

**Johann Reuchlin, Philologist and Mystic:
The Christian Rediscovery of Hebrew**

*HIST 560: The Agonies & Ecstasies:
Varied Portraits of the Christian to 1550 A.D.*

3 Credit Hours

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August 13, 2001

Outline

In this paper, I explore the life and thought of Johann Reuchlin, the father of Hebrew studies in the Church. I begin with the low state of interest in Hebrew studies prior to Reuchlin and then sketch the major themes of his life as they relate to Hebrew. In the main body of this paper, I explore two aspects of Reuchlin's interest in Hebrew: humanism and mysticism. Both deserve examination for his work and writing involved both the humanistic scholar's meticulous study of language and grammar, and the religious mystic's exercises for reaching up into heaven and into the mind of God. These seemingly contradictory thrusts were both consistently present in Reuchlin's life. I conclude with short notes concerning the responses of his notable contemporaries, Erasmus and Luther, to his ideas.

"It was not greed for gold that drove me to learn the mysteries of Hebrew, nor was it a desire for mere reputation. Rather, these studies had to be pursued in secret, because they were considered unworthy of a man of position." Johann Reuchlin

Hebrew in the Christian Church

Jerome (c. 347-420) gave Christendom the Latin Vulgate, a thoroughly researched translation of the Scriptures from the original languages into the current theological vernacular.² This translation, gaining the sanction of the Church as being authoritative, obviated both the need for the knowledge of the original languages of Greek and Hebrew, and reference to the original Scriptures at all. Knowledge of Greek persisted, at least in places, because of interest in the classical Greek literature that continued to undergird western culture. Knowledge of Hebrew within Christendom did not fare so well. Even before Jerome did his translation work, "the 'language of the Jews' had come to be regarded increasingly by theologians as a symbol of the alien, the sinister, and the hostile."³ The deterioration of Christian Hebraica was so severe that Friedman claims that "probably no more than a few dozen Christians from 500 to 1500 could read Hebrew at all and perhaps a quarter of that number could use Hebrew in any

¹ Pinchas E. Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church: The Foundations of Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 5.

² G. A. Keith, "Jerome," *New Dictionary of Theology*, 346.

³ Lapide, 3.

constructive sense.”⁴ Smalley believes this evaluation is overly pessimistic.⁵ Regardless of the actual numbers, for over a thousand years Christian reflection on the Old Testament⁶ did not build upon the foundation of a historical and grammatical understanding of the Hebrew texts.

The reasons for this ignorance and apathy towards Hebrew are several. Lloyd Jones offers three.⁷ First, Christians mistrusted Jews and incorrectly suspected them of falsifying the OT by modifying their texts, altering them in such a way as to disprove the truth of Christian doctrine. Therefore, even if inaccuracies existed in the Vulgate, they were certainly no worse than working with a corrupt Hebrew text. Second, the Church did not lend official support to the study of Hebrew. In 1311, Pope Clement V sought to establish chairs of Hebrew in four key universities, but the effort failed for lack of money and interest. His order was reissued in 1434, but again had no appreciable impact. Third, Jews were the only ones who knew Hebrew, and they were unwilling to instruct gentiles. The rabbis forbade teaching gentiles the oral Torah and the mysteries of the Law, though some allowed instruction in the Hebrew language.⁸ Zimmer adds to this list the simple fact that the pervasive hatred of Jews by Christians meant that submitting to Jewish mentors was distasteful to Christians.⁹

This 1,000-year lack of Hebrew scholarship in Christendom is quite striking, but even more surprising is how rapidly the situation changed. In 1500, the number of Christians who knew Hebrew was infinitesimal and the study of the language was cause for suspicion. However, within fifty years the situation had changed completely. By 1550, Hebrew instruction was available at every major university, Hebrew grammars and dictionaries in Latin were plentiful, and critical editions of the Hebrew versions of

⁴ Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1983) 13-14.

⁵ Quoted in Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 39.

⁶ Acknowledging the problems with its usage, in this paper I refer to the Hebrew Bible as the “Old Testament” or “OT.”

⁷ G. Lloyd Jones, “Introduction” in *De Arte Cabalistica [On the Art of the Kabbalah]* (New York: Abaris Books, 1983) 8.

⁸ Eric Zimmer, “Jewish and Christian Hebraist Collaboration in Sixteenth Century Germany,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 71 (1980) n. 5. Note that rabbinic materials such as the Talmud are unintelligible even to those who are fluent in biblical Hebrew [cf. Johannes Reuchlin, *Recommendation Whether to Confiscate, Destroy and Burn All Jewish Books*, tr. Peter Wortsman (New York: Paulist Press, 2000) 40].

all of the OT books were available along with both Hebrew versions and Latin translations of the medieval Jewish commentaries.¹⁰ Indeed, knowledge of Hebrew came to be seen as a necessity for the study of divinity.¹¹ What happened to spark this dramatic increase in interest in the Hebrew Scriptures within the Church? Clearly, many factors were involved, but much of the credit must be given to a single man and his passion for the Hebrew language and the Hebrew Scriptures: Johann Reuchlin.

“Every detail in the life of Reuchlin is of absorbing interest. Whether we look upon the greatness achieved by him in his luxuriant mental endowments, or upon the greatness thrust upon him by the unholy zeal of his enemies, we are equally struck by the commanding power of his intellect, the noble dignity of his conduct, and the harmony in which the various traits of his character were blended, so as to form an imposing and, at the same time, sympathetic figure.”¹² Samuel Abraham Hirsch

Johann Reuchlin: Biographical Sketch

In order to provide a framework for subsequent explorations into Reuchlin’s passion for Hebrew, this section contains a sketch of his life.¹³ (See also the timeline and pictures in the appendix.) Johann Reuchlin (a.k.a. ‘Capnion,’ the Greek form of his name, meaning ‘smoke’) was born in 1455 in Pforzheim, Baden in Germany. He was given a Latin education and then moved on to the University of Freiburg in 1470, where he stood out for his skilled use of Latin. In 1473 he visited Rome, one of several trips he made across the Alps, where he made contact with Italian humanism and its cry of *ad fontes*, i.e. a return to the sources of classical learning for the revitalization of Europe.¹⁴ After graduating in 1474, he did graduate work at the University of Basel. Among other studies, he began to learn Greek from a native speaker, which became his habit when learning new languages. While at Basel, Reuchlin commenced his public work in philology by writing a Latin dictionary, *Vocabularius breviloquus*, which was published in

⁹ Zimmer, 70.

¹⁰ Friedman, 12.

¹¹ Lloyd Jones, 27.

¹² S. A. Hirsch, “Johann Reuchlin: the Father of the Study of Hebrew Among Christians” in *A Book of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1905) 116.

¹³ Unfortunately, research for this paper was hampered by the inaccessibility of several key documents, including Barham’s biography of Reuchlin and translations of Reuchlin’s *De verbo mirifico* and the introduction to his Hebrew Grammar, *De rudimentis Hebraicis*. It was necessary to depend upon secondary and tertiary sources for much of this material. The details of this biographical sketch were largely drawn from Hirsch and Klemens Löffler, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, v. XII (Robert Appleton Co., 1911) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12798a.htm>. Information from other sources is cited as appropriate.

¹⁴ N. P. Feldmeth, “Humanism,” *New Dictionary of Theology*, 322.

1475.

Moving to France in 1477, Reuchlin studied law as a career to support himself and received his diploma as Licentiate of Civil Law in 1481. He returned to Germany and settled in Tübingen. Though it is uncertain when Reuchlin first began the study of Hebrew, two contemporary Tübingen theologians were known for their knowledge of Hebrew. They may have contributed to his knowledge, or possibly he to them. In any case, by 1483 Reuchlin was being praised for his knowledge of Hebrew. However, he did not yet have a Hebrew Bible and was still trying to procure one five years later. His breakthrough occurred in 1492 when his patron Eberhard sent him to the Emperor on legal business. There he met the Emperor's personal physician, Jacob Jehiel Loans, who became his Hebrew tutor. Reuchlin devoted himself to the study of Hebrew, and, in 1500, he wrote a letter to Loans in Hebrew to demonstrate his progress in the language.

During this time, Reuchlin did not focus solely on law and philology. His passion for Hebrew was also a result of his curiosity concerning Hebrew mysticism. The Jewish mystical art of Kabbalah combines biblical texts, numerology, prayer and meditation to access and manipulate the various angelic and demonic powers. It is tightly connected to the Hebrew language, for it sees the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as the basis of creation, with every word, every letter, every jot and tittle of the Hebrew Bible as “muttering echo[es] and shimmering mirror image[s] of ‘the eternal.’”¹⁵ Reuchlin had gained a fascination for Kabbalah from Johann Pico della Mirandola during one of his trips to Italy. Pico had advocated the Christian use of Kabbalah and believed that this Jewish art could be used to prove basic Christian doctrines. Concerning his study of the Jewish kabbalistic books, Pico writes:

Among the Hebrew of the present day these books are cherished with such devotion that it is permitted no man to touch them unless he be forty years of age. When I had purchased these books, at no small cost to myself; when I had read them through with great diligence and with unwavering toil, I saw in them...not so much the Mosaic religion as the Christian faith. There is the mystery of the Trinity...the incarnation of the Word...the divinity of the Messiah. There I read about original sin, its expiation through

¹⁵ Peter Wortsman, “Forward” in *Recommendation Whether to Confiscate, Destroy and Burn All Jewish Books*, by Johannes Reuchlin, tr. Peter Wortsman (New York: Paulist Press, 2000) 4.

Christ, the Heavenly Jerusalem, the fall of the devils.... The same things we read daily in Paul, Jerome and Augustine.¹⁶

Reuchlin worked to systematize Pico's writings concerning Kabbalah. He published his first book on the subject, *De verbo mirifico* in 1494 while he was still learning Hebrew for himself. He continued studying Kabbalah along with the Hebrew language and published his second book on this mystical art, *De arte cabalistica* in 1517.

In-between writing these two mystical books, Reuchlin began publishing books to help other students of Hebrew. Most importantly, he published a combined Hebrew grammar and dictionary, *De rudimentis Hebraicis*, in 1506. It was published at his own expense, and the lack of a patron seems to have been justified since 750 of the original 1,000 printed copies remained unsold in 1510. However, Reuchlin was committed to the propagation of the Hebrew language to the Christian world. Unflagging, he petitioned the Emperor to establish university chairs for teaching Hebrew in the German universities. In 1512, he published a book containing the seven penitential psalms in Hebrew along with German translations and commentary, *In septem psalmos poenitentiales hebraicos interpretatio de verbo ad verbum*. This was the first Hebrew book printed in Germany, a technical as well as cultural feat. His final book on the Hebrew language was *De accentibus et orthographia linguae Hebraicae*, published in 1518. This advanced book describes the details of pronunciation, accents and synagogue chanting. Though his Hebrew textbooks do not have lasting linguistic value, they present a written record of Reuchlin's commitment to establishing the study of Hebrew as a valuable exercise for Christians.

Reuchlin's passion for Hebrew was not met with only apathy. He faced dogged opposition. In the preface to his final textbook, he explains that he writes in order

...to give the youth, bent upon studying languages, a leader under whose banner they would be able to fight, if need be, with those ferocious and rabid dogs who hated all good arts; against the disease and pestilence of everything old; against the burners of books who thirsted for the destruction and extermination of the most ancient monuments. As an old man he might cease to teach elements of grammar, fit only for children and young

¹⁶ Quoted in Ktziah Spanier, "Christian Hebraism and the Jewish Christian Polemic" in *Hebrew and the Bible in America: The First Two Centuries*, ed. Shalom Goldman (Hanover, New Hampshire: Brandeis Univ. Press, 1993) 8.

people, but his zeal for the spread of the study of Hebrew makes him forget all objections.¹⁷

This opposition reached explosive proportions in “The Reuchlin Affair,” otherwise known as “The Battle of the Books.”¹⁸ In 1507, Johann Pfefferkorn, a recently baptized Jew, began to attack his former Jewish brethren by alleging that all Jewish books were inimical to Christianity. Supported by the Dominican order in Cologne, he pursued a pamphlet crusade for three years, finally gaining a decree from Emperor Maximilian I ordering the confiscation of Jewish books throughout the realm so that they could be studied. After this order began to be carried out, a committee was organized to examine the books and offer legal opinions. Because of his outstanding qualifications as a scholar, his knowledge of Hebrew and his training as a lawyer, Reuchlin was a natural choice for this committee. Reuchlin’s careful and brilliant response, *Recommendation Whether to Confiscate, Destroy and Burn All Jewish Books*,¹⁹ published in 1511, was the only one offered in support of preserving the Hebrew literature. In his judgment, two issues needed to be addressed: the place of Jews in the empire, and the place of Jewish books within Christianity. Drawing from classic Greek authors, the Church fathers, canon law, and imperial law, he shows that the Jews have a right to protection as people, including the protection of their property. He also shows that the destruction of their literature would be a huge loss to Christendom. Besides, he argues, how can books be destroyed whose contents are not even understood by the courts? Even Reuchlin himself could not read the Talmud, and, more tragic, he had never even had the opportunity to look at a copy!

Reuchlin’s opinion in the matter was enough to earn him a reputation as a hero to the Jews (even though he did not care for Jews nearly as much as he cared for their books). However, it was not enough to sway the courts. Reuchlin was tried as a heretic and his writings were eventually condemned to be burnt. Likewise his opinion that the Jewish writings should be preserved was rejected. Fortunately for the

¹⁷ Quoted in Hirsch, 143.

¹⁸ This account is drawn largely from Wortsman, 1-14 and Carlebach, 15-26.

¹⁹ Johannes Reuchlin, *Recommendation Whether to Confiscate, Destroy and Burn All Jewish Books*, tr. Peter Wortsman (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

Jews and for the study of Jewish literature, more serious problems began to occupy the empire and the ruling against the Jewish books was never carried out.²⁰

This section has outlined some of the major activities in Johann Reuchlin's life as they pertain to the study of the Hebrew language and Hebrew literature. Reuchlin's professional life focused on words, both his vocation as a lawyer and his avocation as a philologist. Indeed, Reuchlin was one of the first scholars of the humanist era to know all three classical languages: Greek, Latin and Hebrew—something which would be assumed of all scholars soon afterward. But why did he dedicate so much of himself to these studies? Was it only a love of ancient texts for their language-beauty? It would be tempting to think so, for even Reuchlin described his work this way: "I do not discuss the meaning, like a theologian, but rather the actual words, like a grammarian."²¹ However, seeing Reuchlin as only a grammarian is too simplistic, for it does not explain his passion for the mystical Kabbalah. It is this extra dimension of the spiritual significance of words, the value of the words in the present day life of the believer for the reception of the revelation of God, that appears to have driven Reuchlin to study Hebrew so thoroughly, to promote its study by others, to sacrifice his own standing in order to protect Hebrew literature, and to write two books on the power of Kabbalah for the instruction of the Church. In the subsequent sections of this paper, I explore these two dimensions of Reuchlin's life to see how his commitments to language and mysticism worked together.

*"Johannes Reuchlin's life and varied contributions defy easy classification. His struggles with the Dominicans, his pioneering work in Hebrew-language instruction, and his enthusiasm for Cabbalistic mysticism, as well as his ardent desire for church reform, all seem to be diverse tendencies."*²²
Jerome Friedman

An Unlikely Combination? Humanism and Mysticism

During Reuchlin's life, scholasticism was still the dominant mindset within the universities, though it was losing its hold. Scholasticism²³ arose as an intellectual tradition from the 9th century and

²⁰ Charles Zika, "Reuchlin and Erasmus: Humanism and Occult Philosophy," *Journal of Religious History* 9 (1977) 224-5.

²¹ Lloyd Jones, 12.

²² Friedman, 94.

²³ This summary is largely derived from A. Vos, "Scholasticism," *New Dictionary of Theology*, 621-3.

held sway in the medieval educational system. It resulted from the melding of Christian doctrine and Aristotelian philosophy. Christianity was seen as offering ultimate truth in the form of divine revelation, so its doctrines were never questioned. Meanwhile, Aristotle brought a sophisticated method for logical thinking through his dialectic. It was assumed that these two approaches to truth would converge. Thus Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* brought the biblical text together with reason and logic to unravel difficult puzzles concerning such matters as God's will and human free choice.

This process continued smoothly until Aristotle's philosophical works were newly re-discovered in the 13th century. These espoused a worldview that was fundamentally incompatible with Christianity. The resulting clash between Christian revelation and the supposedly irrefutable logic of Aristotle became the preoccupation of the scholastics. Aquinas and others worked to smooth out the wrinkles, but the inevitable contradictions produced a system that "satisfied neither the cravings of the pious nor the demands of the intelligent."²⁴ As the debates became increasingly subtle and irrelevant to Christian life, two corrective movements arose. The first, humanism,²⁵ emphasized the power of the intellect and called for a return to the former days of glory known by the ancients. The Italian form of humanism sought the period of Graeco-Roman civilization and thus emphasized the pagan classics. The northern European form, in whose line Reuchlin worked, sought the purest truth by returning to the Christian Scriptures. By clearing away the layers of speculative scholastic accretions, the substance of true faith could be re-discovered. This necessitated getting back to the original sources of revelation, which meant knowledge of the original languages and access to the texts. Reuchlin dedicated himself to both of these tasks for the Hebrew Scriptures. Erasmus of Rotterdam did similar work on the Greek Scriptures.

Mysticism, the second corrective movement to scholasticism, is less often recognized.²⁶ Scholasticism was built upon logical deduction, often taking the form of syllogistic argumentation. As scholasticism crumbled, so did the desire to find ultimate truth and communion with God through logic.

²⁴ Hirsch, 121.

²⁵ cf. Feldmeth, 322.

²⁶ But see Hirsch, 121.

Alternative means needed to be found. The mystical approach is one that denied the power of reason for penetrating into knowledge of the divine. Instead, non-rational techniques could be employed to bridge the chasm separating the transcendent God from humanity, bringing him to immanence. In Kabbalah, Reuchlin found a mystical art that seemed to put the faithful Christian practitioner into contact with the spiritual realm. Furthermore, in order to practice Kabbalah, both knowledge of Hebrew and access to the Hebrew Scriptures were required. Reuchlin was ideally positioned to be both a humanist and a mystic as he struggled against the entrenched theological system of his day.

"I assure you that not one of the Latins can expound the Old Testament unless he first becomes proficient in the language in which it was written. For the mediator between God and man was language, as we read in the Pentateuch; but not any language, only Hebrew, through which God wished his secrets to be made known to man."²⁷

Johann Reuchlin

Reuchlin's Humanism and Philology

When Reuchlin is labeled with a single word, the standard choice is "humanist."²⁸ Indeed, this category describes one side of Reuchlin's goals and works quite well. "An eminent Latin scholar and author of the most popular Latin dictionary north of the Alps in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the pioneer of the Greek language in Germany and of the Hebrew in Europe, he typifies the humanist passion for the original text and for the literature of the ancient world."²⁹ Reuchlin's love for words, philology, established that field as a "recognized and independent discipline entitled to discuss the meaning of words in the Bible."³⁰ If Erasmus deserves the title of 'humanist,' then Reuchlin deserves it even more, for Erasmus had command of Greek and classical Latin, but Reuchlin also wielded Hebrew.

Reuchlin also embodied the skill of persuasive rhetoric that was so prized by the humanists. His *Recommendation...Jewish Books* is a masterful piece of rhetoric, beginning with a lawyer's incisive description of the issue and the two positions, and building upon it with artistic argumentation that leaves

²⁷ Lloyd Jones, 10.

²⁸ e.g., Löffler. See also Zika, 223 and 243.

²⁹ Zika, 243-4.

³⁰ Lloyd Jones, 12.

opponents speechless.³¹ Two brief examples will illustrate this point. First, Reuchlin argues that the Jews as a people deserve the same protection under imperial law as Christians enjoy. He appeals to the pre-Constantine Roman law where Christians and Jews were both regarded as religious sects. This shrewd argument had obvious appeal to Emperor Maximilian's ambition to reassert imperial rule over the Church, by placing both Christians and Jews under civil law.³² As a second example, consider Reuchlin's argument concerning certain Jewish prayers for vindication against their enemies. Some thought these prayers to be subversive since they clearly targeted Christians. However, Reuchlin outwits such thoughts by first establishing that the prayers in no way explicitly mention Christians. He then goes on to 'prove' that these prayers cannot possibly refer to Christians for "there is no people on earth that accords them [the Jews] greater freedom and welcomes them more readily than do the Christians, as we may find affirmed in canonical and secular law."³³ In a brilliant move, he wins his argument *and* disgraces his opponents, for they seek to oppress the Jews in violation of both the Church and the empire. Reuchlin's rhetorical eloquence displays his humanism.

Finally, Reuchlin displays the characteristic humanistic zeal for returning to the original, unadulterated source of knowledge and wisdom. Reuchlin and Erasmus had a "shared confidence that a fresh investigation of the biblical sources would yield that wisdom which, once recovered, was to restore pristine truth and thus renew church and society."³⁴ Therefore the Vulgate was no longer satisfactory, because the original wisdom was in the original language documents, not in Jerome's translation. Reuchlin wanted the same right Jerome had a millenium before and Nicholas of Lyra a century before: to work with the original texts. He wrote: "Though I admire Jerome as an angel and highly esteem Lyra as a master, I bow before the truth as before God."³⁵ Thus he was bold enough to offer over 200 corrections to

³¹ The fact that Reuchlin's position did not prevail in the courts is much more a reflection of the politics of the situation than for lack of rhetorical skill.

³² Carlebach, 19.

³³ Reuchlin, *Recommendation*, 43.

³⁴ Heiko A. Oberman, "Three Sixteenth-Century Attitudes to Judaism: Reuchlin, Erasmus and Luther" in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard Dov Cooperman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983) 330.

³⁵ Oberman, 334.

the Vulgate in the dictionary portion of his *De rudimentis Hebraicis*.³⁶ Reuchlin was opposed in this endeavor, not simply because he showed a lack of reverence for the official Latin Scriptures, but because he was “concerned with the study of classical languages and literatures as the way to a deeper understanding and an interior reformation of the Christian religion.”³⁷ He did not simply want to improve the translation with a few corrections, but he wanted to return to the undiluted sources of Scripture so that he could reform the *theology* of the Church. Carefully searching out the intricacies of grammar was not intended by Reuchlin to produce superficial results, but was aimed at revealing “the true and genuine sense of Scripture through bringing to our attention the distinctive properties of the words used.”³⁸ Ultimately, Reuchlin sought to hear the voice of God, and his means was to go back to the original Hebrew. As he wrote in *De mirifico verbo*, “the wondrous beauties of Hebrew—the language in which God, angels, and men spoke together, not through the ambiguous murmur of a Castalian spring, Typhonian cave or Dordonian wood, but as friends talk face to face.”³⁹

Reuchlin clearly shared key interests and sympathies with the humanists of his day. However, he took the philosophy of *ad fontes*, returning “to the source,” a step farther than most humanists were willing to go. Reuchlin wanted more than the original text: he wanted the original revelation of God. This led him further back in time, to the pre-classical world of mysticism and the occult.

“He made a discovery which gave him the leitmotif for all his future work: the contrast between the scholastic understanding of Word as essentially an intellectual occurrence, and the biblical understanding of Word as a wonderful and creative happening.”⁴⁰
Thomas F. Torrance

Reuchlin’s Mysticism

It is not clear when Reuchlin first became interested in the mysticism of Kabbalah: did it draw him to study Hebrew or did the study of Hebrew draw him into it? He clearly had opportunity to learn of

³⁶ Lloyd Jones, 13.

³⁷ Peter Schäffer, “Letters of Obscure Men” in *The Renaissance and Reformation in Germany: An Introduction*, ed. Gerhart Hoffmeister (New York: Frederick Ungar Publ., 1977) 130.

³⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, “The Hermeneutics of John Reuchlin, 1455-1522” in *Church, Word, and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley*, ed. James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 116.

³⁹ Quoted in Marvin Lowenthal, *The Jews of Germany: A Story of Sixteen Centuries* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1936) 145.

Kabbalah early on in his Hebrew studies. Pico, one of Reuchlin's inspirations for Hebrew studies, delivered his theses concerning Kabbalah in 1486, including one that said "there is no knowledge which makes us more certain of the divinity of Christ than magic and Kabbalah."⁴¹ Reuchlin came under Pico's influence four years later. While defending Kabbalah in the "Battle of the Books," Reuchlin wrote of the Church's interest in it:

Twenty years ago, our most Holy Father, Pope Innocent VIII, ordered this material, namely the books of the Kabbalah, to be studied and appraised by many very learned bishops and professors; this in response to the challenge of that most noble and learned gentleman, Count Johann Pico della Mirandola.⁴²

It therefore appears likely that Reuchlin's interest in Kabbalah was piqued by 1490, early in his days of studying Hebrew.

The ideas and practices of Kabbalah are difficult for modern minds to comprehend. Reuchlin describes Kabbalah as the correct means for grasping theological truth. While math and physics are understood by syllogisms and logic, knowledge of God cannot be attained that way.⁴³ Kabbalah is the means for apprehending the divine, far surpassing the mortal reasoning of logic.⁴⁴ Kabbalists receive divine revelation, which is apart from reason, through symbols, specifically the symbols of the Hebrew alphabet.⁴⁵ The content of the divine revelation is all derived from a single message: there is universal restoration, *i.e.* salvation, after the primordial Fall of the human race.⁴⁶ Reason is invalid because frail human thought processes cannot begin to learn how sin can be purged from Creation. But God will send a just man who will produce salvation for all who hope for it.⁴⁷ Kabbalah traces this one revelation from God's original disclosure to Adam through all of human history, though it is hidden from those who are

⁴⁰ Torrance, 107.

⁴¹ Lloyd Jones, 16.

⁴² Reuchlin, *Recommendation*, 64.

⁴³ Johann Reuchlin, *De Arte Cabalistica [On the Art of the Kabbalah]*, tr. Martin and Sarah Goodman (New York: Abaris Books, 1983) 57.

⁴⁴ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 61.

⁴⁵ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 63.

⁴⁶ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 65.

⁴⁷ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 65-9.

unprepared for it.⁴⁸ Reuchlin expands the range of Kabbalah by also arguing that all wisdom, even Greek philosophy, ultimately has its origin in the kabbalistic revelation. He goes to great lengths to show that Pythagoreanism is rooted in Kabbalah.⁴⁹

Reuchlin also explains how the continuing practice of Kabbalah works. Here is revealed the non-negotiable requirement for knowledge of Hebrew. Kabbalah works with the biblical texts, but not in a straightforward manner. Instead, it uses three techniques to manipulate the text, which are called geometry, notariacon, and commutation.⁵⁰ Geometry is based on the fact that each Hebrew letter also represents a number. Therefore each word has a numerical value (or several numerical values, depending on how the various letters/numbers are combined). Geometric manipulation is based on the understanding that all words with the same numerical value are interchangeable. Therefore, the biblical Hebrew text may be changed by replacing words with numerically equivalent words. Notariacon is another manipulative technique whereby new words are constructed by joining together the first letter of various words from a verse of the Bible. (Other letters besides the first are sometimes chosen instead). Thus, new words can be extracted from the biblical text. Finally, commutation refers to the rearrangement of letters within a word to create new words. Because of Hebrew's unusual structure of building words from trilateral stems, most combinations of letters form valid words. Therefore, these alphabetic manipulations are particularly fruitful in Hebrew, unlike most other languages. Reuchlin makes this point in the dialogue of *De arte cabalistica* by having the Kabbalah instructor respond to his students who are trying to use these manipulations on words of their own language:

But you will soon run out of examples to enumerate because of the poverty of other languages. Compared to Hebrew, the fount of all languages, they are poor, and so impatient of their shortcomings that they even adopt the idioms of other nations. They do not have a full complement, nor do they allow the useful composition of new words. Hence this art can only with great difficulty be translated into the speech of other nations. If I did not know you to be equally skilled in Hebrew, I would have gone over these little hints on Kabbalah with you to no avail.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 73-89.

⁴⁹ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 127-89.

⁵⁰ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 299.

⁵¹ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 311.

For Reuchlin, knowledge of Hebrew was not simply an intellectual endeavor, but an essential part of gaining access to the mind of God. Kabbalah cannot be translated into other languages.

Through these manipulations, kabbalists have derived all sorts of special words and, particularly, divine names that provide ways to tap into the divine. The resulting kabbalistic world is very complex. There are fifty gates between God and humanity, with Moses having ascended through forty-nine of them.⁵² There are thirty-two paths of wisdom that run from the very top to the very bottom.⁵³ Seventy-two angels, corresponding to the numerical value of seventy-two for the divine name YHVH, have powerful names that are derived through the aforementioned letter manipulations.⁵⁴ It is through meditation on these powerful words and names that revelation is gained. Though coming dangerously close to being occult,⁵⁵ Reuchlin maintains that God is not manipulated through this meditation, but that God has chosen to operate in accordance with kabbalistic practice by a pact with humanity, established initially with Adam. Reuchlin describes how these practices function to produce true piety:

[We do these things] not so that we may soften up God as we would a woman, and not so as to catch the angels with our sweet words and terms of endearment. We do it so that in the exaltation of God and the divine we may acknowledge the poverty of our own condition, humbly confess our subordinate and obedient state, and so unite all human desires in matters divine. In this way we conceive for the Highest an intense and burning love, one which renders us able to give thanks more than anything else. So we stand with outstretched hands and arms; so we bend the knee, standing to pray.... All these things, and all things like them, are made for us, intended to move us and excite us, to turn us away from the visible and towards the invisible. They are designed to increase our faith and strengthen our hope, to transform true love of each other, which is most pleasing to God, by diligent recapitulation into love of the divine. This teaching is wholly Kabbalistic....⁵⁶

For Reuchlin, Kabbalah is completely in accord with Christian doctrine. The revelation of salvation through the just man points to Christ and the practice of meditation draws the practitioner into a state of humble love of God. As strange as the practice seems, Torrance points out that it represents an important

⁵² Reuchlin, *DAC*, 247-55.

⁵³ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 255-9.

⁵⁴ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 261.

⁵⁵ Reuchlin's earlier work, *De verbo mirifico*, focused more on gaining miraculous power through Kabbalah, and therefore being occult. In *De arte cabalistica*, the focus is much more on gaining revelation and access to God.

⁵⁶ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 269.

stance: Kabbalah rejects any attempt to penetrate into the divine mind by reasoning. Our knowledge of God must come through mysterious revelation, not through Aristotelian argumentation.⁵⁷

“Reuchlin points out that the relationship through the Word with which he is concerned is not something irrational but on the contrary arises in the divine employment of the human mind as his instrument through admitting it into fellowship with the divine Mind.”⁵⁸ Thomas F. Torrance

The Resulting Hermeneutic

Reuchlin’s hermeneutic, his way of understanding God, had two balancing thrusts. On one side, he trusted in a mystical experience in the Hebrew words of revelation. On the other, he demanded a rigorous philological and grammatical treatment of Scripture in order to be sure of the words to which he ascribed the power of revelation.⁵⁹ When he combined these rational and supra-rational processes together, the resulting experience caused him to write, “When reading Hebrew I seem to see God Himself speaking when I think that this is the language in which God and the angels have told their minds to man from on high. And so I tremble in dread and in terror, not, however, without some unspeakable joy.”⁶⁰ Reuchlin’s God is so transcendent that it requires a miraculous act through his Word to allow human participation in fellowship with God.⁶¹ Ultimately, Reuchlin believed that Jesus is the true Word, the most powerful name of all, who brings salvation to the world. He is the one true revelation of God.

One can almost hear the Reformation theme of individual illumination by the Holy Spirit during the reading of Scripture in Reuchlin’s encounter with the Hebrew text. But, as Torrance points out, Reuchlin “developed an esoteric philosophy of Scripture which seriously distorted his christological insight into the doctrine of the Word and damaged his influence both within and without the Roman Church.”⁶²

⁵⁷ Torrance, 109.

⁵⁸ Torrance, 111.

⁵⁹ Torrance, 116.

⁶⁰ Friedman, 73.

⁶¹ Torrance, 110.

⁶² Torrance, 119.

“Our enemies, and the oppressors from among our own people [Pfefferkorn], arose to abolish the written Torah; then God demonstrated a double miracle to us, for the Torah was returned to its former glory by a sage among the nations [Reuchlin].”⁶³
Jasel of Rosheim

The “Battle of the Books”

Within the context of Reuchlin’s combined philology and mysticism, his commitment to the “Battle of the Books” can be much better understood. He dared not lose any of the revelation contained in the original Hebrew writings, nor the Jewish wisdom that provided the keys to the revelation. Clearly the Hebrew texts of the OT were necessary, as the source documents for the revelation. But beyond these biblical texts, the Jewish commentaries were absolutely invaluable for they “explain precisely how every word of the Bible is to be understood in the particularity of its linguistic context.”⁶⁴ This linguistic detail made the Hebrew language intelligible and provided the nuances of meaning that are necessary for really hearing any foreign language. Furthermore, it should go without saying that Reuchlin defended the preservation of the kabbalistic texts, which revealed the mysterious methods and results of this mystical practice that had brought him up to the mind of God. While other scholars only wanted the OT texts preserved, Reuchlin defends all non-blasphemous Jewish books as not simply benign but vitally beneficial to the Christian church.

“He has all Germany in his debt, where he was the first to awake the study of Greek and Hebrew. He is a man with an exceptional knowledge of the languages, accomplished in many subjects, eminent and well-known throughout Christendom for his published works.”⁶⁵
Erasmus of Rotterdam

“I am no Reuchlinist, nor a member of any other faction. . . . Except for civil friendship, there was nothing between Reuchlin and myself. Furthermore, never have I anywhere given him support, nor would he have wished it.”⁶⁶
Erasmus of Rotterdam

Erasmus and Reuchlin

How was Reuchlin’s plan for revitalizing the faith of the Church received? Pope Leo X eventually condemned Reuchlin’s writings and silenced him. But his work was also praised by many, so why was there such an ambivalent response? The two quotations by Erasmus that head this section

⁶³ Wortsman, 24.

⁶⁴ Reuchlin, *Recommendation*, 66.

⁶⁵ Lloyd Jones, 24.

⁶⁶ Zika, 223.

express the polarity of mind that could exist even within a single person concerning Reuchlin. Earlier scholarship identified Reuchlin's innovations with the humanists' challenge to scholasticism. The publishing of a satirical book of fictional letters (*Epistolae obscurorum virorum* [*Letters of Obscure Men*]) by supporters of Reuchlin during the "battle of the books" bolstered this view. These letters were purported to be written by scholastics, supporting Reuchlin's opponents. Using satire, the authors made the scholastics look like fools in contrast to the respectable humanists.⁶⁷ In terms of this satire, the struggle over the Jewish books was one of humanism vs. scholasticism. However, this oversimplifies the real complexity of the issues involved. Specifically, such a view places Erasmus and Reuchlin in the same camp and would not explain the distance Erasmus maintained between the two of them.

Zika examines the question of Erasmus' response to Reuchlin in depth. His belief is that Erasmus and Reuchlin had similar humanist commitments, but the latter's further commitment to kabbalistic mysticism took him out of the humanist camp and placed him in a new category, 'occult philosophy,' alienating him from Erasmus.⁶⁸ Zika focuses on the ceremonial aspects of Reuchlin's beliefs, but it seems more likely that all of Kabbalah was distasteful to Erasmus. Both men desired the reform of the Church, but the source of the reform differed between them. For Erasmus, the Jewish influence of Kabbalah only confused the purity of Christ and took Christian practice back to empty esoteric practices and away from practical ethics and morality.⁶⁹ Reuchlin was not a mainline humanist; his commitment to mysticism in addition to the humanistic form of rationality divorced him from the purer humanists.

*"Without your knowing it, you have served as an instrument of Divine Providence."
Martin Luther to Johann Reuchlin*

Luther and Reuchlin

Erasmus remained suspicious of Hebrew studies, worrying that they would lead to empty formalism and that they would be distracting from the more vital study of the New Testament.⁷⁰ Luther, however, saw Reuchlin's contributions as invaluable. Like Erasmus, he dismissed Kabbalah as a

⁶⁷ See Schäffer.

⁶⁸ Zika, 226.

⁶⁹ Zika, 230 and 232.

superstition that was only suitable for scholars with too much time. He preferred to find divine revelation in the words as they existed in the original Scriptures and as they are intelligently read with eyes of faith.⁷¹ But for Luther, Reuchlin had paved the way for the Reformation by (1) polarizing the establishment Dominicans against the study of the historical Bible,⁷² (2) by contributing to an intellectual climate that was exploring new ways to access the revelation in Scripture and thereby re-evaluating the traditional Church doctrines,⁷³ and (3) by propagating the Hebrew language to Christian scholars. Luther proclaims in his *Tischreden*:

The Hebrew language is the best language of all, with the richest vocabulary.... If I were younger I would want to learn this language, because no one can really understand the Scriptures without it. For although the New Testament is written in Greek, it is full of hebraisms and Hebrew expressions. It has therefore been aptly said that the Hebrews drink from the spring, the Greeks from the stream that flows from it, and the Latins from a downstream pool.⁷⁴

Beyond all of this, Reuchlin had contributed to the belief that “the medieval Church had gone awry and that this erroneous pattern of development would find its cure in reinstating the past.”⁷⁵ Luther became the successful leader of this reformational crusade when he discarded Reuchlin’s beloved Kabbalah and began studying the Scriptures in their original languages, slowly extricating himself from the stiling man-made accretions that had distorted God’s revelation in the Bible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Reuchlin’s complex life and thought pointed to a much-needed reform of the Church. His interwoven loves of the Hebrew language and Kabbalah were the substance of his studies and also of his gift to his beloved Church. In some ways, his insistence that logic and syllogism be left behind when seeking divine revelation foreshadowed modern debates in the field of biblical studies concerning the relationship between the biblical text and divine revelation. Reuchlin’s love for Hebrew is

⁷⁰ Zika, 229.

⁷¹ Oberman, 346.

⁷² Lowenthal, 156.

⁷³ Friedman, 1.

⁷⁴ Lepide, x.

⁷⁵ Friedman, 55.

also warmly appealing to later students of Hebrew, this author included, because he loved the language for the continual transcendent refreshment that it offers to minds weary of being steeped in Greek thought patterns. His enthusiasm was contagious, and it resulted in the accessibility of the Hebrew language to Christians in all subsequent ages. Finally, it is encouraging that God chose to bless the work of a man like Reuchlin, despite his devotion to mystical ways that have not remained part of orthodoxy. In his postscript to *De arte cabalistica*, he writes to Pope Leo X that he submits his work for the scrutiny of the Church, asking him to “throw out what displeases you and then I shall be happy that what is left has pleased.”⁷⁶ Indeed, though some has not, much of Reuchlin’s work has been found to please.

⁷⁶ Reuchlin, *DAC*, 357.

Appendix: Reuchlin Timeline and Pictures

1311	Pope Clement V establishes chairs of Hebrew in four key universities, but no money nor interest
1434	Clement's order re-issued but with no impact
1455	Reuchlin born in Pforzheim
1470	Reuchlin enrolls in the University of Freiburg
1474	Reuchlin begins studies at the University of Basel and studies Greek under Lapidanus
1475	<i>Vocabularius breviloquus</i> published (Latin dictionary)
1481	Reuchlin settles in Tübingen
1488	Reuchlin writes about beginning to study Hebrew The first copy of the Hebrew Bible is printed in Italy
1492	Reuchlin studies Hebrew under Jacob Jehiel Loans, Jewish physician to the Emperor
1493	Pope Alexander VI approves of Pico's books promoting Kabbalah
1494	<i>De verbo mirifico</i> published ("The Wonder-Working Word")
1500	Reuchlin writes a letter in Hebrew to Loans
1506	<i>De rudimentis Hebraicis</i> published (Hebrew grammar and dictionary)
1507	Pfefferkorn begins alleging that all Jewish writings attack the Christian faith
1509	Pfefferkorn accomplishes the first Jewish book confiscations
1510	Reuchlin called upon to offer an opinion on the Pfefferkorn claim Reuchlin petitions the Emperor to commission professors of Hebrew at every German university Only 250 of the 1,000 copies of <i>De rudimentis Hebraicis</i> have been sold
1511	<i>Recommendation Whether to Confiscate, Destroy and Burn All Jewish Books</i> published
1512	<i>In septem psalmos poenitentiales hebraicos interpretatio de verbo ad verbum</i> published (on the seven penitential psalms – the first Hebrew text printed in Germany) Reuchlin acquires a copy of the <i>Sanhedrin</i> (part of the Talmud)
1513	Inquisitional proceedings begin against Reuchlin
1514	Reuchlin's books condemned to be burned
1517	<i>De arte cabalistica</i> published ("On the Art of the Kabbalah")
1518	<i>De accentibus et orthographia linguae Hebraicae</i> published (details of Hebrew)
1520	Reuchlin's works condemned by Pope Leo X
1522	Reuchlin dies



A portrait of Johann Reuchlin

<http://www.stadt-pforzheim.de/reuchlin/reuchlin/leben.html>

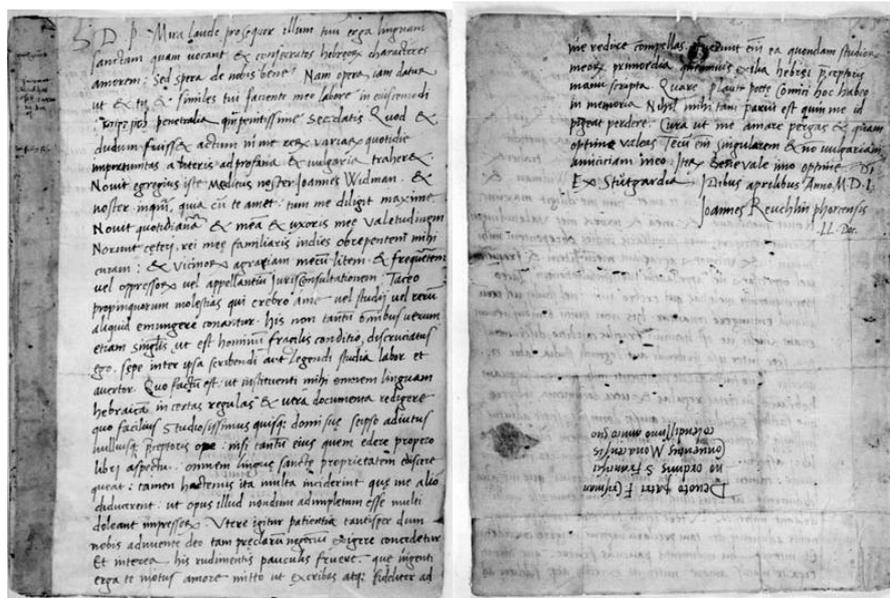


Reuchlin studying his Hebrew letters
(Hirsch, 116)



Reuchlin's coat of arms. The miller's wheel represents his wife's family trade. The altar with burning coals is labeled by the inscription 'ara Capnionis,' the altar of Capnion (Reuchlin's Greek name). See Zika, 241-2.

<http://www.blb-karlsruhe.de/blb/blbhtml/besondere-bestaende/handschriften/abb-21.html>



A letter in Reuchlin's own hand.

<http://www.stadt-pforzheim.de/reuchlin/reuchlin/briefe.html>



"The Triumph of Reuchlin" (CAPTION) Woodcut. 150 x 415 mm. Berlin-Dahlem (D354-10)

The Triumph of Capnion, showing Reuchlin's defeat of the obscurantists (Reuchlin, DAC, 360-1).



The Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin battle of the books.
<http://www.stadt-pforzheim.de/reuchlin/reuchlin/judenbuch.html>

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