

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE:

THE STUDY OF HEBREW AMONG CHRISTIANS

by

Prof. David Rudavsky*

The Old World

For hundreds of years, the study of Hebrew was prompted by religious interest in finding anti-Christian references in Jewish religious literature. After the Reformation, Hebrew was also used for Bible research and criticism. The combination of religious and scientific approaches brought about the inclusion of Hebrew in European and American universities. To understand this development, we must examine the study of Hebrew by Christians from the beginnings of Christianity.

The early Church of the first and second centuries made Greek its language for a number of reasons: Greek was the *lingua franca* of the enlightened world, and the Church Fathers, who were Greek philosophers before their conversion, were eager to demonstrate the rapport between Christianity and Greek philosophy. Moreover, Hebrew was rejected for fear of having the Christian religion identified with Judaism. In the fourth century, Latin took over from Greek. Few churchmen had any knowledge of Hebrew, and those who did had learnt it from Jewish teachers.

Among those who knew Hebrew was Hieronymus (Jerome). He wrote a number of commentaries on the Old Testament and also two lexicographical works on biblical Hebrew, which served as sources to sixth century Christians who had some knowledge of Hebrew. These lexicons were to become the first sources for Hebrew study. From the ninth century a good deal of biblical study was undertaken among Christians with the help of Jews.

From the twelfth century Christians began to study the Talmud for the purpose of finding in it confirmation of the Christian faith and thus facilitating the conversion of the Jews. Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, examined the Talmud with the help of converted Jews, with a view to proving that it is a source of hatred and defamation of the Church. This led to a number of disputations, out of which there appeared a body of

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Christian polemical literature, which in turn led to greater knowledge of the Bible and of rabbinical literature. This is illustrated by the following examples.

Roger Bacon (1213-1294) had a positive attitude towards Hebrew because it was the language of revelation, and he cast doubts on any translation of the Bible with the argument, "The wine is purer when it remains in the first barrel than after it has been poured from one vessel into another". Nicholas of Lyra (1279-1341), a Franciscan biblical scholar, wrote a book of Bible interpretations using rabbinical literature and Rashi's commentaries as his sources. His method of exegesis was taught at the University of Erfurt, where Martin Luther received his theological education, so here may be a link between rabbinical literature and the Reformation. John Calvin also had a fair knowledge of Hebrew.

Early in the 14th century the Pope tried to establish a chair of Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic at the universities of Paris, Oxford and Bologna to facilitate the work of missionaries, but these attempts were not very successful. With the Renaissance, which began in Italy in the 15th century, the study of Hebrew became more widespread, in keeping with the general tendency to broaden the scope of learning. Johann Reuchlin and Pico della Mirandola were among the first Humanists noted for their knowledge of Hebrew. Mirandola read and translated the *Kabbalah* in the belief that it held confirmation of the teaching of Christianity. Reuchlin opposed the efforts of a converted Jew who wanted to destroy all Hebrew literature except the Bible, and suggested that the rabbinic literature was a source of explications which could benefit the Christian faith. He was the first Christian to edit a Hebrew grammar, and his example was followed by Sebastian Münster, a German Protestant (1489-1552). In 1488 the chair of Hebrew was re-established in Bologna and later (1514) one was established at Rome.

The Reformation, based as it was on the Old Testament, did much to encourage the study of Hebrew among Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. A number of other chairs of Hebrew were established, and by the 17th century Hebrew had equal status with Latin and Greek in European universities. In England under Henry VIII an incentive for the study of Hebrew was the King's desire to prove from the Hebrew Bible that his marriage with Catharine of Aragon was invalid. In 1540 he established a chair of Hebrew at Cambridge. Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629) of Basle composed a lexicon of Talmudic and rabbinical Aramaic. John Lightfoot (1602-1675) was the first Christian scholar to use the Talmud for New Testament research. The polyglot Bibles of the 16th and 17th centuries did much to further the study of Hebrew.

Johan Wagenseil (1633-1705) published a collection of anti-Christian statements from Jewish sources, to reveal Jewish "blasphemies" with regard to the "true religion", but on the other hand he had a great respect for the Musar Books which appeared in his time, and protested against the

persecution of Jews and defended them against the blood libel. Quite a different attitude was adopted by Andreas Eisenmenger (1654 - 1704), who in his influential antisemitic book *Entdecktes Judentum* ("Judaism Unveiled") used Hebrew sources to substantiate the blood libel and the accusation of well-poisoning. But in general the Christian Hebrew scholars supported the Jews against their adversaries, and there were those among them who became admirers of Judaism.

Modern Bible criticism may be said to have started with Jean Astruc (1674 - 1766), a professor of medicine at the University of Paris; it was carried further by such scholars as Gottfried Eichhorn (1752 - 1827) and reached its peak among the famous 19th century Bible scholars in Germany and Great Britain. It was the fruit of religious liberalism, sparked off among Christians by the Reformation and among Jews by the Haskalah movement.

The New World

The Puritans brought the tradition of Hebrew scholarship from England to America upon their arrival there in 1620. The principal purpose of the universities founded there by the Puritans was to train clergymen. When Harvard University was founded in 1636, it was to become the first institute of higher learning to teach Semitic languages. Hebrew was included in its syllabus as well as Chaldean (Aramaic), Syrian and Arabic. In addition to its significance for religious studies, Hebrew was taught at Harvard for its cultural value as "mother of all languages". Judah Morris, a baptised Jew, was Professor of Hebrew at Harvard from 1722 to 1760. Yale followed Harvard's example. Ezra Stiles, a Hebrew language expert and Head of Yale (1777 - 1790), made a speech in Hebrew at the 1781 graduation ceremony. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone (in Egypt) and of various biblical sites and manuscripts towards the end of the 17th and early in the 18th centuries roused yet more interest in Hebrew.

Towards the end of the 19th century a large number of American universities opened Departments of Hebrew, including New York University. In the 20th century American universities now have departments in every sphere of Jewish studies - literature, philology, history etc.

To a certain extent the leaders of the Science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) Movement and the Christian theologians and scholars were in agreement in their attitude towards Hebrew culture, which they considered to be moribund. The only difference of opinion was over the time of its demise. The former group thought that Hebrew culture was condemned to death by the Emancipation of the Jews and that good taste required its burial with honour in university departments, alongside the ancient Greek and Roman cultures; the Christians considered Hebrew literature after the emergence of Christianity as devoid of real value. But with the 1930's a change took place and since then, due to the work of Professor

A. I. Katsh, Hebrew language and literature have been taught as expressions of a living culture. New York University was the first secular institute of higher learning to introduce this approach. Today there are fifty institutes of higher learning in America that teach modern Hebrew.

Summary by Ruth Reich

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