

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

on a Sabbath forenoon during our last war with Great Britain, a minister, eminent for his genius and learning, was engaged in his pulpit services, and was informed that three ships of the British navy were coming near the port where he resided, and imperilling one of our own men-of-war. He instantly suspended the morning worship, left the pulpit, hastened to the neighboring fortification, offered his military services to the commander, was ordered to stand by one of the guns, remained at his post until the three ships of the British line had sailed away; then he returned to his church in season for the afternoon sermon, which he delivered extempore from the triumphant words: "There go the ships" (Ps. civ. 26). The text as quoted is entirely different in its meaning from the text as first written. The sentence was complete, but when severed from its adjuncts became ludicrous, though patriotic.

(To be continued).

ARTICLE VII.

JOHN REUCHLIN, THE FATHER OF HEBREW LEARNING IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

BY REV. SELAH MERRILL, ANDOVER, MASS.

THAT was a most interesting period in history when Germany was awakened from a long mental sleep. She seemed to become suddenly conscious of her condition and needs, and at once set herself resolutely to work to remedy her defects. It was within the period of deadness and darkness that Reuchlin was born at Pforzheim, in 1455,— when Germany lacked libraries and books, learned men, efficient teachers, and respectable schools, and, most deplorable of all, the consciousness that such things were at all necessary to the completeness of national life and character. But all this was changed; and when Reuchlin died, in 1522, in his sixty-seventh year, the national mind was characterized by a passionate eagerness for truth in both education and religion. Learned men had arisen; character had been given to the schools; education had been established on a sound basis; printed books had accumulated; Latin, Greek, and Hebrew had come to be studied according to scientific methods; a fair critical spirit had been developed; and, withal, light had begun to dawn

on the spiritual world. The subject of this brief sketch was one of the most prominent actors in these rapidly shifting scenes. He was pre-eminently a man raised up by God to do a great work for the race. His works have now no value, and are quite forgotten; but his life and labors form an epoch of great moment in the history of the human mind and spirit. Reuchlin was a man of rare gifts. He was an eminent jurist, a master of pure Latin and Greek, the great light of his age and country (in the Christian church) in Hebrew, a man of liberal culture, a polished gentleman, the ambassador and companion of kings, a writer who commanded respect in his own age, a man of indomitable energy, of plodding perseverance, of exceeding fairness and soundness of judgment, a most earnest seeker for truth, who said of himself: "I worship truth as God" and whose name was praised and whose advice was sought by the scholars of every nation, both on account of the degree of his attainments and also on account of the integrity and purity of his character. We have to do, certainly, with a rare man, and the complete story of his life is one of exciting interest. But, in this sketch, we must consider him chiefly in the department of Hebrew learning, to which the book before us confines its notice of him.¹

1. *His struggle to master the Hebrew, and his attainments in the same.*— During the first half of Reuchlin's life manuscripts were expensive, and printed books did not exist. Also, capable instructors in Hebrew were quite as non-existent as books themselves. Reuchlin was thirty-three years old when the first complete Hebrew Bible was printed (that was in Italy, in 1488), and it was some time, perhaps several years, before any copies reached Germany. Besides, there was no demand for a knowledge of Hebrew. What possible incentive or motive was there to lead a student to apply himself to this study? Two theologians at Tübingen, Conrad Summenhart and Paul Scriptoris, are mentioned as having known a little Hebrew; but they left neither books nor pupils. Conrad Pellican also made some progress in this study; but as late as 1500 he was obliged to apply to Reuchlin for the solution of difficulties which appear now very trifling. Rudolf Agricola learned the rudiments of Hebrew in early life, and then laid aside the language altogether, making no use of it until a year or two before his death, when he resumed the study of it, which amounted, of course, to commencing it anew. Perhaps the most familiar name, in this connection, is that of John Wessel. Probably he taught Agricola what the latter knew of this language; but he left no records as to his own attainments in it, and that he had other pupils is not at all certain. Agricola is authority for saying that Wessel *dissuaded* Reuchlin from studying Hebrew. Yet he may have taught Reuchlin the rudiments

¹ Das Studium der Hebräischen Sprache in Deutschland vom Ende des xv. bis zur Mitte des xvi. Jahrhunderts. Von Ludwig Geiger. Breslau. 1870. pp. viii, and 140. — Reuchlin, pp. 23-40.

of it. These men are named as the predecessors of Reuchlin, so far as he had any; but it is easily seen that such knowledge of Hebrew as they possessed would not be entitled to any great respect. We mention these facts for the purpose of showing that to master Hebrew under such circumstances, and to create among the students of Germany a universal enthusiasm for the study of it, was no small task, and deserves no small praise. Besides the obstacles already mentioned, public opinion in many quarters was very bitter against the study of Hebrew. In the eyes of the strict party of the church, "the Greek language was the mother of all heresies, and the study of the Hebrew was an unquestionable apostasy to Judaism."¹ Pfefferkorn said: "The Jews injure the Christian religion more than the devil himself."² Later, Reuchlin, because of his enthusiasm for Hebrew studies, was charged with having been "bought up" by the Jews.³ In a letter to Cardinal Hadrian, Reuchlin says: "I devoted myself to Hebrew partly for the pleasure it gave me, but chiefly for the great service which I foresaw a knowledge of it would be to religion and truth." And further: "Neither a thirst for gold nor a desire for fame have driven men into this study. On the contrary, I have been obliged to keep my studies a secret, and as to the expense of learning Hebrew, I assure you it has cost me much money." If Reuchlin learned the rudiments of Hebrew of Wessel at all, it must have been in 1475, after his return from the Paris schools, when he resided for a time in Basel, where he met Wessel. This was in his twentieth year.

There is evidence that by 1480, he had learned a little Hebrew. In 1483 Agricola (Reuchlin was then twenty-eight) speaks of his knowledge of Hebrew. But when the best has been said, the knowledge of it which he then possessed was very limited. In 1487 he sent to his friend, Sebastian Murrho, to get him a copy of the Pentateuch, *but in a translation*; which, however, Murrho could not find. In 1489, Leontorius, in a letter praising Reuchlin's learning, speaks only of Greek and Latin. Reuchlin could make no great progress in Hebrew without a teacher; and a teacher, what Reuchlin himself afterwards became, could not at that time be found. He had been in various universities, — Freiburg, Basel, Paris, Orleans, Poitiers, — but they were alike poor in this respect. In 1481 he went to Würtemberg to reside. Here there was a considerable number of Jews, but none sufficiently educated to help him. And it was not till 1492, in his thirty-seventh year, when he was sent to the court of the emperor Friedrich III., that his desire to find an instructor in Hebrew was gratified. A Jew, Jacob Jehiel Loans, the private physician of the emperor, was also master of Hebrew, and at once became Reuchlin's teacher. This fact marks an important epoch in Reuchlin's life. Perhaps.

¹ Hase's History, 329.

² Libell. de Confess. Judaica. See Meiners, Lebensbeschreibungen, I. 103.

³ Meiners, I. 81.

also, it marks an important moment in the history of learning in the Christian church. During this and the following year Reuchlin received instruction, at intervals, from Loans. In 1498 he was sent from Heberberg, where he had settled, to Rome as ambassador. While at Rome he sought a second time for a Hebrew instructor, and obtained the services of a Jew named Sforzo. This Obadiah, or "Abdias" Sforzo, Reuchlin paid "one gold crown an hour" for his instruction.¹ It will be noticed that it was not till this late date, 1498, Reuchlin's forty-third year, that he was able fully to stand on his own feet in this department of learning in which he became so eminent. And as late as 1516, six years before his death, we find him seeking means to perfect himself in Chaldee.² Through the friendship and influence of Loans, Friedrich III. presented Reuchlin with an elegant manuscript of the Bible, valued at three hundred gold crowns. To Doctor Streler, tutor of a brother of Reuchlin, Reuchlin wrote, in 1491, for a copy of the Bible. After much fruitless searching, Streler replied: "Books are not so plenty here in Florence as you imagine. I have found no Hebrew Bible yet, except one owned by a man in Bologna, and to which several books are wanting."³ In 1492 Streler wrote again: "No Hebrew Bible yet; and about it I can say nothing further till Holzhafer returns from Naples." Although Reuchlin had infinite trouble to collect books, yet he was able to collect, for the times, quite a fair library. Besides many other literary works, Reuchlin published, in 1506, his "Rudiments of Hebrew"; in 1512, a "Grammatical Interpretation of the Seven Penitential Psalms"; and in 1518, his "Hebrew Accents and Orthography." He also translated into Hebrew one or more small works, and wrote several letters in Hebrew. We find him making constant use of his knowledge, in the way of assisting or instructing others. We have space only to mention the fact that the Elector of Saxony invited him to occupy the chair of Hebrew in Wittenberg, which he was obliged to decline.⁴ In 1520, he was invited to a professorship of Greek and Hebrew in Ingoldstadt, at a salary of two hundred gold crowns a year, which offer he accepted, and at once he began to lecture on Kimchi's Hebrew Grammar and the *Plutus* of Aristophanes. Upwards of three hundred students crowded into his lecture-room to hear him. It is a fact worthy of note that among his pupils here were John Forster, and John Eck, the famous opponent of Luther. Later he was called to Tübingen as Professor of Greek and Hebrew, where he labored till the summer of 1522, when he died in Stuttgart, where he had been carried.

There are many facts illustrating the thoroughness of his scholarship. His bitter enemy, Pfefferkorn, the converted Jew, was regarded as a man of learning; and yet Reuchlin showed him Hebrew books which he (Pfefferkorn) could not read. Later in the famous Pfefferkorn-Hochstrassen-Reuchlin controversy, Reuchlin's "Eyeglass," in which were many quotations

¹ Meiners, I. 66.² Geiger, 29, note.³ Meiners, I. 88.⁴ Geiger, 31.

tions in Hebrew in rabbinical character, was to be examined by the church officials. But to be read it had to be first translated into Latin. Both parties appointed men for this purpose. When the work came to be examined, Reuchlin's attorney showed that the church party had made three hundred mistakes in their translation. The church party were at last obliged to yield, and take the Reuchlin translation as the correct one. This was certainly a triumph for Reuchlin's scholarship. One point in the famous controversy just alluded to was that the Talmud should be burnt. It had not then been printed, except a few single tracts. Reuchlin said he could not speak of this from personal knowledge. He had never been able to get a copy, although he would have gladly paid twice its value for one. Further, he had never in any German country met a Christian who had read the Talmud. And among all the baptized Jews, he knew of but a single one who could read it. And Reuchlin argues: "Why condemn a book which no one is able to read, and which no one in Germany is able to tell us anything about?"¹

One other incident will illustrate the candid spirit of Reuchlin, in contrast with the narrow spirit of his opponents Pfefferkorn, of whom Erasmus said, "This one half-Jewish Christian has injured Christianity more than the entire Jewish rabble,"² made a plan for converting all the Jews and annihilating Judaism, as follows: 1. All books were to be taken away from the Jews, except the Bible; 2. Government was to compel all Jewish children to be trained up in the Christian religion; 3. The adult Jews who would be converted were to be kindly received; 4. But the rest, who should harden themselves in their errors, were to be driven away as incorrigible knaves. His plan may have looked well on paper to himself and to those of his party. But Reuchlin said: "The gospel, the church Fathers, and justice are all against such a thing. Much wiser would it be to put two professors of Hebrew into each of the universities in the land, and let them train the young men thoroughly in the knowledge of this language. And thus, after ten years, perhaps, there will be a body of men who will be able to meet the Jews fairly, mildly, and reasonably, on their own grounds, and in that way convert them."³ Nothing could better illustrate the spirit of the two parties into which the Christian church was now dividing itself—the party of progress and its opposite—than the incident or fact just related.

2 If we had time, it would be interesting to show, as our second point, *the exceeding liberalness and fairness of Reuchlin's judgment*, of which the facts just related are illustrations.

3 *Reuchlin never left the Catholic church.*—It seems as if Providence had a special object in retaining him there. He did a great work as a forerunner of the Reformation. Luther said: "I thank the grace of God

¹ Meiners, I. 111.

² See Graetz., *Gesch. der Juden*, ix. 89.

³ Meiners, I. 104, 122.

which has been revealed in thee, dear man, and which has enabled thee to stop the mouths of the ungodly." Others said, on account of his great services for the Bible: "Hieronymus is born again."

4. *Reuchlin deserves notice as a man of general culture.* — This hardly belongs to the limits of our sketch. Yet as a promoter of Roman and Greek literature, by his lectures, translations, and other works; as the author of several dramatic pieces, and the first to introduce dramatic representations into the colleges of Germany; as a jurist, in which capacity he spent many years of his life — he has given abundant evidence that his general culture was of the most liberal kind.

5. *Further, he is an example of constant and persevering labor.* — If he was the father of Hebrew learning, he was also the father of that patient plodding, yet cheerful method of study for which German students have been so long renowned. While in the service of emperors or princes every hour when he was not engaged in his regular duties he devoted to study. Sebastian Brant "regrets deeply that a man with Reuchlin's abilities should be so occupied with all sorts of affairs, and even military affairs, as to have no time left for learned labors." "No portion of my life," he says, "has passed when I have not applied myself to advance the interests of learning and religion." At another time he speaks of toiling day and night to accomplish a certain task. His constantly laborious life could be illustrated by many facts.

6. *After Reuchlin had created a place for himself in the world, his services were in great demand.* — Melancthon, Schilling, Oecolampadius, and many others from many quarters, came to him to enjoy his instruction. Universities, abbots, and private individuals sent to him for advice in procuring Hebrew instructors. In Latin, Greek, and theology he passed everywhere as authority. His advice was sought in difficult matters pertaining to learning. Stoffler wants to know if *bobel* and *bovel* are Hebrew words. Peutingger, if the word rendered "eagle," in Deut. xiv., means really an eagle, or some four-footed animal. Amorbach is editing Hieronymus, and needs Reuchlin to assist him with his knowledge of Hebrew. Others ask for other favors, so that Reuchlin, besides his own duties, was often employed in aiding eminent scholars.

7. *Reuchlin's contemporaries had the highest respect for him.* — Budæus, Ruellius, Copus, and Faber all write from France, "No name is more renowned here than that of Reuchlin." Whatever Reuchlin wrote was called a "masterpiece." In Italy and England, and France also, "we kissed the letters of this famous man, and preserved them as precious relics." Erasmus puts him among the saints, and associates his name with that of St. Hieronymus. The stream of praise setting towards him is swollen to a perfect flood. "The learned world owe him everlasting thanks." "The Jews are outdone in the knowledge of their own language." "Theologians must put upon his head the crown." And the learned men who succeeded Reuchlin spoke of his time as the golden age.

We must now close this incomplete sketch of one whose name marks an epoch in history; who gave character and significance to an entire age; whose influence changed infinitely for the better the whole tone and sentiment of a nation in regard to learning; whose rare attainments, combined with great purity and integrity of character, won for him the admiration and esteem of all the learned world.

And in these days, when in our country good Hebraists are alarmingly rare, when in the minds of many students there is a feeling that a Hebrew scholar can be little more than a mere fossil of a man, it is refreshing, and ought to be stimulating to all ministers and theological students, to consider that the father of Hebrew learning in the Christian church was not only an eminent scholar, but a polished gentleman, of courtly manners, of remarkable sweetness of voice, of agreeable and perhaps commanding personal address, of good habits and perfect health, and withal possessed of a wonderful talent for application and patience—qualities which in any age, and under almost any circumstances, will create genius, or at least achieve success.

It seems as if the work of Geiger, which has suggested this Article, ought to be put into an English dress. In our sketch, perhaps the very excellent work of Meiners, "Lebensbeschreibungen," etc., Zürich, 1794 (vol. i. 44–212), has been of more service than the work of Geiger. Mayerhoff has also a volume, with an Introduction by Neander, "Johann Reuchlin und seine Zeit," Berlin, 1880, which we have used. At the end it has a list of Reuchlin's works, with their different editions and running remarks. It contains, also, an excellent portrait. Then much valuable matter on Reuchlin and his times is contained in the first few chapters of vol. ix. of Graetz's, "Geschichte der Juden."

ARTICLE VIII.

NOTICES OF RECENT PUBLICATIONS.

THE THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGIANS OF SCOTLAND, chiefly of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. By James Walker, D.D. 8vo. pp. 187. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark. 1872.

In this instructive volume Dr. Walker says of John Livingstone: "He knew Hebrew and Chaldee, and something of Syriac. He had tried his hand, he says, at Arabic. He was sufficiently acquainted with French and Italian to be able to make use of French and Italian books. He could read the Bible, too, in Spanish."—p. 21. Of Thomas Boston he writes: At the time he came to Ettrick "he borrowed a 'piece of the Hebrew Bible containing the books of Samuel and Kings,' and with that set himself to the study of the 'Holy Tongue.' After a while he bought for