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David H. Price. *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. ix + 355 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-539421-4.

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A New Overview of the Reuchlin Affair

In 1510, Johannes Reuchlin, a law professor in Pforzheim who had considerable experience in imperial political affairs and had a reputation as a humanist and a Hebraist, was asked to render a legal opinion on the status of Jewish books. Two years before, Johannes Pfefferkorn, a Jewish convert to Christianity, had accused his former coreligionists of possessing literature that defamed Christianity, and he and his allies convinced the emperor to order the confiscation and examination of all books owned by Jews to check for blasphemy or anti-Christian views. Reuchlin's famous response defended the legal rights of Jews in the empire and argued that Jewish literature as a whole could not be seen as slanderous to Christianity.[1] He also acted as a kind of expert witness and offered a discussion of Jewish literature (including what is one of the first categorization schemes for Jewish bibliography[2]) in the service of explaining not only how harmless most Jewish books were, but also that Jewish books were necessary for the practice of Judaism (a licit religion), and that some Jewish books were useful to Christianity (especially Kabbalah). The publication of this response in 1511 led to accusations of heresy and provoked a wide-ranging debate over Jewish literature, the viability of Christian Hebraism, and the relationship between humanist philological pursuits and Christian theology. Reuchlin had a great deal of success in fighting the legal charges for several years, enlisting a wide range of supporters across Europe, and continued his work on Jewish material, publishing *On the Art of the Kabbalah* in 1517. His works were ultimately condemned by the pope in 1520, although Reuchlin continued as a professor in

Tübingen and died (naturally) in Stuttgart in 1522.

This is a brief summary of a story well known to historians of humanism, early modern Germany, and Christian Hebraism. David H. Price offers a detailed and extensive version that is readable and also clears up some key misconceptions that occasionally make their way into accounts of the events. His monograph is a welcome addition to a recent outpouring of studies in English and German that have revamped our picture of the important figure of Reuchlin and his scholarly work, as well as our understanding of the complex set of legal maneuvers, accusations, counteraccusations, behind-the-scenes politicking across the Holy Roman Empire and Italy, trials, and polemics authored and published by a range of early sixteenth-century intellectuals that have come to be known as the "Reuchlin affair." Price's book is now the most complete and most up-to-date treatment of the subject available in English and would serve as an excellent introduction for students and specialists in other areas of early modern studies.

Although Price does not frame his work as a biography of Reuchlin, he includes extensive summaries of Reuchlin's scholarly and judicial/political career prior to the controversies over Jewish books. Price argues that Reuchlin's extensive political experience was in fact important background to his role in the controversy and in his subsequent ability to defend himself. Price's discussion of Reuchlin's role at court and his connections with powerful figures across Germany and in the Church prior

to 1510 should counter any lingering erroneous notions that Reuchlin was an ivory-tower intellectual who fell into a “political hornet’s nest” (p. 58).

Price then offers a clear and thorough explanation of the campaign against Jewish books set off by Pfefferkorn; Reuchlin’s response defending Jewish books; and the various controversies and legal maneuvers that followed. Price is especially good at explaining what was at stake in Pfefferkorn’s campaign and what distinguished these events from earlier attempts to confiscate the Talmud. By focusing on *all* books owned by Jews, including prayer books, ritual manuals, and legal compendia of all kinds, the intended effect was to make it impossible to practice Judaism in Germany, an aspect well understood by the instigators of the campaign, by the Jews of Germany, by Reuchlin, and ultimately (it seems) by the emperor.

A particular bug-a-boo, to which Price devotes a good part of a chapter (and to press the point, gives the chapter the title “Who Saved the Jewish Books?”), is the notion that the emperor acted to return books to Jews only as a result of Reuchlin’s activity. In fact, as Price shows, there were many other factors, including Jewish political action, petitions from the Frankfurt city council, and internal imperial fiscal considerations. Indeed, Reuchlin’s recommendations were not delivered to the archbishop of Mainz until the fall of 1510 to be forwarded to Maximilian who had already rescinded the confiscation orders in May 1510. And some of the legal arguments that Reuchlin made were anticipated by the Frankfurt burghers. But as Price points out, Reuchlin’s dissenting report was a decisive blow to the hopes of Pfefferkorn and his allies to resume the confiscation campaign in the fall of 1510 and the winter of 1510-11 on the basis of a new directive from the emperor from July; it was also the most “exhaustive analysis of the issue,” going into much greater depth than any of the political actors or the other scholars called in to report (p. 127). Even before the publication of Reuchlin’s memorandum in 1511, Reuchlin was in fact a key player in the confiscation campaign, albeit not in the first round in October 1509-May 1510.

In the chapters that follow on the legal proceedings against Reuchlin, his defense and counter-maneuvers, and the ensuing intellectual controversy that played out through pamphlets and disputations, Price adds a great deal of nuance and detail to an episode that is much too complex to be summarized as a battle between scholastics and humanists or proto-Reformers and proto-Counter-Reformers. In his penultimate chapter, he explains how

the Reuchlin affair became caught up with the “Luther affair” (i.e., the beginnings of the Reformation). And indeed, there really can be no consideration of the Reuchlin affair without considering the dramatic changes in the religious and political landscape of Germany and Italy from 1510 to 1520. By the spring of 1520, when the German Dominicans (who had originally attacked Reuchlin) had made peace with the courtly backers of Reuchlin and parted company with their former champion, the inquisitor Jacob Hoogstraeten, the papacy was moving in a different direction and was preparing a full condemnation of Reuchlin. While Leo X had previously seemed sympathetic to Reuchlin and had spent several years balancing between the pro- and anti-Reuchlin factions within the Church, by 1520 it seems that he connected the arguments of the Reuchlin group to Martin Luther’s insurrection and was ready to condemn both as he did in June and July of 1520.

Luther offered support to Reuchlin early on (in his letter to George Spalatin in 1514) and Reuchlin had close ties with Philipp Melanchthon; some of Reuchlin’s supporters became Protestants (although many prominent ones, including Desiderius Erasmus) did not. So Reuchlin, despite his loyalty to the Church and his protestations that the two cases (his and Luther’s) were not connected, became seen as a kind of proto-Protestant. (An image taken up by the Lutheran Church for centuries, as Price shows). Price’s work also lays out the crucial differences between the positions of Luther, Erasmus, and Reuchlin on Jews and Judaism. While the views of Luther and Erasmus (as well as other figures, like Reuchlin’s students Johannes Eck and Andreas Osiander) have been the subject of a large body of scholarship and Price does not break new ground here, his judicious reading of both primary and secondary sources and his synthesis of the key issues make a useful contribution.

The book concludes with a reflection on the overall significance of Reuchlin’s argument for tolerating Jewish books and on his legacy as a Christian Hebraist, including ways in which his legacy was recognized at the end of his own life. Price makes a compelling case for the relative novelty of Reuchlin’s willingness not to only defend Jewish books as useful to Christianity (pushing the Augustinian paradigm a bit farther) but also to publicly embrace a conception of Jewish rights and to offer a positive assessment of some Jews and their scholarship. Although Reuchlin’s position was not consistently embraced by later Christian Hebraists and some of his legal arguments were already part of the conversation in 1509-10, Price offers us good reasons to consider Reuchlin a

kind of forerunner of modern philosemitism.

But Reuchlin's connection to Jews, Judaism, and Jewish books went far beyond his 1510 memorandum and the controversy that ensued. As Price shows in his earlier chapters and invokes at the end of his book by noting Daniel Bomberg's admiration, Reuchlin was the foremost Christian Hebraist of his day. He had extensive contacts with Jewish scholars (documented by recent studies by Saverio Campanini and others and discussed by Price); his work on Hebrew grammar and Kabbalah were crucial in introducing those fields to Christian audiences; and he was part of a network of scholars and bookmen who were just beginning to harness the relatively new technology of printing for the dissemination of knowledge. One of the strengths of Price's multifaceted approach is that he offers us a portrait that does not reduce the Reuchlin affair to either a humanist-scholastic dispute in which Jewish books play a role or to an episode in Jewish-Christian relations in which some issues of humanism get aired.[3] In this regard, Price's work also represents the best of new histories that break down barriers between "Jewish" and "general" history.

Notes

[1]. His response is usually known as *Gutachten über das jüdische Schrifttum*, and is available in multiple editions. It is most accessible to English readers in Johannes Reuchlin, *Recommendation Whether to Confiscate, Destroy, and Burn All Jewish Books*, trans. Peter Wortsman (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

[2]. I have discussed this in detail in a lecture at the

World Congress of Jewish Studies. Adam Shear, "Reuchlin and the Categorization of Jewish Knowledge circa 1500" (paper presented at the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 2009). An analysis of Reuchlin's categorization in comparison to the other participants is also offered in Avner Shamir, *Christian Conceptions of Jewish Books: The Pfefferkorn Affair* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2011).

[3]. In many ways, Price's approach dovetails with another recent book that treats some of the same issues, Shamir's *Christian Conceptions of Jewish Books*. Shamir makes a case for paying a great deal more attention to the books themselves and to the mechanics of the confiscations, and his account is complementary to Price's chapter that covers some of this ground. But more significantly, I think, Price and Shamir both reflect a new consciousness that has refocused attention on particularity and contingency and on the individuals in the controversies, rather than seeing individuals as stand-ins for larger positions (cf. Shamir, 13-15). The recent spate of new English translations of key documents in the controversy, which will spark greater reference by non-Germanists as well as greater use of the texts in teaching in the Anglo-American world (and Israel, most likely), can be seen as another aspect of this new focus. In addition to Wortsman's translation, see Erika Rummel, *The Case against Johann Reuchlin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), which contains a wide range of texts, and Ruth I. Cape's translation of Pfefferkorn's *Der Juden Spiegel* (Johannes Pfefferkorn, *The Jew's Mirror*, trans. Ruth I. Cape [Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011]).

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