

JUDAISM AND ENLIGHTENMENT

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CHAPTER I

The crisis and decline of Christian Hebraism

Despite the suspicion and at times violent hostility with which most medieval Europeans generally treated the Jews in their midst, from a theological perspective medieval Christians understood the existence and survival of this dispersed minority as meaningful and necessary. The key principles of Christian dogma with regard to the Jews were classically formulated in the fifth century by Augustine of Hippo. For Augustine, Jewish disbelief in the Messiah was foretold in Scripture, and thus the Jews' 'blindness' to the meaning of their own sacred writings only confirmed these texts' truth. God's decision, Augustine argued, to disperse rather than exterminate 'our enemies' the Jews both demonstrated divine mercy and marked the Jews with a unique and crucial theological significance, as 'witnesses' to the truth of Christianity.¹ The Augustinian doctrine of Jewish witness, although subject to repeated reinterpretation, remained until the Renaissance the overarching paradigm within which Christian attitudes towards the Jews in their midst were theorised and legitimated. By the twelfth century this notion stood at the core of a more elaborate doctrine of the divine purpose of the preservation of the Jews. Not only did the Jews' dispersion serve to bear witness to the historical truth of the Church, but their misery was also a reminder of the punishment deservedly meted out to the killers of Christ. However, their suffering was not to be permanent – at the end of days, the completion of the mission of the Church would be signalled by the final coming to Christ of even his most hostile and obdurate enemies.

HEBRAISM, CONVERSION, REFORMATION

The doctrine of Jewish witness implicitly – and in its early, Augustinian form explicitly – militated against any engagement by Christians with postbiblical Judaism. All meaningfulness within Judaism was understood abruptly

¹ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (1960), §7:32, 18:46.

to have ceased at the historical moment of Jesus' crucifixion, when the old religion was superseded by the new.² However, this theological premise was problematised in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by a dramatic rise in Christian awareness of the texts of rabbinic Judaism. This intellectual development was associated with a general hardening of attitudes towards contemporary Jews, and an increased virulence of anti-Judaic polemic.³ The primary aim of the conversionist friars of this period was to expose the blasphemy of rabbinic literature. However, a striking tension can be discerned in the friars' attitude towards rabbinical literature. Texts such as Raymund Martin's *Pugio Fidei* (1278), the most sophisticated conversionist text of the thirteenth century, acknowledged the presence within the Talmud and other rabbinic writings of occasional seeds of the divine truth revealed to Moses and the prophets. As 'honey is the spittle of bees' despite their poisonous sting, so Martin argued that Christians should not disregard everything transmitted by the rabbis.⁴ In attempting to locate within the Talmud proofs of the truth of Christianity, and to use this strategy to undermine Judaism from within, Martin paradoxically ascribed a new element of value to this text, which he nonetheless intensely reviled and condemned. The universalistic impulse of scholasticism to incorporate all domains of knowledge as buttresses to Christian truth thus inspired a tentative positive interest in postbiblical Jewish writings that was subtly at odds with the dismissal of Judaism that this same universalistic rationalism simultaneously reinforced.

In the late fifteenth century, several Christian Humanist scholars turned with renewed interest to Jewish texts.⁵ The Kabbalah was a particular source of fascination for men such as Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin, who scoured the Jewish mystical tradition for further proofs of the truth of Christianity. However, there was also a powerful contrary tendency within Humanism, best exemplified by Erasmus, who was equivocal towards Christian Hebraism and repeatedly described Hebrew as a 'barbaric language'.⁶ Uncertainty and ambivalence towards Judaism was heightened in the polemically charged Reformation period. In the new, unprecedented

² Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (1999) 65; *The Friars and the Jews* (1982) 19–22.

³ Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (1993) 172–201; Robert Chazan, 'The Deteriorating Image of the Jews: Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries' in Scott L. Waugh and Peter D. Diehl, eds., *Christendom and its Discontents* (1996) 220–33; *Daggers of Faith* (1989).

⁴ Cohen, *Living Letters*, 342–58, esp. 355. See also Chazan, *Daggers of Faith* 118–36; Aaron Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis* (1984) 3–6.

⁵ See Ilana Zinguer, ed., *L'Hébreu au temps de la Renaissance* (1992) esp. 8–27.

⁶ Shimon Markish, *Erasmus and the Jews* (1986) 112–41, esp. 119.

environment of interdenominational rivalry, the establishment of authoritative and distinctive scholarly credentials was of vital importance in the formation of confessional identities. Almost from the beginnings of the Reformation, and with increased intensity from the 1540s onward, the appropriate status of Hebraic study within Protestantism was a markedly conflicted issue. The theological authority of study in the original language of the Old Testament held a powerful allure within the intellectual culture of a nascent and internally riven Protestantism, intellectually driven by the imperative to underpin its truth claims. However, Hebrew was also widely perceived as a field of danger. Learning this language effectively almost always required assistance from a Jewish teacher, and led naturally to an immersion in rabbinic writings. Such contacts and intellectual pursuits carried with them the fear of contamination, and left scholars open to the highly charged accusation of 'judaising'.

Luther's enduring hostility towards Judaism is now widely acknowledged. Despite the contrast in tone between the optimism of his early conversionist and eschatological essay *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523) and the ferocity of his infamous *On The Jews and Their Lies* (1543), throughout his career Luther was wary and contemptuous of Jewish difference.⁷ Although the hope of an imminent Jewish conversion to Christianity was a powerful animating force in his early rhetoric, this stood as an abstract ideal rather than as a concrete goal towards which he was actively working. Jews in Luther's thought were remote and largely imaginary figures, usually invoked in service of the polemical needs of the moment.⁸ Luther's approach to Hebraist scholarship was similarly for the most part instrumentalist. The Christian Hebraist tradition developed at Wittenberg, in isolation from any Jewish teachers, was characterised by the determined reading of New Testament concepts into Old Testament passages.⁹

Lutheran Hebraism differed significantly from the more intellectual dynamic approach developed in the Reformed centres of Basel, Zurich and Strasbourg. Whereas the Wittenberg approach insistently subordinated the Old Testament to the Gospels, Reformed scholars were more inclined to

⁷ Richard Marius, *Martin Luther* (1999) 372–80. See also Gavin Langmuir, 'The Faith of Christians and Hostility to Jews', in *Christianity and Judaism* (1992) 77–92; Eric W. Gritsch, 'The Jews in Reformation Theology', in Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer, eds., *Jewish-Christian Encounters Over the Centuries* (1994) 197–213.

⁸ See Marius, *Luther*, 372–3; Betsy Halpern Amaru, 'Martin Luther and Jewish Mirrors', *Jewish Social Studies* 46 (1984) 95–102; Carl Cohen, 'Martin Luther and his Jewish Contemporaries', *Jewish Social Studies* 25 (1963) 195–204.

⁹ Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (1983) esp. 168–9.

view the two covenants as separate, and were therefore less wary of using Jewish sources.¹⁰ However, even in the Calvinist world such scholarship was widely regarded as a perilous endeavour. Hebraism drew the Christian theologian deep into alien territory, raising the fear that the outwardly Jewish activity of reading rabbinic texts could lead to a shift of perspective or even of religious loyalties. The reality of these anxieties is reflected in the scandal of the famous ‘circumcision incident’ in Basel in 1619, when the esteemed Hebraist Johannes Buxtorf the elder was severely reprimanded and fined for attending the circumcision of the son of one of his Hebrew printers. Despite Buxtorf’s unquestionable conviction of the profound falsity of Judaism, his friendships with his Jewish collaborators ran against the grain of the expectations of his fellow citizens, and reinforced their suspicion of his Hebraist activities.¹¹

The leading Protestant Hebraists of the mid sixteenth century typically presented their work as conversionist texts. However, the polemical fierceness of such ostensible missionary treatises as Sebastian Münster’s *Mashiach* (1539) and Paul Fagius’ *Sefer Emunah* (1542) would, it can safely be assumed, swiftly alienate any potential Jewish convert, and strongly suggests that these texts were in fact intended for a Christian rather than a Jewish audience.¹² By the end of the sixteenth century, Hebraist missionising to Jews had in general receded to little more than a rhetorical gesture. The formation of Protestant national and confessional identities, meanwhile, assumed an increasingly overt role in the advance of the discipline. In the decades around 1600 the intellectual commitment to Christian Hebraism was strongest in England and in the Dutch Republic: the two states that were most heavily invested in the formation of new theologico-political identities. Across Europe, though, Calvinists and other Protestant minorities frequently asserted their affinity with the ancient Israelites. A sense of a shared emphasis on the Mosaic commandments and a common experience of persecution and survival in diaspora powerfully fuelled interest in Jewish exegesis among Calvinist scholars.¹³ In Elizabethan England, Hebrew scholarship developed rapidly from a very low base, culminating in the publication of the King James Bible in 1611. Most English enthusiasts for Hebrew, such as Hugh Broughton, the leading English Hebraist of this period, were Puritans, for whom promotion of the ‘purity’ of Hebrew was heavily charged

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134, 165–75.

¹¹ Stephen G. Burnett, ‘Johannes Buxtorf I and the Circumcision Incident of 1619’, *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 89 (1989) 135–44.

¹² Friedman, *Ancient Testimony*, 215–51.

¹³ See Salo Wittmayer Baron, ‘John Calvin and the Jews’, *Ancient and Medieval Jewish History* (1972) 338–52.

with anti-Catholic rhetoric.¹⁴ In the nascent Dutch Republic, the new universities of Franeker and Leiden soon became important centres for the study of Hebrew.¹⁵ The self-conscious identification of the Dutch nation with the ancient Israelite Kingdom was a recurrent motif in Dutch cultural politics both during the revolt against the Spanish and throughout the seventeenth century.¹⁶ The development of Hebraic studies in Holland was greatly facilitated by the establishment of a community of Portuguese crypto-Jews in Amsterdam in 1595. Amongst the arguments put forward by Grotius in 1614 in favour of allowing Jewish settlement throughout the States of Holland was the claim that it was of great value for Christians to study Hebrew, which could only be learnt effectively from Jews.¹⁷

By the early seventeenth century Christian Hebraism had developed into a pan-European phenomenon. Catholic participation was hampered by the extremely restrictive policy of the Papacy towards rabbinic literature, particularly after the promulgation of Clement VIII's Sisto-Clementine Index of 1596, which prohibited even editions of the Talmud expurgated of 'calumnies against Christianity', which had been tolerated since the Council of Trent.¹⁸ However, Jesuits such as Robert Bellarmine and Georgius Mayr published brief and successful Hebrew grammars.¹⁹ Basel, home to the Buxtorf dynasty of Hebraists, had the most active Hebrew press in Europe.²⁰ Increasingly, editions and translations of rabbinic commentaries, portions of Midrash, Talmud and Kabbalistic texts and specialist Hebrew dictionaries and lexicons to facilitate their reading were being printed and circulated across the continent. The surviving correspondence of the Buxtorfs includes letters from scholars all over Europe, including Italians, Poles, Swedes, Englishmen and Hungarians.²¹ The self-conscious internationalism of Hebraist scholarship, however, did not displace the centrality of inter-confessional rivalry in establishing Hebraist credentials. Beneath a generally maintained veneer of intellectual *politesse*, all Christian groupings, Catholics included, were competitively engaged in demonstrating

¹⁴ See Gareth Lloyd Jones, *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England* (1983) esp. 266–73; Eliane Glaser, 'Hebrew as Myth and Reality in Renaissance England', in Robert Rabinowitz, ed., *New Voices in Jewish Thought* (1998) 4–19.

¹⁵ See Katchen, *Christian Hebraists*, 15–37; Peter van Rooden, *Theology, Biblical Scholarship and Rabbinical Studies* (1989) 1–13, 49–57.

¹⁶ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (1997 (1987)) 93–5.

¹⁷ Israel, *European Jewry*, 64.

¹⁸ Salo Wittmayer Baron, 'The Council of Trent and Rabbinic Literature', *Ancient and Medieval Jewish History* (1972) 353–71.

¹⁹ Robert Bellarmine, *Institutiones linguae Hebraicae* (1578), Georgius Mayr, *Institutiones linguae Hebraicae* (1622).

²⁰ Raphael Loewe, 'Hebraists, Christian', in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971) v111, II.

²¹ Manuel, *Broken Staff*, 84.

their scholarly competence in the holy tongue. Up to approximately the middle of the seventeenth century this competitive edge heightened the importance of the discipline, and functioned as an important stimulus to its development.

Nonetheless, beneath this veneer of intellectual confidence and prolific production, Christian Hebraism in the early seventeenth-century heyday was beset with an underlying uncertainty of purpose. Popular and durable works such as Johannes Buxtorf the Elder's *Synagoga Judaica* (1603) were strikingly ambiguous in tone. This text was the first extensive account of Jewish religious beliefs and practices written by a non-Jew for a Christian audience, and was modelled on the earlier ethnography of the sixteenth-century Jewish convert Antonius Margaritha.²² Buxtorf's study provides a detailed and in general dispassionate description of Jewish rituals and traditions of birth, circumcision, marriage, divorce and death, of the Sabbath, Passover and other festivals, and of Jewish communal treatment of criminals, the poor and the sick. In his introduction, Buxtorf emphasises that his text is not intended to imply any admiration of the Jews, but to reveal the full burdensomeness of their hollow rituals. He states that his text should lead the Christian reader to ponder the 'massive incredulity and hardheartedness' of the Jews, and thus to be all the more aware of God's 'unspeakable mercy and goodness towards us'.²³ However, Buxtorf's stated scorn for the empty rituals of Jewish life is difficult to reconcile with the meticulous and respectful explanation he gives of the theological significance of almost every aspect of Jewish practice. His dismissal of the Talmud as 'a labyrinth of errors'²⁴ is similarly at odds with his painstaking efforts to translate and interpret this text accurately. Buxtorf legitimated his ethnographic study in the same terms in which he defended his attendance at the 1619 circumcision: as part of an informed and active conversionist mission to the Jews.²⁵ However, while we have no reason to doubt that his abstract desire to see the Jews convert was sincere, there was no direct sense in which his work furthered this end. The attitude of Buxtorf towards his subject of study was, it seems, profoundly ambivalent, embracing contradictory impulses of fascination and denigration (see figure 1).²⁶

In the Dutch Republic, fears of the possible consequences of excessive exposure to Jewish thought gave rise to sustained controversy during the first

²² Stephen G. Burnett, 'Distorted Mirrors: Antonius Margaritha, Johann Buxtorf and Christian Ethnographies of the Jews', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25 (1994) 275–87.

²³ Johannes Buxtorf, *The Jewish Synagogue* (1663 (1603)), preface (unpaginated).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39. ²⁵ Burnett, 'Circumcision Incident', 140.

²⁶ See Stephen G. Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564–1629) and Hebrew Learning in the Seventeenth Century* (1996) 54–102.



Figure 1 Johannes Buxtorf, *Synagoga Judaica*, Basel, 1680, frontispiece, depicting a circumcision and a scholastic scene.

half of the century over the appropriate use and status of Hebrew scholarship. At Leiden, Hebrew was taught in accordance with academic convention as a propaedeutic subject within the faculty of letters, and theologians there insisted that linguistic study should remain clearly subordinate to the higher, dogmatic study of the Bible.²⁷ Constantijn L'Empereur, Professor of Hebrew at Leiden from 1627 to 1646, and alongside Johannes Buxtorf the Younger the most important Christian Hebraist of the second quarter of the seventeenth century, devoted considerable energy to the justification of his scholarship to his colleagues. In his inaugural lecture, L'Empereur vigorously expounded the unique value (*dignitas*) and usefulness (*utilitas*) of Hebraic study, and also devoted a lengthy excursus to 'the blinding of the Jews', in which he explained that their imperviousness to the truths so clearly demonstrated in the Hebrew scriptures was due to their persistent attachment to the 'fables' of the Talmud and other rabbinic literature.²⁸ This attack on the Talmud established the theological acceptability of Hebraist scholarship, and also enabled L'Empereur to demonstrate his erudite familiarity and competence with rabbinic texts, which were his central scholarly interest.²⁹ In 1633, L'Empereur was additionally appointed as Professor *Controversiarum Judaicarum*, and this specific responsibility to write *adversus Judaeos* further legitimated his interest in rabbinic writings. However, for L'Empereur, as for other leading Christian Hebraists, the conversion of Jews did not appear to be a practical concern.³⁰ Paradoxically, an essentially purely scholarly fascination in rabbinic literature could only be publicly justified through the denigration of the intellectual value of these texts.

VOWELS AND DOUBTS

The emergence of new scholarly controversies further problematised Christian Hebraist study. In 1616, Pietro della Valle brought back to Europe a copy of the Samaritan Pentateuch that he had bought in Damascus, which contained as many as 6,000 differences from the Masoretic Hebrew text.³¹ This caused considerable confusion, and posed a troubling challenge to the traditional identification of the physical text of the Bible with its true meaning. From the 1620s, the Huguenot Academy at Saumur emerged as the centre of a new, critical approach to the biblical text. Louis Cappel, Professor of Hebrew at Saumur, first argued in his anonymous *Arcanum Punctuationis Revelatum* (1624) that the vocalisation signs in the Masoretic

²⁷ Van Rooden, *Theology*, 51. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 85–9. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 88. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

³¹ David S. Katz, 'Isaac Vossius and the English Biblical Critics, 1670–1689', in Richard H. Popkin and A. Vanderjagt, eds., *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1993) 171.

Bible were a textual accretion. This thesis was essentially an appropriation of a familiar non-traditional rabbinical argument, originally advanced in Elias Levita's *Masoret ha-Masoret* (1538) and already rebutted at length by the elder Buxtorf, that the vowel points were invented by scholars at some stage after the composition of the Talmud.³² Cappel's *Critica Sacra*, completed in 1634 but because of the controversy it provoked not published until 1650, extended this argument, identifying corruptions in the main body of the Hebrew text, and arguing that the use of critical judgement was necessary to ascertain, case by case, the most probably accurate biblical reading.³³ In rebutting Cappel, the younger Buxtorf made extensive use of rabbinical literature in insisting on the divinely inspired Mosaic origin and uncorrupted perfection of every detail, including vowel points, of the standard Masoretic text. At stake in this dispute between the 'rabbinic' and 'critical' schools of Christian Hebraism was the fundamental issue of the sacred status of the Hebrew language, which according to Buxtorf and his allies was undermined by the new critical approach.³⁴ Cappel's arguments unintentionally cast the very conceptual basis of Hebraist scholarship into controversy, and placed the issue of the reliability of the early postbiblical Jews as a central point of dispute.

These scholarly tensions echoed the wider epistemological upheaval of the period, centred around the rise of the mechanistic worldview. Although Cartesianism and biblical criticism were not explicitly brought into alliance until the publication of the work of Spinoza and his allies in the 1660s and 1670s, Cappel's critical rationalism, despite his theological orthodoxy, opened the pathway towards such arguments. Already in the 1630s a self-undermining dynamic had emerged in Hebraist scholarship: the application of critical logic to the Hebrew Bible destabilised the assumptions on which the study of this text was based. Seen from this perspective, the publication of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) simply posed in far more devastatingly relentless terms a critique of transparent biblical exegesis the essence of which had already been dimly visible on the intellectual horizon for several decades.

The increasing paradigmatic instability of Christian Hebraism was compounded by a creeping uncertainty regarding its cultural worth. In the late seventeenth century the notion of reason emerged as a key theological concept for Protestants of all denominations. The value of abstract reasoning

³² Burnett, *Christian Hebraism*, 205–39. ³³ Van Rooden, *Theology*, 222–7.

³⁴ See Daniel Droixhe, 'La Crise de l'hébreu langue-mère au xvii^e siècle', in Chantal Grell and François Laplanche, eds., *La République des lettres et l'histoire du judaïsme antique* (1992) 91–6; Georg Schnedermann, *Die Controverse des Ludovicus Cappellus mit den Buxtorfen über das Alter der Hebräischen Punctuation* (1879).

was widely invoked against the opposing dangers of deistic atheism and enthusiastic excess, of which excessive immersion in Hebrew texts was often taken as prime example.³⁵ In the decades around 1700 rabbinic scholarship was widely caricatured as the quintessence of useless learning. However, the categorical dismissal of Jewish learning was resisted in scholarly circles. A rational approach demanded that all potential sources of knowledge should be considered objectively and with scrupulous care, and particularly those relating to the fundamentally important subject of the accurate interpretation of the Bible. Attitudes towards Christian Hebraism were thus pulled in two contrary directions: suspicion of obsessive obscurantism and doubt as to the ultimate worth of Hebrew texts were offset by the desire to adhere to high standards of fair-mindedness and intellectual thoroughness. This tension was heightened by the more general anxiety concerning standards of erudition that afflicted the rapidly growing and intensely self-conscious Early Enlightenment 'Republic of Letters'. The new monthly literary periodicals which circulated across Europe from the 1680s onwards made it much easier for would-be savants to acquire a veneer of up-to-date erudition. However, this led to a widespread anxiety that book reviews were being used as a substitute to reading the actual books, and that the mastery of the ancient languages, and Hebrew in particular, was being neglected.³⁶

The treatment of Hebraic subjects in these periodicals offers a valuable insight into the dynamics of this ambivalence. The francophone literary reviews published in the Dutch Republic from 1684 onwards, and circulated across Europe, were among the most important cultural institutions of the Early Enlightenment. The first three journals, Pierre Bayle's pioneering *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (1684–7), its successor the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* (1687–1709), edited by Henri Basnage de Beauval, and its main early rival, Jean Le Clerc's *Bibliothèque Universelle et Historique* (1686–94), were rivalled in influence only by the authoritative but staid *Acta Eruditorum* of Leipzig (1682–1731), and were central to the establishment of the Dutch Republic as the undisputed European hub of bookselling and intellectual exchange in this period.³⁷ All three journals gave extensive

³⁵ Michael Heyd, *'Be Sober and Reasonable': The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (1995) 176, 180–1.

³⁶ Goldgar, *Impolite Learning*, 54–114.

³⁷ See Graham Gibbs, 'The Role of the Dutch Republic as the Intellectual Entrepôt of Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *BMBGN* 86 (1971) 323–49; Hans Bots, 'La Rôle des périodiques néerlandais pour la diffusion du livre, 1684–1747', in *Le Magasin de l'Univers: The Dutch Republic as the Centre of the European Book Trade* (1992) 49–70; Eugène Hatin, *Bibliographie historique et critique de la presse périodique française* (1866) 28–39.

coverage to books dealing with Hebraic and Jewish subjects.³⁸ Pierre Bayle's journal exhibited a particularly strong interest, with on average at least one article in each monthly issue dealing substantially with a Jewish-related theme. The journals gave detailed coverage both to new editions of classic Christian Hebraist texts and to new scholarly works, many of which were extremely narrow in their focus of interest. In April 1685, for example, Bayle's *Nouvelles* carefully reviewed an anonymous volume titled *Polygamia Triumphatrix*, a study of Jewish laws and customs with regard to polygamy, which used rabbinical sources to argue that this practice is acceptable to God and in accordance with the Mosaic Law. The appearance in 1688 of a Latin *Life* of Johann Reuchlin was warmly welcomed in the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* and in the *Bibliothèque Universelle et Historique*, both of which commented on the great usefulness of Hebrew texts for the interpretation of the Bible.³⁹ In March 1689, the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* reviewed a new edition of Louis Cappel's Old Testament commentaries, rehearsing at length the now long-standing controversy over the authenticity or otherwise of the biblical vowel signs.⁴⁰ In 1695, the same journal reviewed J. Ludolf's *Dissertatio de Locustis*, in which the author used philological argument to establish his case that the Israelites had fed on locusts, and not quails, when wandering in the desert.⁴¹

The thorough reviewing of Hebraist studies in these journals reveals the extent to which this mode of erudition continued to be accorded respect. However, submerged beneath their scholarly conservatism the journals evinced distinct unease regarding the status of Jewish texts. Writing in the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* on a Hebrew edition of the Talmud published in Amsterdam in 1688, the editor Henri Basnage (whose brother Jacques was later to write his multi-volume *History of the Jews*) lamented his inability actually to read the text under review:

We might have adorned the heading of this article with a title in Hebrew, which might perhaps have earned us much honour. However, it is better for me to admit this language is beyond my sphere of knowledge, and that I find myself shamefully reduced to writing in French the title of a book that is entirely written in Hebrew.⁴²

While proclaiming at the outset of the review his support for the study of the Talmud by Christians, Basnage nonetheless noted that the subject was a controversial one: some scholars, he writes, 'view the Talmud with disdain,

³⁸ A thematic index to the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* shows that about 3 per cent of texts reviewed in the journal were by Jewish authors. See Hans Bots and Lenie van Liesholt, *Henri Basnage de Beauval et sa correspondance à propos de l'Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* (1984) 185–323.

³⁹ *HOS* (February 1688) 274–85; *BUH* (1688) 485–506. ⁴⁰ *HOS* (March 1689) 3–23.

⁴¹ *HOS* (September 1695) 37–42. ⁴² *HOS* (May 1688) 35.

as a heap of impertinences and fantasies', whereas other 'fairer and more moderate' authorities value the text for what it can reveal about Jewish antiquity.⁴³ He himself judged only the Mishnah to be of value, stating that the Gemara contained 'only dull and ridiculous stories, and tedious disputes between exegetes'.⁴⁴

The final publication by Willem Surenhuis in Amsterdam, between 1698 and 1703, of the first translation of the entire Mishnah into Latin was warmly welcomed in the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* with an article forcefully recapitulating the arguments in favour of the usefulness of this text.⁴⁵ This publication, the culmination of a project commenced by the Middelburg Hebraist Adam Boreel six decades previously, in 1639, was a major scholarly achievement.⁴⁶ However, by the time of its final appearance at the beginning of the eighteenth century the study of Jewish texts had declined dramatically in prestige, becoming a more marginal form of erudition. The stance of Henri Basnage was typical of Protestant intellectuals in this period, who, while committed in theory to the study of Hebrew texts, had very limited inclination towards it in practice, and remained highly disdainful of what they regarded as rabbinic absurdities and excesses.

PROTESTANT JEWS AND CATHOLIC JEWS

Despite the aspiration of the Republic of Letters to transcend rigid denominational divides, theological rivalry between Protestants and Catholics remained a central element of much learned debate. Both camps strove to assert their superior scholarly credentials, and the issue of the correct handling of Hebrew texts was a key domain of such competition. In particular, the publication of Richard Simon's *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* in 1678 thrust the issue of the authority and status of the Jewish interpretative tradition into the epicentre of an intense inter-confessional dispute. This text was a bold response to Spinoza's trenchant attack on the authority of the Old Testament, in which Simon accepted that all available versions of the Bible were corrupted with numerous later additions and adaptations. By acknowledging the reality of some of the contradictions and paradoxes that Spinoza had identified in the Pentateuch, but insisting that they did not

⁴³ *Ibid.* ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 36. ⁴⁵ *HOS* (April 1703) 147–57.

⁴⁶ See Ernestine van der Wall, 'The Dutch Hebraist Adam Boreel and the Mishnah Project', *LIAS* 16 (1989) 239–63; Richard H. Popkin, 'Two Treasures of Marsh's Library', in Alison P. Coudert, Sarah Hutton, Richard H. Popkin and Gordon M. Weiner, eds., *Judaean-Christian Intellectual Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (1999) 5–8; Peter van Rooden, 'The Amsterdam Translation of the Mishnah', in William Horbury, ed., *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda* (1999) 257–67.

undermine the spiritual truth of the underlying pure text, Simon hoped to provide an intellectual bulwark against 'all the false and pernicious consequences' that Spinoza had claimed to draw from these textual cruxes.⁴⁷ However, Simon's case was also avowedly anti-Protestant: precisely because the Scriptures were so riddled with inaccuracy and uncertainty, he argued, it was essential to interpret them according to the authoritative tradition of the Church, without which 'we can hardly be sure of anything in matters of religion'.⁴⁸

Unsurprisingly, Protestant theologians took immediate exception to this argument. Attempting to refute Simon's case and to defend the validity of the Protestant commitment to the unmediated interpretation of Scripture, Jean Le Clerc insisted that, while not always transparent in detail, the Bible was invariably clear on essential points.⁴⁹ Le Clerc accused Simon of excessive reverence towards rabbis, a charge that Simon vociferously denied in a pseudonymous counter-attack:

The method that he [Simon] has given us for the interpretation of the Holy Books clearly shows that does not give way entirely to the authority of rabbis. But he also does not believe that we should reject them all, because several of them are very learned scholars of Scripture. He believes we should take from them what is useful, and ignore their fantasies: but in order to do this considerable erudition is required, which none of the Protestants possess. This is why M. le Clerc sweepingly condemns the rabbis.⁵⁰

In his rejoinder, Le Clerc sustained his attack on Simon's claim of a continuity of authority from the ancient Jewish law to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. He also defended himself against some of the specific accusations of exegetical error raised by Simon, but with distinct impatience, stating that he had no desire 'to follow M Simon into the quibbles that he raises concerning matters of little importance'.⁵¹

In accusing Simon of uncritically echoing Jewish exegetes, Le Clerc implicitly portrayed his adversary as 'rabbinic' in his love of devious, sophistic argument and irrelevant minutiae. However, Simon's riposte placed Le Clerc in an awkward position. He could not, of course, concede that he was indeed less learned in rabbinics than was his adversary, because this

⁴⁷ Richard Simon, *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* (1685 (1678)) ii. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁴⁹ See Jean Le Clerc, *Sentiments de Quelques Théologiens de Hollande sur l'Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* (1685).

⁵⁰ Richard Simon, *Réponse au livre intitulé 'Sentiments de Quelques Théologiens de Hollands sur l'Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament', par le Prieur de Bolleville* (1686) 15–16.

⁵¹ Jean Le Clerc, *Défense des Sentiments de Quelque Théologiens de Hollande sur l'Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament, Contre la Réponse du Prieur de Bolleville* (1686) 306.

would amount to an admission that he had been arguing from a position of ignorance. However, if he retaliated, and attempted to demonstrate his equal knowledge of rabbinic literature, he risked allowing himself to be drawn on to his opponent's scholarly terrain, and in so doing muddying the distinction between the clear, logical simplicity that he regarded as the core principle of Protestant theology, and the obfuscating pedantry of which he accused Simon and other Catholics. Le Clerc's position on this subject was thus extremely precarious. He acknowledged that Hebraic study was of a certain potential value, but maintained that rabbinic argument was in essence fundamentally alien to Protestantism, and in excess a dangerously pernicious influence.

The casting of Catholics as pedantically 'rabbinic' stretched back at least to the early seventeenth century, when the idea seems first to have been juxtaposed with a fanciful Protestant self-identification with the newly discovered non-rabbinic Karaite sect.⁵² While this image powerfully encapsulated the sense, among Huguenot refugee Calvinists particularly, of their own difference to and superiority over the Catholics, it was difficult to reconcile with the critical values of the Republic of Letters, according to which Protestants and Catholics alike were committed to the refinement of objective, rational methods of interpretation.⁵³ Because Jewish texts were so strongly associated with the opposing polar notions of either utter purity or extreme obscurantism, they posed the deepest challenge to the aspirations of critical scholarship towards clarity and consensus. Texts such as Jean Le Clerc's *Ars Critica* attempted to establish an undogmatic methodological basis for textual exegesis, focusing in particular on the difficulties of biblical interpretation, but applicable to the critical reading of all texts.⁵⁴ However, the need to interpret Scripture in such a way as to reinforce particular theological positions destabilised this project. Whereas before the Cartesian revolution the rivalry between Protestantism and Catholicism had stimulated Christian Hebraism, by the closing decades of the seventeenth century the embroilment of Hebraist scholarship in inter-confessional disputes stood embarrassingly at odds with the self-image of the Republic of Letters as a cosmopolitan sphere that transcended such rivalries. The explicit denominational polemics that shaped the reception of Simon's work also

⁵² Yosef Kaplan, '“Karaites” in Early Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam', in David S. Katz and Jonathan I. Israel, *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews* (1990) 226–7; Simon Szyszman, *Le Karaïsme* (1980) 94–5; Nathan Schur, *History of the Karaites* (1992) 151ff.

⁵³ See Jean-Michel Vienne, 'De la Bible à la science: l'interprétation du singulier chez Locke', in Guido Canziani and Yves Charles Zarka, eds., *L'interpretazione nei secoli XVI e XVII* (1993) 771–88.

⁵⁴ Jean Le Clerc, *Ars Critica* (1698) esp. 135–41; see also Maria Cristina Pitassi, *Entre croire et savoir: le problème de la méthode critique chez Jean Le Clerc* (1987) 49–65.

highlighted the difference between the confessional division of Christian Hebraism and the unimpeded internationalism of other fields of inquiry, above all in the sciences, that in contrast with Hebraism were in this period decisively in the ascendant.

TWILIGHT HEBRAISTS

The production of weighty tomes of Christian Hebraist scholarship nonetheless continued throughout the latter half of the seventeenth century. In England in particular (as we shall see in greater detail in the section below on politics), the wave of identificatory fascination with the Jews during the Interregnum period was very pronounced, and its impact on scholarly life was not extinguished with the Restoration.⁵⁵ Up to his death in 1675 John Lightfoot maintained a prolific production of distinctive Hebraist studies, applying rabbinic literature to the elucidation of the New Testament. In his *Hebrew and Talmudical Excitations upon the Gospel of Saint Matthew* (1658), Lightfoot powerfully expressed the deep ambivalence typical of the Christian Hebraist attitude towards rabbinic writings: 'The almost unconquerable difficulty of the Stile, the frightful roughness of the Language, and the amazing emptiness and sophistry of the matters handled, do torture, vex and tyre him that reads them . . . There are no Authors do more affright and vex the Reader, and yet there are none, who do more intice and delight him.'⁵⁶ However, from 1650 onwards Christian Hebraism increasingly lost its intellectual vitality and self-confidence. In his preface to Lightfoot's collected *Works*, published posthumously in 1684, George Bright noted and lamented his contemporaries' tendency to neglect Hebraic study in preference for easier subjects.⁵⁷ The decline of Hebrew was particularly pronounced in its traditional continental centres such as Basel and Leiden, while the discipline strengthened in more intellectually marginal parts of Europe. The most notable Hebraist project of the late seventeenth century was the work of an Italian, Giulio Bartolucci, who from 1651 held the post of Professor of Hebrew at the Collegium Neophytorum in Rome, a college for Jewish converts to Christianity.⁵⁸ Bartolucci's vast four-volume *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica* was published from 1675 to 1693, the final volume (and a fifth supplementary volume and index) completed after

⁵⁵ See David S. Katz, *Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England, 1603–1655* (1982) esp. 76–88.

⁵⁶ John Lightfoot, *Works* (1684) 11, 95–6; see also Manuel, *Broken Staff*, 130–2.

⁵⁷ George Bright, 'Preface to the Reader', in Lightfoot, *Works*, 1.

⁵⁸ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* IV, 263–4.

Bartolucci's death by his student, Carlo Imbonati.⁵⁹ In these daunting folio volumes, Bartolucci listed, summarised and in many cases excerpted every rabbinic text that he could find, either directly or through references in earlier compendiums such as the elder Buxtorf's *Bibliotheca Rabbinica* (see figure 2).

Bartolucci's scholarship did not simply amount to tireless cataloguing; interspersed through the *Bibliotheca* are a number of thematic digressions dealing with important or controversial scholarly issues such as the status of angels and devils in Judaism, the differences between Jewish sects and the interpretation of Hebrew cantillation marks. However, these were essentially summaries of basic knowledge, rather than the product of original research or argument. In sheer voluminous comprehensivity, Bartolucci's scholarship marks the highpoint of Christian Hebraism. However, such a retreat into encyclopaedism should, paradoxically perhaps, be interpreted as a further sign of a crisis in attitudes to Jewish learning. Bartolucci offered no global interpretation of the intellectual status and value of the vast body of material he had assembled. He expressed acceptance of the orthodox view that Jewish writings were not of interest in themselves, but only as a tool for conversionism and for the elucidation of the Bible. Nonetheless, his alphabetical catalogue preserved a strict tone of descriptive neutrality, while Imbonati's thematic indexing highlighted the fact that the *Bibliotheca* was potentially an extremely rich resource not only on theological issues, but also on such subjects as medicine, geometry and philosophy. The apparent confidence of the vast edifice of Bartolucci's work in fact veils considerable confusion about the status of Judaic learning. Advances in Hebraism itself – both in awareness of the ambiguities of the biblical text and in the broadened range of rabbinical texts made accessible – had highlighted new complexities, and severely weakened the confidence that had prevailed at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The availability of translations and brief book reviews, and the expansion of the intellectual world to incorporate a wider and more impatient public, broke the exclusive link between the study of the Hebrew language and access to Jewish arguments. By 1700 rabbinic learning was no longer the preserve of a small but proficient intellectual elite. It now loomed more broadly as a bewilderingly vast, intimidatingly difficult and epistemologically confusing intellectual edifice, which could not easily be either accepted or dismissed.

⁵⁹ See Manuel, *Broken Staff*, 98–101.



Figure 2 Giulio Bartolucci, *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinnica*, volume 1, Rome, 1675, title page.

In the early eighteenth century, original Hebraist scholarship ceased almost totally, and new publications tended towards increasingly derivative synthesis. Johann Christoph Wolf's *Bibliotheca Hebraea* (1715), a much more compact four-volume work which listed and very briefly described the writings of over 2,000 Hebrew authorities, was to a considerable extent a distillation from Bartolucci. Even more explicitly than the Roman work, Wolf's tome was purely a reference guide, with no pretensions towards interpretation. The works of these two scholars remained throughout the eighteenth century the key reference texts in the increasingly moribund field of Christian Hebraism. Only in 1802 did a new work of reference appear, by Giovanni Bernardo de Rossi, Professor of Oriental Languages at Parma. This vastly slimmer work, entirely based on seventeenth-century scholarship, is testimony to the dramatic decline of non-Jewish interest in Jewish learning over the course of the Enlightenment.⁶⁰

The eighteenth-century turn away from Hebraica was by no means universal. A notable exception to the decline in Hebraic publication was the work of Biagio Ugolini, whose immense thirty-four-volume compendium of almost every text he could find relating to Judaism was published in Venice between 1744 and 1769.⁶¹ The overwhelming immensity of this work, however, both diminished its usability and marked it sharply apart from the practical, reformist culture of the Italian Enlightenment. Ugolini's preservationist zeal was animated by an instinctive notion of Jewish learning as a precious and vulnerable relic, of vital importance in illuminating the study of the Bible.⁶² While his work reflects an intense, religiously motivated commitment to Hebraism, his relentless accumulation of texts cannot truly be considered as scholarship, and his interpretative innocence places him firmly outside the intellectual mainstream of his day.

The significance of Hebraism within Protestant culture also continued to evolve. The foundation of Johann Heinrich Callenberg's Institutum Judaicum in Halle in 1728 marked the emergence of a new phase in this relationship. Despite the Pietists' emphasis on linguistic and textual study, their approach to rabbinic texts was very different from that of the leading scholars of preceding generations. Whereas conversionism tended to be little more than a legitimating pretext for these earlier Hebraists, for the Halle Pietists erudite study was ancillary to the practical missionising tasks of the dissemination of conversionist texts, the education and

⁶⁰ Giovanni Bernardo di Rossi, *Dizionario storico degli autori ebrei, e dalle loro opere* (1802).

⁶¹ Biagio Ugolini, *Thesaurus antiquitatum sacrarum* (1744–69).

⁶² Angelo Vivian, 'Biagio Ugolini et son *Thesaurus antiquitatum sacrarum*: bilan des études juives au milieu du xviii^e siècle', in Grell and Laplanche, eds., *La République des lettres* 115–45.

assistance of converts and the promotion of the moral reform of all Jews.⁶³ Various eighteenth-century mystical and millenarian organisations, including most notably the Swedenborgians, drew extensively on Hebraic sources and imagery.⁶⁴ However, both missionary and messianic groups, while in varying ways drawing on the ascendant scientific and socially inclusive language of the period, were essentially part of very different and more marginal cultural trajectories than that of the High Enlightenment. As institutional religion steadily lost its intellectual centrality over the course of the eighteenth century, the status of Hebraist scholarship ineluctably subsided with it.

Retrospectively, the eclipse of the dry erudition of Christian Hebraism by the wit and polemic of the Enlightenment perhaps appears as a natural and inevitable process. However, at least until the 1720s no such easy inevitability was apparent to contemporaries. On the contrary, the relationship of the Hebrew language and Hebraist scholarship to the new values of reason and criticism remained a vexed and confused question. This issue provoked such passion and uncertainty because it was intimately associated with a set of wider issues at the heart of the confrontation of religion and philosophy. Much wider issues than mere philology and scholarly competence were at stake in disagreements over the interpretation of the Old Testament. In parallel and in association with these at times arcane debates between Hebraists, the historical, social and political significance of the Jewish Bible and its rabbinic exegesis was also comprehensively reconsidered over the course of the seventeenth century and the Early Enlightenment.

⁶³ See Christopher Clark, *The Politics of Conversion: Missionary Protestantism and the Jews in Prussia 1728–1941* (1995); Christoph Bochinger, 'J. H. Callenbergs Institutum Judaicum et Muhammedicum und seine Ausstrahlung nach Osteuropa', in Johannes Wallman and Udo Sträter, eds., *Halle und Osteuropa* (1988) 331–48.

⁶⁴ David S. Katz and Richard H. Popkin, *Messianic Revolution: Radical Religious Politics to the End of the Second Millennium* (1999) 119–34.