

**Die Mysterien der Zeichen: Johannes Reuchlin, Schmuck, Schrift & Sprache,**

**Matthias Dall'Asta and Cornelia Holzach, Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim (eds.),**

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This magnificent volume explores the connection between Renaissance humanist thought and the meaning of jewelry in the light of theories of communication, symbolism, and language. The best pieces from the collection of the Pforzheim Jewelry Museum are presented in this volume alongside exceptional writings on the great humanist and Hebraist Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522). The occasion is the 500th anniversary of the death of Reuchlin, who was interested in writing and language. The publication deals with language, signs, and writing on and in jewelry, a topic that is approached from various angles. Examples include Nubian silver jewelry and its symbolism, writing on rings, and the contemporary jewelry of Jonathan Boyd. Along with Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1566-1536), Reuchlin is one of the most important European humanists whose works mark transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era. The year 2022 was the 500th anniversary of the death of this Pforzheim-born jurist, illustrious Hebraist, and religious philosopher. His figure resonates with the human quest for understanding and tolerance, which has lost none of its relevance today. Reuchlin was one of the first Christians to compose and publish a Hebrew textbook and lexicon titled *The Basic Principles of the Hebrew Language* (1506). He also won fame for his kabbalistic works *On the Wonder-working Word* (1494) and *The Practices of the Kabbalah* (1517), based on his study of Hebrew writings. Reuchlin was the first to profoundly study the Jewish Kabbalah in an attempt to create a Christian-Catholic Kabbalah. He viewed the Jews as the book carriers (*capsarii*), copyists (*librarii*), and librarians (*bibliothecarii*) who preserve the books from which Christians can extract the truth of their faith; he, therefore, held that the Jews and their books are indispensable to the Christian faith. Besides being an eminent scholar, Reuchlin also deserves the title of public intellectual, first and foremost, due to his outstanding active role in the contentious and toxic controversy known as ‘the Reuchlin affair’ or ‘the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin affair.’ It began in 1508 when Johann Pfefferkorn (1469-1523), a convert from Judaism to Christianity, in an effort to prove the sincerity of his own faith and to convert fellow Jews to Christianity, wrote a number of books against the Jews, notably the strident *Enemy of the Jews* (1509). This spiteful tract contained a section on “How the Jews ruin land and people” and inveighed against the usurious practices of Jewish moneylenders. Two other tracts, *Jewish Confession* (1508) and *How the Blind Jews Keep Easter* (1509), are of ethnographic interest today but also contain hostile passages and go so far as to advocate the expulsion of the Jews or, if that

is not possible, forcing them to do lowly work such as “cleaning latrines or collecting dog feces.”<sup>1</sup> In his zeal to convert his former co-religionists, Pfefferkorn argued that Hebrew books spread false beliefs, impeded conversion to the “true” Catholic religion, and should therefore be confiscated and burned.

Emperor Maximilian I, who initially supported the burning of the books and even issued an official mandate authorizing Pfefferkorn to carry out his plan, changed his mind after the confiscation had commenced. He authorized Uriel von Gemmingen (1468-1514), the Archbishop of Mainz, to head a committee that included four universities (Mainz, Cologne, Erfurt, and Heidelberg) and three individuals: Johannes Reuchlin; Victor von Carben (1515-1422), a scholar who before converting to Christianity was a rabbi in Cologne; Jacob van Hoogstraten (1469-1527), a Dominican theologian who also served as an inquisitor and was Reuchlin’s sworn persecutor. They were asked their opinion on confiscating and burning the Jewish books, the Talmud and others. Reuchlin, in impressively detailed and well-reasoned arguments, was the only one who opposed Pfefferkorn’s call to destroy the books. In his expert opinion, Reuchlin openly states: “The Jew is one of Our Lord God’s creatures just as much as I am,”<sup>2</sup> a statement as liberal as can be concerning Jews in sixteenth-century Europe. No less liberal is Reuchlin’s paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 5: 12: “that they are not members of the Christian Church and thus their beliefs are of no consequence to us.”<sup>3</sup> According to Reuchlin’, the Jews are the Holy Roman Empire’s subjects, just as others are.

First: The Jews, as subjects of the Holy Roman Empire should be treated according to Imperial Laws... Second: Our property should not be taken from us without our consent... Third: Imperial and regal codes and also other princely decrees forbid that any person should have his property taken by force... Fourth: Every person should be allowed to retain his old inherited traditions, customs and possessions, even if he were a robber... Fifth: Therefore, the Jews should be permitted to retain their synagogues, called ‘schools’, in peace and tranquility and should not be interfered with. Sixth: Such Jewish books have never been condemned or censured by either Canon or Civil Law...

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<sup>1</sup>Erika Rummel, *The Case against Johann Reuchlin: Religious and Social Controversy in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2002, Document 1, p. 56, 62.

<sup>2</sup>Daniel O’Callaghan (trans.), *The Preservation of Jewish Religious Books in Sixteenth-century Germany: Johannes Reuchlin’s Augenspiegel*, Brill, Leiden: Boston 2013, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 168; Franz Posset, *Respect for the Jews* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), p. 42.

And therefore, they [our laws] state one should not wrench such books from the Jews, suppress or burn them.<sup>4</sup>

But Reuchlin was swimming against the current. Historian Elisheva Carlebach has observed that to properly appreciate Reuchlin as an exception in the context of his era and Zeitgeist, one has to remember that in 1510, the year Reuchlin wrote his expert opinion recommending the preservation of the Jewish books - and, by so doing, defending the Jews – thirty-eight Jews were burned to death in Berlin after being convicted of stealing and torturing a host, although a Christian man had previously confessed to having done it.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Reuchlin swam against the tides of humanism, as demonstrated by comparing his views with those of ‘the prince of humanists.’ Erasmus wanted a Europe devoid of Jews. Historically, expulsions of Jews were common practice in Medieval and early modern Europe. Erasmus praised France, where: “The law flourishes as nowhere else, nowhere has religion so retained its purity without being corrupted by commerce carried on by the Jews, as in Italy, or infected by the proximity of the Turks or Marranos, as in Hungary and Spain.”<sup>6</sup> His expression implies Erasmus’s ideal of a Europe devoid of Jews and his endorsement of the deportation of French Jews during the Middle Ages – the most infamous occurring in 1306, the late fifteenth century, and the early sixteenth. Against the background of such anti-Judaism, expressed by his esteemed colleague, Reuchlin’s uniqueness shines out even brighter. In contrast to Erasmus, Reuchlin feared that if the Jews were expelled, they would no longer be available as a literary resource. In the preface of his *Basic Principles of the Hebrew Language*, he complained about the persecution of Spanish and German Jews, who were subsequently forced to seek residence elsewhere and turned to the Arab lands. In this way, he feared, the Jews would no longer serve as experts to be consulted and, without their presence, their Hebrew books would soon disappear.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>D. O’Callaghan, *Ibid.*, p. 28, 122.

<sup>5</sup>Elisheva Carlebach, “Critical Introduction,” in Johannes Reuchlin, *Recommendation Whether to Confiscate, Destroy and Burn all Jewish Books*, trans. Peter Wortsman, Paulist Press, New York 2000, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup>*Collective Works of Erasmus*, vol. 27(A *Complaint of Peace*), 306; Nathan Ron, *Erasmus and the “Other,”* Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2019), p. 131-132, 141-145.

<sup>7</sup>F. Posset, *Ibid.*, p. 46 and n. 27.

Consequently, legal proceedings, which rolled on for about a decade, were conducted against Reuchlin in Germany and the papal court in Rome. He was accused of demonstrating, in his writings, a preferential treatment of Judaism and the treacherous Jews (as defined by the Dominican Hoogstraten). Although he was not declared a heretic, he was fined for his allegedly defamatory *Augenspiegel*, which was condemned and banned. Reuchlin classified the Jewish books into seven types: 1. The Hebrew Bible; 2. The Talmud; 3. Kabala, the most secret speech and words of God; 4. Glosses and commentaries written by scholars and scribes on every book of the Bible ('Perusch'); 5. Sermons, disputations, prayerbooks ('Midrasch' or 'Draschoth'); 6. Books of philosophers and scholars of all disciplines, generally called 'Sepharim,' that is, books designated according to the scholar or field; 7. Poetry, fables, verse, tales, satires, and collections of didactic examples, each with their title, as devised by the author (the Jews themselves consider most of them fictions and inventions). Among the books of the seventh group, Reuchlin maintains, there are only two which directly hurl insults and contempt at Christianity: one is *Nizzachon* ('Victory,' a collection of anti-Christian arguments, written in the early fifteenth century by Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman of Millhausen), the other is *Tolduth Ieschu hanozri* ('A History of Jesus of Nazareth,' a Medieval polemical tract describing Jesus as the illegitimate son of Miriam and Joseph Pandera). Only these two books may be confiscated and burned, and only then by imperial order. Reuchlin's final recommendation is that:

...the Imperial Majesty should decree, for the will of God and our Christian faith, that two maintained positions of master should be established at every university in the German speaking lands for a period of ten years. These masters should be competent and able to teach and instruct the students and pupils in the Hebrew language, in accordance with the Clementine decrees and ordinances; *sub titulo de magistris prima*. In order to equip those faculties, Jews who are resident in our lands should be of assistance to us, out of good neighborly relations, and willingly loan their books, in return of course for a substantial deposit, and care will be taken to protect them from damage, until such time as we have copied them or printed our own. For I have no doubt, that in a few years our students will then be so proficient in the Hebrew language, that they will be able to bring the Jews to us with gentle persuasion, through logical and amiable arguments.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>D. O'Callaghan, *Ibid.*, p. 197.

Indeed, despite the persecutions by haters of Hebrew and Judaism, the study of Hebrew flourished and intensified in German universities, mainly thanks to Reuchlin's exertions and persistence. Thus, during 1519-1521 Reuchlin taught, almost until his death, Greek and Hebrew at the University of Ingolstadt. A letter written in Hebrew was sent to him in September 1520 by the Augustinian Friar and eminent Hebraist Caspar Amman (c. 1450-1524) of the Lauingen friary in southern Germany. Amman testifies to Reuchlin's success in teaching Hebrew to students, probably a large number of them, as can be deduced from the letter:

My lord and friend, I have heard that you teach the holy language in Ingolstadt and have already taught the grammar of the late and blessed Rabbi Moshe Kimhi. And now you interpret The Seven Penitential Psalms. Also, you teach the root of the compound words and the use of the auxiliary letters [in humanist Latin called *litterae serviles*]. I was also told that many sophisticated and pleasant students sit daily in front of you, kissing the hem [of your garment], happy to hear and learn the pure doctrine from you. Blessed are they and all those who listen to you, see you, love you, and protect you. Indeed, their hearts are filled with joy and delight. I ask that you always continue like that because you are doing something outstanding. May God give your honorable highness grace and strength to act and teach at the university for years to come – to His praise. In short, love the one who loves you.<sup>9</sup>

With the necessary caution, it can be said that Reuchlin acted, and did so without the conscious awareness of later Enlightenment thinkers, to realize the freedom of religion and civil equality for the Jewish minority in the Holy Roman Empire. In doing so, he stood out as a pioneering public intellectual. Graetz's estimation of Reuchlin's assistance "in making the transition from Middle Ages to modern times"<sup>10</sup> may sound like exaggerated hyperbole. Yet, it reflects the sincere appreciation that post-Reuchlinian intellectuals felt toward him. To Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's praise of Reuchlin, "Who can be compared to him? A miracle in his

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<sup>9</sup>Johannes Reuchlin, *Briefwechsel*, vol.4: 1518-1522, (ed. Matthias Dall'Asta and Gerald Dörner ), Frommann-Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2013), letter no. 391, p. 354. I am indebted to Dr. Franz Posset for drawing my attention to this letter (my translation of the letter to English was revised in cooperation with Dr. Posset).

<sup>10</sup>Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 4, (ed. Bella Löwy), Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1894, vol. 4, p. 432.

time!”<sup>11</sup> one may add that Reuchlin was an exemplary public intellectual not only by the standards of his time.

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<sup>11</sup>Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Zahme Xenien*, in: *Goethes Werke* Bd. 3. 1890, S. 241: “Reuchlin! Wer will sich ihm vergleichen, zu seiner Zeit ein Wunderzeichen.”

### **Resources**

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