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STEPHEN G. BURNETT

PHILOSEMITISM AND CHRISTIAN HEBRAISM IN THE REFORMATION ERA (1500–1620)

Jonathan Israel argues in his seminal work *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism* (1985) that the early modern period marked a distinctive phase in the historical experience and consciousness of the Jews of Western Europe. He contends that the key factor that paved the way for these changes was the “political and spiritual upheaval which engulfed European culture as a whole by the end of the sixteenth century”, above all what he terms the “Catholic-Protestant deadlock”.¹ The Protestant Reformation, which began in Wittenberg but quickly divided into several competing forms of Protestantism, evoked a Catholic Reformation in response. Polemicists from these emerging Christian confessional churches were not slow to portray their theological opponents as demonic enemies of the one true God, but they all agreed that Judaism was a false religion, and that the Jews themselves were stubborn rebels against God.² Yet the sixteenth century also saw the birth and explosive growth of Christian Hebrew scholarship, supported and encouraged by the leaders of these same confessional churches.

Christian interest in Hebrew and in the literature of Judaism has long been identified as a feature of early modern European Philosemitism, beginning with the pioneering book of Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Philosemitismus im Barock* (1952),³ and continuing in the works of Shmuel Ettinger, Jonathan Israel, and David Katz.⁴ Yet scholarly agreement that Philosemitism existed in the early modern period has not necessarily extended to its existence during the Reformation. Indeed, Heiko Oberman asserted, “Philosemitism does not exist in the sixteenth century, and among the Christians friends of Jews are rare exceptions.”⁵ I will argue in this paper that in fact Christian Hebraism in the Reformation era did at times foster a nascent form of Philosemitism that would become more important in the mid-late seventeenth century.

David Katz in his article “The Phenomenon of Philosemitism” (1992) gave a very broad definition of the term as it related to the early modern period (and later centuries). He posited that Philosemitism involved “an attitude which finds Jews and Jewish culture admirable, desirable or even in demand.” Significantly, Katz was also willing to allow that a Christian

could be committed to the Jewish mission and yet could still be considered a Philosemite.⁶ Katz's definition is, however, too imprecise to account for the attitudes of Christian Hebraists of this period. I prefer to identify Christian interest in things Jewish during this time as an example of what Wolfram Kinzig has termed "secondary Philosemitism", where an engagement on behalf of Judaism was possible for reasons other than admiring Judaism for its own sake.⁷ Not surprisingly, the traces of Philosemitic attitudes and actions shown by Christian Hebraists grew out of their understanding of how Christians could benefit from Jewish learning.

The evidence for a growing interest among Christian scholars in the Hebrew language and in Jewish literature during the sixteenth century is overwhelming. Since the late nineteenth century Jewish historians have referred to this intellectual movement as "Christian Hebraism".⁸

"Christian Hebraism was an offshoot of Renaissance humanism whose devotees – biblical scholars, theologians, lawyers, physicians, scientists, philosophers, and teachers in Latin schools – borrowed and adapted texts, literary forms, and ideas from Jewish scholarship and tradition to meet Christian cultural and religious needs."⁹

Christian Hebrew learning therefore involved also an encounter with Judaism as a living religion, and at times the participation of Jews in facilitating Christian study of their literature. This essay will focus on three facets of this scholarly encounter and their significance for the growth of a nascent form of Philosemitism: the study of Hebrew itself, Jewish biblical interpretation, and the study of Judaism by Christians.

Any first-hand encounter with the Hebrew Bible text and with many forms of post-biblical Jewish literature meant that a Christian scholar had to learn to read Hebrew. Finding Hebrew instruction before 1550 was a challenge for those who wished to learn the language. Only a very few Christian Hebraists taught themselves to read Hebrew. The most heroic example of a self-taught Hebraist was Conrad Pellican, who began teaching himself Hebrew in 1499. He accomplished this with the help of a Hebrew manuscript of the Minor Prophets with its own Latin translation, together with a few transcribed Hebrew phrases from the book of Isaiah that he found in Petrus Negri's *Stella Messiae* (1475). However, even Pellican was later obliged to seek out Jewish help in the form of two Jewish converts who tutored him, Matthias Adrianus and Michael Adam.¹⁰

For Christian students to find an effective Jewish tutor who was willing to teach them was difficult throughout the Reformation era. As

early as 1506, Johannes Reuchlin complained that German Jews “either out of hatred or ignorance refuse to teach Christians their language, and they refuse because of the influence of what a certain Rabbi Amos, who wrote in the Talmud (Hagiga 13a)”, “The words of the Holy Scripture may not be explained to unbelievers.”¹¹ Fortunately for would-be Christian Hebrew scholars not all Jews felt bound by this prohibition. Elijah Levita had no reservations on the matter: How could the Christians learn the seven commandments of Noah, he asked rhetorically, if they knew no Hebrew?¹² However, even willing Jewish tutors often found it difficult to teach Christians to read Hebrew because they lacked the broad exposure to elements of Hebrew that Jews could experience daily. Ashkenazic Jewish children were assumed to have learned some of the rudiments of Hebrew within the family and in the synagogue even before they began to work with a teacher. Hence they learned to read the prayer book, as well as the Bible with Rashi’s commentary through an inductive method rather than using the kind of analytical grammar-based approach that Christian students used when learning Latin or Greek. Those few Jewish tutors such as Levita who could teach Hebrew in the Christian manner were very rare and could command high fees.¹³

Fortunately for the majority of Christian Hebrew students Christian teachers equipped with Hebrew textbooks intended for non-Jewish readers had become common by the 1550’s in France, Germany, the Spanish Netherlands, Switzerland, and England, the countries most affected by the Reformation. Reuchlin’s *De Rudimenta* (1507) was one of the first of these books. It was a Latin translation and adaptation of David Kimhi’s Hebrew grammar *Michlol*, and his lexicon *Sefer ha-Shorashim*. Although Sebastian Münster used Kimhi’s works extensively, he devoted much of his career to translating and adapting the works of Elijah Levita for Christian students. The brothers David and Moses Kimhi and Levita were generally acknowledged by Christian Hebraists of the sixteenth century to be their most valuable authorities for settling grammatical and lexicographical questions.

During the sixteenth century Christians were dependent upon Jews either directly or indirectly when learning Hebrew. It is therefore not surprising that Christians felt free to praise Jewish expertise in Hebrew. Johannes Reuchlin extravagantly praised his first Hebrew teacher Jacob ben Yehiel Loans, addressing him in a letter as “my lord and master, guide and friend.”¹⁴ Sebastian Münster was fulsome in his praise of Elijah Levita’s expertise in Hebrew. Not only did he translate a number of Levita’s grammatical works into Latin, but even his own magnum opus, the *Opus*

Grammaticum Consummatum ex variis Elianis libris concinnatum (1542) acknowledges Levita in its title. Cardinal Egedio di Viterbo acknowledged Levita's expertise and worth in an even more public fashion by inviting Levita to live in his household from 1515–1527.¹⁵ Even Martin Luther praised David and Moses Kimhi in his *Table Talk* during the 1530's, calling their work the "purest and best grammars" and referring to them as "excellent grammarians."¹⁶ So it was possible for Christian scholars to publicly admire at least some Jews, both living and dead, for their expertise in the Hebrew language.

A second area where Jews and Christians shared a common interest was in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Deena Klepper succinctly summarized the challenge that Christian Hebraists faced when seeking help from Jewish commentaries to better understand the Hebrew Bible.

"The incorporation of the Hebrew Bible within the Christian canon established an ongoing connection between Christian and Jewish scripture, a connection that was sometimes ignored, sometimes engaged, but that effectively bound biblical exegesis with polemic for Jews and Christians alike. At various times, some within the Christian community found themselves drawn to rabbinic teaching as a source for understanding the Christian Old Testament, but such exploitation of Jewish sources could be met with suspicion or hostility, and Christian exegetes who employed Jewish teachers or texts could easily find themselves accused of 'Judaizing', or slipping back into a Jewish understanding of the text."¹⁷

It is safe to assume that no Reformation-era Christian Hebraist was unaware of this dilemma. Scholars as diverse as Sebastian Münster, Conrad Pellican, Martin Bucer, and even Martin Luther urged Christian Hebraists to make measured, cautious use of Jewish biblical commentaries, although they disagreed among themselves what "cautious" use meant.¹⁸

One of the most forthright and enthusiastic proponents of using Jewish commentaries in the early sixteenth century was Sebastian Münster. In his *Hebraica Biblia* (1534–1535) he even published a defense for the use of Jewish commentaries. He wrote,

"The works of St. Jerome teach us that the writings of the Hebrews are not all to be condemned by one who tries to render the holy Hebrew codices into Latin. In fact, he confesses that he, by no means, would have been able at all to interpret the Sacred Scriptures without the aid

of the Hebrew teachers. [...] I do not doubt that, if the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Moses Gerundi, Ben Gerson, or David Kimhi had been available to Jerome, he would not have needed living teachers. [...] T]he reading and interpretation of the rabbis, O Christian reader, will not harm you if you have studied Christ truly. In fact, this information will be helpful to you whether they agree with us or not.”¹⁹

Cardinal Robert Bellarmine was another strong supporter for use of Jewish biblical commentaries. Bellarmine expressed himself forcefully on one occasion, declaring that the “hoary prejudice that the Hebrew commentators had maliciously corrupted the text of Scripture was rubbish [...] rubbish founded upon ignorance of the language.”²⁰

Luther, not surprisingly, had some of the deepest reservations about using Jewish commentaries. Since he believed that the true subject of Scripture was Christ, the exegetical help that Jewish commentaries could offer was limited. The rabbis, he argued, did not know the “subject matter” of the Bible, and therefore they could not understand it fully.²¹ Yet even Luther could not and did not ignore Jewish biblical interpretation in his Genesis Lectures of 1535–1545, and in the revision of his German translation of the Old Testament. At least two of his “Sanhedrin” of Hebrew experts, Philipp Melanchthon and Caspar Cruciger, owned and used Bomberg rabbinical Bibles, and it is believed Luther himself may have owned a copy.²²

The most common means by which most Christian Hebrew students gained access to Jewish biblical commentaries was one of the various Bomberg rabbinical Bibles imprints (1517, 1524–1525, 1546 or 1568), or Buxtorf’s edition of it that was printed in 1618–1619. Although these multi-volume folio books were originally produced with Jewish purchasers in mind, they had an important impact upon Christian biblical scholarship in the Reformation era. In addition to the Hebrew Bible text, rabbinic Bibles contained the Aramaic Targums to each biblical book, a selection of Jewish Bible commentaries, including Rashi’s commentary for the entire Bible, and frequently the commentaries of Abraham ibn Ezra and David Kimhi.

One can measure the impact that the rabbinic Bible had upon Christian biblical scholarship by the large number of Latin translations made of Jewish biblical commentaries and the Targums of shorter biblical books for student use. Sebastian Münster translated and printed the biblical commentaries of Ibn Ezra on the Decalogue (1527) and of David Kimhi on the prophets Joel, Amos and Malachi (1530–1531).²³ Jean Mercier,

Professor of Hebrew at the College Royale in Paris (1547–1570) translated no fewer than 6 biblical commentaries – five of David Kimhi and one of Ibn Ezra – into Latin, and seven of the Targums into Latin.²⁴ These translations, while making available in Latin examples of Jewish biblical commentary, were primarily intended to teach Christian students to read the commentaries and the Targums for themselves.

The final variety of Christian Jewish learning that I will consider is study of Judaism as a living religion in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Before the sixteenth century Christian knowledge of the practice of Judaism was at best fragmentary, and at worst Christians fundamentally misunderstood Judaism. The twin myths of ritual murder and Host Desecration were widely believed by Christians both learned and uneducated, and both were, of course, utterly false. Johannes Pfefferkorn began a new kind of conversation about Judaism by publishing his unflattering but recognizable accounts of how Jews celebrate Yom Kippur and Passover in his *Judenbeichte* (1508) and *Osterbüchlein* (1509).²⁵ His rather humble efforts were completely superseded in 1530 when Anthonius Margaritha published his *Der Gantz Jüdisch Glaub*,²⁶ which contained not only a recognizable portrayal of Jewish life from cradle to grave, but also a German version of the Siddur, the order of daily prayers. Margaritha's purpose, he claimed, in writing the book was to “depict the ceremonies, prayers, and customs of the Jews based on their own books”, thereby to “expose” the false beliefs of the Jews, and to show how they cursed the Holy Roman Empire and Christians in their daily prayers.²⁷ Paradoxically, Margaritha's portrayal of Judaism was also the most comprehensive book of its kind in any non-Jewish language and served to inform an otherwise ignorant German reading public about the realities of Judaism as it was practiced. For example, Margaritha provided a subtle rejoinder to Christian belief in the Blood Libel. Emphasizing his own experience in preparing for Passover, he wrote that Matzah was made of “only flour and water, neither salt nor fat may be added.”²⁸ Of course he had no need to add that no blood of any kind could be added to the mixture.

The first contribution to this genre of polemical literature by a Christian from birth was Johannes Buxtorf's *Juden Schul* (1603). Buxtorf took the pattern laid down by Margaritha and elaborated upon it considerably, beginning in Chapter one with a harshly critical discussion of Maimonides' Thirteen Articles of Faith, the origins of the Talmud and the basis for rabbinic authority. In the rest of the book he provided a far lengthier explanation of Jewish life from cradle to grave than Margaritha had (392 octavo pages long in the first printing).

After Buxtorf's harsh, uncompromising theological critique of Judaism in *Juden Schul's* first chapter, his narrative tone throughout the remainder is less harsh and more detached. His descriptions of Jewish rites and beliefs alternate with page after page of direct quotations from Jewish authorities.

"However, Buxtorf's milder rhetoric does not reflect a change of heart but rather a shift in tactics. He sought to illustrate his contention that Judaism was based upon adherence to the Talmud rather than faithfulness to the Scriptures by examining specific Jewish customs, rituals and beliefs and linking them whenever possible to Talmudic precept."²⁹

Nearly every chapter ends with a series of biblical quotations that served as a foil to the Jewish practices just described, and demonstrated to Buxtorf's satisfaction that they depart from the Bible, the one true source of religious authority. Where he did editorialize in his discussions he usually placed his ironic or sarcastic comments in the margins rather than incorporating them within his narrative. Like Margaritha, Buxtorf claimed that his discussion too was based upon "the Jews's own books", and his broad knowledge of Jewish sources attests to his skill as a Hebraist.

While *Juden Schul* was hardly an unbiased account of Jewish life, it served to dispel further Christian misconceptions of Judaism. Most importantly, his book provided a fundamentally accurate guide to Jewish beliefs and practices that was in fact read and cited by both Jews and Christians. Many Christian and Jewish convert writers based their discussions of Jewish belief and practice on Buxtorf's book for the next 150 years. When Leon Modena of Venice was asked between 1614 and 1615 by an English "nobleman" to write an account of Judaism,³⁰ he was obliged to write the book with a Latin translation of Buxtorf's book at his side, since it was the "accepted wisdom" concerning Judaism among educated Christians. Solomon Aufhausen found it useful, when writing *Yudischer Theriak* (1615), a refutation of Samuel Friedrich Brentz's attack on Judaism, to quote from both Buxtorf's and Margaritha's books to expose the ignorance of his opponent, and thereby to undermine his credibility as a witness concerning Judaism.³¹

Let me conclude by analyzing Reformation-era Christian Hebraism as an example of "secondary Philosemitism" from the perspective of scholarly motives, goals and unintended consequences of their work. The two primary motives that Christian Hebraists gave for studying Jewish literature were (1) to profit from such study and to incorporate its results into

the Christian world of learning, and (2) to seek the conversion of the Jews. The fruit of the scholarly study of Jewish literature can be seen most obviously in the books that Christian Hebraists themselves wrote and published. These include new translations of the Hebrew Bible into both Latin and vernacular European languages, studies of the Kabbalah, translations of portions of the Targums and Jewish biblical commentaries, and books such as Buxtorf's *Juden Schul* about the practice of Judaism itself. At least some Hebraist biblical commentaries – such as Martin Bucer's famous Psalms commentary (1529) and Jean Mercier's enormous, posthumously published commentaries on Genesis, Job, Proverbs, and the Minor Prophets – reflect greater sophistication in interpreting the Hebrew Bible text and utilizing the resources of Jewish scholarship for its interpretation.³²

As Christian Hebraists sought to gain the knowledge necessary to produce their new works, they needed Jewish help to accomplish their goals. Their involvement with Jews sometimes had quite unintended consequences. First and most obviously, interacting with a Jewish teacher as a Christian student was necessarily a different kind of relationship than that of a customer transacting business with a peddler or merchant. The same point can be made for Christians who worked with Jews in Hebrew print shops. Studying Jewish texts with Jews was yet another kind of interaction which helped to chip away at the social and religious wall of separation between Jew and Christian, and providing the opportunity for “semi-neutral encounters” between them.³³

Many Christian Hebraists needed Jewish books to pursue their studies, which meant that they had a stake in ability of Jews to print, sell, and own their own books. The most famous case from the Reformation era of a Christian defense of the right of Jews to own their own books was of course the Reuchlin Affair. Reuchlin argued both privately in his *Opinion on Jewish Books*, and later publicly in his pamphlet *Augenspiegel*, that confiscating Jewish books was not only illegal under the law, it would also harm Christians in their efforts to profit from Jewish learning.³⁴ Reuchlin of course paid a heavy price for defying Pfefferkorn and his patrons the Dominicans of Cologne, but he refused to concede to them. He held his ground not because he loved Judaism for its own sake, but because of his personal commitment to Hebrew learning and his desire to defend his personal honor. Reuchlin's public stand had a positive impact upon the situation of contemporary German Jews.

The relationship between Jewish conversion as a motive for Hebrew study and its intended and unintended consequences is still more complicated.

Individual Christian Hebraists attempted to convert their Jewish employees, tutors or acquaintances, sometimes successfully. For example, Paul Aemilius, converted to Christianity while working as a Hebrew scribe for Johann Albrecht Widmanstetter.³⁵ Johannes Buxtorf famously tried and failed to persuade his chief printing assistant Abraham Braunschweig to convert on the occasion of his son's circumcision in 1619.³⁶ On occasion Christian Hebraists also published conversionary literature, some of it intended for Jewish readers, some intended for would-be Christian preachers to the Jews.

What possible unintended consequences could Christian commitment to Jewish conversion have for European Jewry? Perhaps the most important consequence was what Ronnie Hsia has termed the "disenchantment" of Judaism.³⁷ Andreas Osiander wrote a robust (if anonymous) rebuttal of the Blood Libel, based in part upon Jewish sources. As Joy Kammerling has pointed out, Osiander's motives in writing the book were quite mixed, involving a sophisticated attack upon Catholicism that is woven throughout the book, and Osiander's well-attested personal involvement in the proselytism of Jews. Like the early Luther, Osiander believed that if Jews were treated better, they would be more easily converted. Yet Osiander's attack on ritual murder, undertaken for reasons of his own, had the effect of supporting German Jews.³⁸

Buxtorf's *Juden Schul* (1603) was intended as an exposé of Judaism but it would become a primary source of information about Judaism itself for Christians. By providing accurate information about Judaism, Osiander, Buxtorf and others served to dispel some Christian fears about the Jews. To cite one consequence of this greater knowledge, it was possible even in the early seventeenth century, at the height of Christian confessional conflict in Germany, to create a workable regimen of oversight for Jewish printing there to ensure that Jews would be able to produce and own the books they needed.³⁹ If not an example of toleration, this was an example of a *modus vivendi* that benefited German Jews.

In my essay I have emphasized the often-mixed motives of Christian Hebraists in pursuing their interests, and their ambivalent relations with Jews. Yet I have argued that Christian Hebraists were persuaded that they had a stake in the survival and growth of Hebrew learning, and consequently they had a stake, however small, in Judaism as well. These Hebraists were not for the most part secular rulers or leaders of the church (Cardinal di Viterbo was a very exceptional figure). They were scholars whose work contributed in an important way to a *reevaluation* of Jews and Judaism and their place within European society.

Anmerkungen

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