adopted under the influence of the aristocratic antiquarian and patron of learning Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc during their association in the 1630s. Its peculiarity does not lie in its focus on esoteric subject matter per se, for other antiquarians of the time, including Peiresc, who strike us as more sober-minded than Kircher, were also interested in the study of hieroglyphs, esoteric oriental texts, and artifacts associated with magic. Peiresc, for example, had a large collection of "gnostic" amulets, whose investigation he promoted, and even Kircher's notion of using the Kabbalah to translate hieroglyphs was foreshadowed in a letter by Peiresc.³⁸ Having mastered Roman and Greek antiquity in the course of the sixteenth century, by the seventeenth many antiquarians and philologists increasingly turned their attention to the wonders of the East. Kircher's peculiarity with respect to more sober antiquarians rather lies in his relative lack of critical acumen and scholarly rigor in the implementation of a shared research program. If antiquarianism is usually associated with a skeptical attitude, fastidious attention to detail, and a preference for accumulating factual information rather than advancing speculative hypotheses, Kircher's work may well seem to represent its antithesis. (Indeed, his success among those receptive to his methods may be attributed in part to his ability to offer a kind of comprehensive finished product that more rigorous scholars, because of their rigor, could not.) However, the point is not the degree to which Kircher fell short of the scholarly model represented by antiquarianism, but that this was his model. The two-thousand-page *Egyptian Oedipus*, with all its recycling of Late Antique and Renaissance Neoplatonist and magical traditions, may read like a "Summa Magiae" or a "phenomenology of the occult,"³⁹ but formally the work was an interpretation of some (especially perplexing) ancient inscriptions, the most antiquarian of genres.

The Kabbalah, then, provided the theoretical context in which Kircher considered Jewish magical artifacts and practices, such as amulets, which consequently took on a disproportionate role in his exposition. This kind of "esoteric antiquarianism," practiced with different degrees of scholarly rigor by different practitioners, should be recognized as a factor in the continued interest in the esoteric lore associated with Renaissance magic and Neoplatonism during the seventeenth century.

But it was not only scholars and collectors who were interested in these matters. Amulets were not only, or even primarily, objects from the past to be

displayed in the antiquarium; they were also widely in use in popular magical practices. In the section of the *Oedipus* devoted to “Hieroglyphic Magic,” Kircher describes two “kabbalistic amulets,” which he claims he was approached to explain not only by curious acquaintances but also by the Holy Office of the Inquisition, which obviously had a practical interest in the matter. As he often does in such matters, Kircher presents his discussion as a public service to the Christian reader: since it can be difficult in some of these cases to discern the false from the true, he will explain things so that should the reader come across such an amulet, he may recognize its impious nature and avoid jeopardizing his soul.⁴⁰

Describing one of these amulets, a certain “magical coin,” Kircher explains that if one considers its surface, all seems sacred and divine, but beneath the surface lurks a black scorpion’s tail ready to sting overly credulous souls.⁴¹ It is in fact a superstitious Jewish amulet, and Kircher uses his knowledge of the Kabbalah to explain its inscriptions. The nature of the coin is somewhat ambiguous; although it is written in Hebrew, the front is composed of various names of Jesus, and there is even a picture of the Christian savior in its center (Figure 6.8). Kircher, who is convinced of the Jewish provenance of the amulet, interprets the presence of Christ’s image and names as a nefarious attempt to lure Christians into superstition as well as an example of the Jewish penchant for blaspheming Christ.⁴² It is more likely, however, that this amulet was produced by Jewish converts to Christianity who continued to practice Jewish magic within the framework of their new religion by calling on the power of the name of Jesus along with Jewish names of God and the angels.⁴³

Whatever its provenance, this amulet has particular relevance to this discussion because of its striking resemblance to another image: Kircher’s diagram of the kabbalistic tree of divine names. Both figures have a face of Jesus Christ at their center, surrounded by various divine names laid out in concentric rings. Indeed, some of their inscriptions are identical: like the diagram, the amulet bears the five-letter name of Christ in the center of its front side, and its back side features (in addition to the twelve permutations of the letters of the Tetragrammaton and the names of the angels Uriel, Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael) the same four Hebrew phrases inscribed by Kircher in the openface letters of the monogram IHS.

Kircher’s diagram, besides being a Jesuit emblem of Catholic universalism, can also be read as a pious Christian-kabbalistic amulet—an apotropaic talisman to ward off superstition through the power of the name of Christ. At the center are several forms of the “wonder-working” divine name of Jesus, as well as a portrait of the Savior. Christ’s force radiates outward through derivative forms of the divine names, reaching all humanity, and ultimately repels the superstitious magical Kabbalah of the rabbis, which is forced to take refuge in the

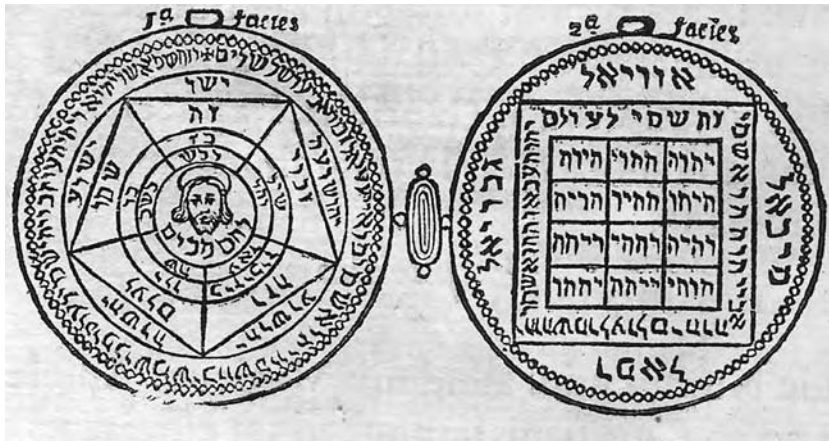


Figure 6.8. A kabbalistic amulet. *Source:* Kircher, 1652–55, vol. 2, part 2, p. 475. By permission of Stanford University Libraries.

corners—not unlike the heroic Society of Jesus, fighting heresy and superstition and spreading truth in the four corners of the globe.

Notes

1. Reuchlin 1993, p. 311.
2. Kircher 1652–55, vol. 1 fol. b1v.
3. Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 359.
4. Aquin 1625. The original work is very rare, and the plate even more so, as it is lacking in many copies. I have consulted a photograph of a loose print of the diagram that belonged to Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, which is now deposited with Peiresc's manuscripts at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris MS. Latin 9340, fol. 7. I thank Peter Miller for bringing this to my attention. Secret 1985, Pl. 15, reproduces a 1735 reprint of the diagram, which is quite faithful to the original. The frontispiece to the modern Italian translation (Aquin 1993), however, bears little resemblance to the original. For d'Aquin's explanation of his diagram, I have to rely on the Italian translation.
5. Cordovero's *Pardes rimmonim* was a major source of Kircher's treatise, although Kircher did not know the author's name and referred to the work simply as "Pardes." Kircher consulted a manuscript of the work at the College of Neophytes, now Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (hereafter BAV) MS. Neofiti 28. The diagram is found at fol. 319r. The immediately preceding pages of the manuscript bear marginalia by Kircher.
6. See Mély, 1922, which reproduces the entire broadside. Hepburn was a Scottish Franciscan and curated Oriental manuscripts at the Vatican Library.
7. D'Aquin has an apple tree, while Kircher has a pomegranate—though in Latin a pomegranate is a "Punic apple," *malum punicum*. Kircher does not explicitly identify the lower-left tree as an olive but it resembles one, and that is how the corresponding tree is identified by d'Aquin.
8. The treatise on the Kabbalah, like the rest of the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, is heavily annotated with citations to sources. The citations, however, are not reliable as an indication of Kircher's actual encounter with the sources—indeed, they are often positively misleading. Many of Kircher's quotations from and references to Hebrew and Aramaic primary sources are taken secondhand (often along with ready-made Latin translations) from unacknowl-

- edged Latin authors. At the same time he omits any reference to many of the secondary sources on which his work is dependent.
9. On the Christian Kabbalah, see Secret 1985, 1992; Scholem 1997; Dan 1997; Faivre and Tristan 1979; and Blau 1944.
 10. Galatino 1518, bk. 2; Reuchlin 1993, bk. 3.
 11. Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 287. Also see pp. 232–238 for his discussion of the mystical Trinitarian significance of the Tetragrammaton.
 12. Reuchlin 1494. See Zika 1976. In addition to Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirificio*, Kircher cites Arcangelo da Borgonovo 1557. (Here as elsewhere Kircher mistakenly gives that author's name as "Novoburgensis.")
 13. Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 235.
 14. In Kircher's translations these are: "hoc nomen meum in aeternum" (this is my name for eternity); "Domine, nomen tuum in aeternum Deus" (Lord, your name for eternity is God); "Deus virtutum hoc nomen meum" (God of powers this is my name); and "Ego Deus, hoc nomen meum" (I am God, this is my name). *Ibid.*, p. 287.
 15. The Hebrew text in the diagram is frequently corrupt, due to the artist confounding similarly shaped letters such as *kaf* and *bet* and transposing letters. Here as elsewhere I have corrected the obvious mistakes and followed the more reliable Hebrew names given in the body of Kircher's text.
 16. On Heredia and the *Epistola secretorum*, see Scholem 1997. Forgeries by Jewish converts—primarily Heredia's *Epistola secretorum* and the interpolations in the otherwise reliable translations of kabbalistic texts prepared by Flavius Mithridates for Givoanni Pico della Mirandola—played a decisive role in the genesis of the Christian Kabbalah. On Flavius's translations and their influence, see Wirszubski 1989.
 17. Kircher, 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 251. Kircher's inclusion of this divine name in the table may indicate that he did not consider it so superstitious as he felt compelled to state. In his explanation of the diagram (which occurs in a later section of the treatise than his initial negative description), he describes the second forty-two-letter name neutrally, giving no explanation of its significance or method of composition: "And these are the two divine names of forty-two letters; the first disclosed (*explicatum*) [i.e., the Trinitarian name attributed to Haccados], the second secret (*arcanum*) [i.e., the name derived from letter combinations] . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 287.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
 19. *Ibid.*, pp. 267 ff.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 273.
 21. The theurgical significance involves the use of the angel names in mystical prayer, described by Kircher; *ibid.*, p. 274. The less religiously magical significance of the names is only implicit in the kabbalistic sources, but becomes explicit in Jewish magical practices based on the construction of amulets with the seventy-two angel names, as discussed below.
 22. Arcangelo da Borgonovo 1569, p. 1. Borgonovo's discussion of Christ as the Tree of Life may also have inspired parts of Kircher's interpretation; *ibid.*, pp. 21–28.
 23. The relevant passage of Borgonovo appears, uncited, in the original manuscript of *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Vittorio Emanuele, Rome (BNVE) MS. Ges. 1235, fols. 125r–v. Kircher removed this section after the Jesuit Revisors, who reviewed the text prior to publication, called attention to the fact that he had plagiarized from Borgonovo; see Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (hereafter ARSI) FG 668, fol. 392. See Stolzenberg 2004 and Stolzenberg forthcoming. It is now known that Borgonovo had himself plagiarized much of his text from the work of his deceased teacher, Francesco Giorgi; see Wirszubski 1974; Secret 1974. Hepburn's *Virga aurea* (see above) was likely another link in the chain of association that led Kircher to this vision of the name of God in seventy-two languages.
 24. Allen, 2000 pp. 142–5
 25. Kircher, 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 287.
 26. See Zika 1976, p. 128.
 27. On this diagram considered as a Jesuit emblem, see Michael John Gorman, "The Angel and the Compass: Athanasius Kircher's Geographical Project," in this volume.
 28. See Mungello 1985. On the congruence of Kircher's studies of the hieroglyphs and other occult traditions with the ideology of the post-Tridentine Church, see Cipriani 1993; and Pastine 1978.

29. On the *prisca theologia*, see Walker 1972, esp. pp. 1–2. Beginning with Pico, most Christian interpreters of the Kabbalah traced that tradition to Moses, but Jewish views were less uniform; Altmann 1987, p. 7.
30. By these comments, I do not mean to attribute to Kircher an explicit and deliberate anti-Christian argument, but only to point out certain implications that may be easily derived from his line of argument. The fact that ancient Jews and pagans knew Christian mysteries does not, of course, contradict the most important rationale for Christ's incarnation, the redemption of the original sin. It is notable, however, that the original sin is all but absent from Kircher's account of the transmission of Adamic wisdom to postlapsarian posterity.
31. In fact, in his explanation of the amulet (Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 352), Kircher gives the six-letter name as But this appears to be an error, as it is inconsistent with the forty-two-letter name (as given in Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 258) of which it is supposed to be the beginning. The text given in the diagram is even more corrupt.
32. Each of these amulets is composed of one of the seventy-two angel names written with a corresponding verse from the psalms. Kircher, 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, pp. 274–281. Kircher also discusses the amulets based on the seventy-two names, along with the amulets represented by the olive and pomegranate trees, in the chapter on kabbalistic astrology. *Ibid.*, pp. 352–353.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
34. By this I mean that these popular practices involved neither the type of theurgic activity directed toward affecting the realm of the sefirot nor the ecstatic practices meant to induce divine union, which constitute the practical dimensions of the two main divisions of the Kabbalah. (See Idel 1988.) Rather, practices such as the use of amulets described in the *Shimmush Tehillim*, although they sometimes employed elements derived from the Kabbalah—such as the names of God constructed by kabbalistic hermeneutic techniques—were popular practices used to attract good fortune and repel bad in the mundane realm of daily life. On “practical Kabbalah,” see Scholem 1978, pp. 182–189, who observes: “Historically speaking, a large part of the contents of practical Kabbalah considerably predate those of speculative Kabbalah and are not dependent on them. In effect, what came to be considered practical Kabbalah constituted an agglomeration of all the magical practices that developed in Judaism from the talmudic period down through the Middle Ages.”
35. Giulio Bartolucci, “Morè Makòm. Index Materiarum Authorum & titulorum librorum M.S. Ebraicorum Bibliothecae Vaticane, Palatinae, & Urbinatis” (1661): BAV Vat. Lat. 13197–13199. “Cabala Practica, Magica, etc.” in vol. 3, fols. 239–246. The distinction between these works and those defined simply as “Cabalistae” is explained at vol. 1, fols. 137–138: “Until now we have listed kabbalistic books which are called Work of Creation and Work of the Chariot (*Maassè Bereschith, et Maassè Marcheà*); which deal with the external works of God (*de operibus dei ad extra*), the divine attributes, and the rewards and punishments owed to men according to their works. Now are noted Kabbalistic codices which are called operator, for the very reason that they [the authors] boast that they can produce many marvels and supernatural effects by the invocation of certain good names or evil spirits.”
36. The classic descriptions of early modern antiquarianism are Momigliano 1966, 1990.
37. Kircher's professional identity as an interpreter of mysterious objects and inscriptions can be seen especially clearly in Kaspar Schott's portrait of Kircher in his preface to the first volume of the *Oedipus*: “Benevoli Lectori,” Kircher 1652–55, vol. 1, fols. c2r–d1v. It is true that the amulets represented by the trees in the diagram are not physical specimens but texts meant to be written on paper or parchment—they are practices more than objects. Nonetheless, inasmuch as his interest in amulets in general was fueled by antiquarian interest in physical specimens, the point holds. Furthermore, Kircher's discussion of the written amulets is based, as he stresses, on information culled from unpublished Hebrew manuscripts, making their exposition a kind of antiquarian endeavor. The other kabbalistic amulets described by Kircher (discussed below) were specific specimens, described by Kircher as “coins” (*nummi*), the archetypal object of antiquarian study.
38. This dimension of Peiresc's antiquarianism emerges clearly in Agnès Bresson's edition of his correspondence with Saumaise and others: Peiresc 1992. Peiresc refers (with some skepticism) to the efforts of a M. St.-Clerc to interpret a hieroglyphic inscription “by the Kabbalah” in a 1632 letter to d'Aubery; Peiresc 1888–98, vol. 7, 221. An example of Peiresc's promotion of the study of “gnostic” amulets from his collection is treated in Barb 1953.

Peiresc also sent Kircher an Arabic magical seal from his collection, which he interpreted in Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 1, p. 392. None of this is to deny that Peiresc's interest in such matters was much, much more circumspect than Kircher's, and there is no doubt that he would have been greatly dismayed by the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, despite its frequent homages to him, had he lived to see its publication. On Peiresc's antiquarianism more generally, see Miller 2000.

39. Evans 1979, pp. 440–441.
40. Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 2, p. 474. Kircher's reference to the Inquisition's desire for him to publish this material is clearly intended to deflect criticism that his detailed descriptions of illicit magical practices were too dangerous to be published. Precisely this complaint was made regarding Kircher's descriptions of magical seals by the Jesuit censors charged with reviewing the *Oedipus* manuscript, apparently to no avail: "Thus it does not seem permissible for the author to lay out how each superstitious seal may be composed and arranged in practice for superstition and magic. Nor does the author do enough when he reproves the aforesaid seals as superstitious and to be shunned, since some curious and insufficiently God-fearing individuals might esteem them and put them to use." ARSI FG 668, fol. 396r.
41. Kircher 1652–55, vol. 2, part 2, pp. 474–475.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 476–477. Also see pp. 477–478 on Jewish blaspheming against Christ.
43. A version of this same amulet, as well as other similar kabbalistic amulets in use among Jewish converts at the end of the seventeenth century, is described by Bartolucci 1675–93, vol. 4, pp. 158–165, 233–235. The seal in question is depicted at p. 162.