

PROJECT 2 (2009-10): The Reading of Hebrew and Jewish Texts in the Early Modern Period

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Hebrew texts, or the wisdom contained in Jewish books, engaged the attention of Christian readers of all denominations from the mid-fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Hebrew was regarded as part and parcel of the scholar's accoutrements, enabling him or her to enter the republic of letters and to converse with its members. In the great volumes of humanist correspondence, Hebrew and matters related to Jewish tradition often occur in scholarly exchanges – and Hebrew is even on occasion used as the medium of communication. By the end of the seventeenth century certain Christian scholars had a deep knowledge of Hebrew writing, becoming familiar with works hot off the printer's press. Indeed, the case of John Selden (1584–1654), who read the entire Babylonian Talmud while languishing in Her Majesty's prison and who applied his Jewish learning to matters of natural and Roman law, was not an exception.

There were various reasons that propelled Christians to acquire knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic: the desire to return *ad fontes* and to read the Bible in its original language, to study the rabbinic texts which somehow testified to the historical world in which Christianity was born and to engage in Kabbalah, the esoteric writings of Jewish tradition which allegedly contained deep mysteries of the Christian faith. The Christian Hebraism to which this interest in Hebrew gave rise dominated our seminars on 'Reading Hebrew in the Early Modern Period'. Our weekly meetings, which continued over six months and involved ten senior and junior scholars from Europe, Israel and the United States, and which also drew audiences from the wider Oxford scholarly community, were meant to initiate a comprehensive approach and to reconsider the definition of Christian Hebraism.

The mandate given to the participants was to attempt to understand the nature of Hebraism in this period, by taking into account all its different guises. To date, research has concentrated on either Christian or Jewish Hebraism, resulting in a skewed version of Jewish culture among Jews and Christians. Here, instead, the purpose was to pinpoint the texts that inform the discussion of both Jews and Christians in their scholarly writings. In other words, did Christians read the same books as Jews and, if so, were they reading the books through the same lenses and for the same reasons?

The expertise of the members of our group enabled us to consider many different aspects of reading Hebrew in the early modern period. Crucial for our undertaking was an in-depth study of the Jewish libraries of Christian scholars. Theodor Dunkelgrün demonstrated how the great Dutch Hebraist Johannes Drusius acquired and applied his Hebrew knowledge. Andrew Berns brought a Hebraist out of the closet – Ulisse Aldrovandi – more usually known as a Bolognese naturalist. Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg focused on the library of one of the greatest Christian Hebraists of the sixteenth century, Johannes Buxtorf, by means of his one surviving notebook that yielded much new information about Buxtorf's attitudes and working methods. An illuminating case study of Jewish-Christian reading of Jewish texts was Anthony Grafton's survey of Christian scholars' efforts to understand the relation between the Last Supper as depicted in the Gospels, and the Jewish Passover Seder as they recreated it (or attempted to do so).

Another aspect of our deliberations was to consider the written culture of Hebraism in Italy during the fifteenth, sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. An important aspect of this topic, which reemerged repeatedly and was presented by Federica Francesconi and Piet van Boxel, was the interplay between Jewish texts and the activities of Christian censors, and the way in which the world of the inquisition placed limits on, and created particular opportunities for, religious expression on the part of both Jews and Christians. Yet religious scruples, or rather the dictates of religion, did not really impede the influence of Jewish authors on the various Bible translations from Hebrew into Latin and into the vernacular (Italian).

Some of the most important manuscripts of biblical glossaries and biblical translations in Judeo-Italian and in Italian at the Bodleian Library at Oxford were studied by Alessandro Guetta, who showed us the Christian hand in Jewish Bible translations into the vernacular.

In a preliminary investigation of the collection of Hebrew manuscripts in the Bodleian Library collected by the great orientalist and Laudian Professor of Arabic Edward Pococke (1604–91), Yosef Hacker reconstructed how the quest for Oriental enlightenment led Western diplomats and scholars to search for Hebrew (and other Oriental) manuscripts in all corners of the Ottoman Empire, where they purchased the texts from Jewish owners. These trophies contributed in no small way to the development of Hebrew scholarship in the West. The acquisition of expertise in reading the Hebrew materials also affected – and not superficially – Christians' own understanding of their religious origins.

Not unrelated to this phenomenon, as Scott Mandelbrote argued, is the way scholars used Jewish sources in evaluating the text and authority of the Septuagint in the early modern period. Likewise, the circulation of printed books from Italy to Poland – as Elchanan Reiner showed – caused a cultural ferment challenging the traditions of Ashkenazi Jewish society. Less ideological, perhaps, was Christian interest in the realia of the Jewish world which developed for the first time in this period. The fascination for Hebrew epistolography, presented by Theodor Dunkelgrün, and the study of Jewish tombstones for their historical and literary content, presented by Michela Andreatta and Eleazar Gutwirth, clearly belong to the humanist and antiquarian context in which the majority of the scholars functioned. And as Philip Ford demonstrated in his seminar paper, the study of Hebrew was not a male prerogative. In the 1560s the Belgian scholar Charles Utenhove became the tutor of the Morel family, teaching the daughters of the house, Camille, Lucrece and Diane, how to read Holy Scriptures, and we even have a document testifying to how he went about giving lessons to his female pupils.

In general, then, the seminar brought to light the transformation that took place between Christian scholarship and Jewish learning in the early modern period: in terms of the changes that were provoked in doctrine, religious practice, historical understanding and linguistic skills.

Another exciting and undoubtedly novel venture undertaken by the group was investigation of the censored Talmud produced in Basel between 1578 and 1581, a momentous event in Jewish-Christian relations which involved Jews in Germany and Venice, Catholics (including Pope Gregory XIII) and Reformed Christians. In the 1570s the printer Ambrosius Froben set out with Jewish funding to produce a Christian edition of the Babylonian Talmud – the vast compendium of Jewish laws and debates – thousands of copies of which had been publicly burned in Rome and Venice in 1553, and which had often been maligned as a work of blasphemy containing scurrilous

attacks on Jesus. The Basel censored Talmud, with title-pages in both Hebrew and Latin and with approbations of the Church, has never been studied in depth, although it represents a key moment in Jewish-Christian relations. The very notion of a Christian Talmud seems an oxymoron, yet the publication of this Talmud gave permission for both Jews and Christians to possess this vital text.

In our workshops we began to scrutinize the Basel Talmud by gathering the extant information on the complex business negotiations between Jews and Christians over the publication, for which important materials are to be found in Basel, Zurich and Venice, surveying the rules of censorship applied to the Talmud, and examining copies of the Talmud in libraries in order to ascertain ownership. Annotated copies have been discovered which testify both to Christian study of the text and to its use in Jewish Yeshivot (academies) in Germany at the end of the sixteenth century. We intend to continue this work on the Basel Talmud and to produce a monograph that will include a careful examination of all the volumes of the Talmud, and a scrutiny of the various novel marginalia that do not appear in the standard texts of the Talmud. The Basel Talmud is the most eloquent example of Christian-Jewish Hebraism in the early modern era, and our investigation into the vicissitudes of its production and into the product itself will engender a fresh formulation and definition of Christian Hebraism.

Each member of the group presented a paper at the weekly seminar held at Exeter College, which was attended also by Fellows of the Centre and by faculty and graduate members of the University of Oxford.

Particularly gratifying has been our cooperation with another major project in the University – ‘Cultures of Knowledge’ – which used some of their Mellon grant to fund lunches so that participants in both seminars could attend each other’s papers. This remarkable development continues and enhances the integration of Jewish Studies in the University. All Souls College offered to host the concluding conference, in which Professor Eleazar Gutwirth, Professor William Horbury, Professor Yosef Kaplan and Dr Nurit Pasternak also participated. A volume reflecting the seminar and its conference papers is to be published.

In addition to the weekly seminars and workshops the group met informally to discuss the progress of the research, and to lay the foundations for the future publications of the Talmud project and proceedings of the conference.

We are indebted to our funders for having given us this unique opportunity for scholarly encounter and promoting Jewish studies in Europe.

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