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Review of Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*

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At the time of this publication, Dr. Ruderman was affiliated with Yale University, but he is now a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania.

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Review of Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*

Abstract

The idea of transplanting into English *De arte cabalistica* of Johannes Reuchlin is, no doubt, an exciting one. Reuchlin's work, originally published in 1517, was one of the first Latin books on the Jewish kabbalah written by a Christian. Since the writing of *De verbo mirifico* some twenty years earlier, Reuchlin had made considerable progress in mastering kabbalistic sources and utilized his expanded knowledge to produce an informed and sympathetic elucidation of his subject.

Disciplines

History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Medieval History | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

At the time of this publication, Dr. Ruderman was affiliated with Yale University, but he is now a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania.

not complete his analysis of the monistic trend in this volume, but he does allude to it on several occasions. What is missing in Pagel's volume and what is needed to complete his analysis is a discussion of the difference between man's and God's relationship to Nature and how that difference guides van Helmont's science. But what we have in this volume is a rich weave indeed—one that proves that even at the end of his illustrious career Pagel remained the master of motif in the history of Renaissance science and medicine.

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Johann Reuchlin. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*. Tr. Martin and Sarah Goodman. Intro. G. Lloyd Jones. (Janus series, 10.) New York: Abaris Books, 1983. 378 pp. \$20.

The idea of translating into English *De arte cabalistica* of Johannes Reuchlin is, no doubt, an exciting one. Reuchlin's work, originally published in 1517, was one of the first Latin books on the Jewish kabbalah written by a Christian. Since the writing of *De verbo mirifico* some twenty years earlier, Reuchlin had made considerable progress in mastering kabbalistic sources and utilized his expanded knowledge to produce an informed and sympathetic elucidation of his subject.

Reuchlin's interest in Jewish esoteric learning was spurred primarily by Pico della Mirandola, whom he had met in Italy some years before. He then studied with a variety of Jewish scholars including Jacob b. Yoḥiel Loans and Obadiah Sforno. He became familiar with earlier and contemporary Christian writers on Judaism who had been motivated primarily by missionary concerns: Johannes Trithemius, Paulus de Heredia, Paulus Ricius and others.

Like Pico, Reuchlin was attracted to the kabbalah out of a need to revitalize Christian theology. Also like his Italian mentor, he considered kabbalah a higher and theologically licit form of magic, a source of divine revelation equivalent ultimately to the highest truths of Neoplatonic and Pythagorean philosophy. Inspired by Pico's notions of "ancient" and "poetic" theology, he strove to fashion a syncretistic Christianity from Jewish and pagan sources which would spiritually liberate the Christian soul.

Reuchlin's commitment to Jewish studies aroused the antagonism

of many of his contemporaries, as his well-publicized debate with the Cologne Dominicans testifies. While Reuchlin's personal attitude toward contemporary Jews was ambivalent at best, he warmly embraced Jewish learning and even publicly praised a Jew, albeit a fictional one, at the beginning of Book II of *De arte cabalistica*:

They [Reuchlin's two other characters, Philolaus and Marranus] were full of admiration for the quality of his teaching, his extraordinary kindness to strangers, and above all his dignified manner. . . . Fired with passion for learning, they called to mind the Jew's extraordinary speaking style; incisive in argument, serious and erudite in instruction, its delight never palled.

No doubt so positive a portrait of contemporary Jewish culture, written by a Christian scholar of such stature in the midst of a heated controversy over the publication of Hebrew books, constituted a most daring political and cultural statement.

In recent years, Christian Hebraica has aroused the interest of a number of scholars, including Gershom Scholem, Chaim Wirshubsky, Moshe Idel, François Secret, and now, Jerome Friedman. For the most part, however, primary texts have been unavailable in English. This translation, therefore, should be a most welcome contribution to the field. Unfortunately, the translators, Martin and Sarah Goodman, have produced a work of questionable quality which fails to meet the minimal standards of scholarship usually associated with an undertaking of this sort.

Reuchlin's Hebraic and kabbalistic learning is formidable enough to require a translator with proficiency in both areas. Reuchlin quotes extensively in Hebrew, utilizes a variety of Jewish philosophical, exegetical, and kabbalistic works, some readily accessible in print and others still in manuscript. Minimally, a translator should provide an accurate translation of the Hebrew texts (not simply a translation of Reuchlin's Latin translation) and a complete identification of Reuchlin's sources. The Goodmans fail to accomplish either objective.

Mistranslations of Hebrew quotations are so numerous in this text that they make any scholarly use of this work hazardous. I shall offer only a few examples of such mistakes: On p. 61, the quote of R. Azriel should read "None of the prophets were able to hear the voice of the Divine Presence (= Shechinah), save Moses," instead of "None . . . were strong enough to hear the words proceeding from

the mouth of God." On p. 71, the quote from the *Talmud* should read (B. T. Hagigah 13a): "The mysteries of the Torah may only be transmitted to a counsellor, wise in crafts and endowed with understanding of whispering [incantation]." The translation here misses the entire sense of the passage by relying only on the Latin: "The secrets . . . to men of good counsel, to the sages, who teach the young, and to wise men of learning and intellect." On p. 95, Reuchlin quotes the kabbalists who write: "The [subject called] the act of creation [cosmogony] is synonymous with physics; the [subject called] the 'Account of the Divine Chariot' [of Ezekiel I] is equivalent with the divine science [metaphysics]." This is rendered by the translators: "Work on *Bereshit* brings wisdom in nature. Work on the *Merkavah* brings wisdom in divine things." On p. 97, the kabbalists are called "contemplative men among the masters of the law," which is translated as "men who speculate on the matters of the law."

The translators fail to identify most of the Reuchlin's sources, even his relatively simple rabbinic sources. The glossary they supply at the end of the volume provides only the names of some authors, not titles, and is most inadequate. Their notes are no more useful. Mistakes also abound: Maimonides is confused with Nahmanides (p. 79); the "Mishnah on Deuteronomy" is obviously the *Mishneh Torah* (*Sefer ha-Maddah*) (p. 107) and so on.

One of the critical concerns of such a translation should be to demonstrate precisely the process of transmission and transformation of Judaic learning into Christian learning. Such an objective requires exact translation of the Hebrew text and a close comparison with the Latin translation of Reuchlin. It also requires a careful examination of Reuchlin's use of "theosophic" kabbalistic and "practical" kabbalistic sources, his great reliance upon the Hebrew works and Latin translations of the Spanish kabbalists, Abraham Abulafia and Joseph Gikatilia, and especially his use of Hebrew manuscript Halberstam 444 of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, identified by Gershom Scholem as Reuchlin's major source. The translators ignore all of these concerns; the general introduction of G. Lloyd Jones also provides meager information about Reuchlin's composition. Would a translation of a comparable classic of Renaissance culture based on Greek and Latin sources be acceptable for publication if prepared without regard to such essential requirements?

Professor Jones does mention in passing (in a footnote) the existence of a recent French translation of Reuchlin's work by François Secret (Paris, 1973). Secret's translation is superior to that of the Goodmans. Even though he too fails to identify many of Reuchlin's sources, he makes the effort to identify some of them and succeeds in placing Reuchlin's book in the context of contemporary Christian Hebraica. The Goodmans, at the very least, should have consulted Secret's work. Until a better translation appears, the serious student of Reuchlin's classic, who is unable to read the original, should rely on the French version.

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G. Lloyd Jones. *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England: A Third Language*. Manchester-Dover, N.H.: Manchester University Press, 1983. vi + 311 pp. £19.50.

His father Mr William Bois was a great scollar, being learned in the Hebrew and Greek excellently well. Which, considering the manners (that I say not the rudeness) of the times of his education, was almost a miracle. Yet did his modesty so withhold him from seeking after eminancy, that it's hard to say, whether the copy of learning or virtue, were better sett by the father, or followed by the son; in whom, as he was careful to lay the grounds of religion betimes; so he was not backward in laying the foundation of learning. For he hath shewed me Hebrew which his father had taught him to write very young (unless my memory fails me) by six years old. And that in a character not only legible, but [which] deserves consideration, had he been as old in the university as he was in nature.

This, from the beginning of Anthony Walker's account of his contemporary John Bois (given in Ward Allen's *Translating for King James*) takes us back to 1566. Bois's father was from Halifax, but by way of Trinity College Cambridge he found himself in a Suffolk farmhouse, teaching his six year old son the rudiments of Hebrew grammar. For Walker, writing some time after Bois's death in 1643, those times were so rude that such an education might seem miraculous. Until this book we might have been tempted to agree, for with the first chairs of Hebrew on the Continent only having been founded in the last two decades of the fifteenth century, it would seem unlikely that England should have caught up so soon. And yet, as *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England* exhaustively and meticulously shows, the sixteenth century saw a developing English en-