

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Steimann, Ilona. Jewish Book – Christian Book: Hebrew Manuscripts in Transition between Jews and Christians in the Context of German Humanism

Giuseppe Veltri

Volume 45, Number 2, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094852ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39795>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Veltri, G. (2022). Review of [Steimann, Ilona. Jewish Book – Christian Book: Hebrew Manuscripts in Transition between Jews and Christians in the Context of German Humanism]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(2), 356–358. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39795>



Steimann, Ilona.

Jewish Book – Christian Book: Hebrew Manuscripts in Transition between Jews and Christians in the Context of German Humanism.

Bibliologia 58. Turnhout: Brepols, 2020. Pp. 263 + 28 b/w ill., 3 b/w tables. ISBN 978-2-503-59074-5 (paperback) €80.

The question of the Christian acquaintance with the Jewish cultural heritage is a long story that stretches from the first century until today. Yet from the Renaissance and the early modern period on, we can safely speak of a real interest in Jewish traditions. With few exceptions, Christian knowledge of Jewish texts, language, and traditions in the Middle Ages was both limited and faulty, mostly based on second-hand sources; that is, polemical reports either by converts to Christianity or by other Jewish informants such as those mentioned by the Church father Jerome. Given both the linguistic difficulties and the prohibitions by watchful Church authorities, the reading of actual rabbinic texts and the visiting of local synagogues were neither possible nor desired.

The emergence of Jewish mystical texts and the increasing recognition of Jewish expertise in biblical grammar and exegesis gradually gave rise to a new attitude among Christian scholars in the Humanist and Renaissance periods. Humanist schools such as those initiated by Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin openly professed an appreciation of Jewish mystical traditions and literature. Their suitability for Christian purposes was established by explaining that ancient (or purportedly ancient) Jewish mystical methods, texts, and traditions were Christian in either *origin* or *intention*. The result was that a number of scholars—either followers of the Kabbalistic discourse or opponents of this new intellectual fashion—wrote a large number of books, booklets, tractates, and chapters on Jewish grammar, traditions, and texts. The representation of Jewish mystical traditions contained in these works is often of good quality, frequently based on sources authored by converted Jews or created with the active cooperation of Jewish scholars. Rabbinic prohibitions against teaching Hebrew to Gentiles did not inhibit Jews from helping Christian Hebraists who wished to concern themselves with Kabbalah.

Not every aspect of the Christian–Jewish relationship has been the object of accurate study, and therefore every effort to illuminate expressions of it is to be welcomed, including the book I am reviewing here, which is based on the

dissertation of Dr. Ilona Steimann and whose main topic is Christian Hebraists and their interest in Jewish books and manuscripts. In this book, Dr. Steimann offers a new perspective on Hebraism in the early modern period (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). Her main focus is meant as a “contribution to the history of the production, circulation, and reception of Hebrew material outside of the Jewish context” (18) and her discussion focuses “on a nearly unknown group of around twenty Hebrew codices produced at the turn of the sixteenth century (c. 1495–1520) by a group of Hebraists from Swabia and Bavaria” (18). The book concentrates on material aspects of the interest of Christian theologians and intellectuals in Hebrew books and manuscripts. In the first chapter, the author addresses the topics of Jewish attitudes to the interreligious circulation of Jewish books, what motivated Christians to collect Jewish books and when they did so and finally Hebraica Renaissance libraries. The second chapter deals with the Hebraists’ production of manuscripts (Johann of Grafing, Johann Böschenstein, Caspar Amman, Johann Renhart, Johann Eck, and Kilian Leib). The third chapter deals with an old but always current concern of scholarship (and mysticism) with the mysteries of the Hebrew letters and the manipulation of Hebrew script for Christian purposes. The fourth chapter is devoted to the reception of these works: the formation of the libraries of the Christian Hebraists and the production of Hebrew books or notebooks that were not “Jewish books” anymore. The fifth and final chapter of this study “elucidates the kind of career Jewish texts on philosophy and Kabbalah, liturgical books, and the Talmud had among Christians and scrutinizes how these genres were treated in the Hebraist Hebraica collections” (19–20).

This book introduces the concept of canonicity as a catalogue of Jewish books for Christian use. This is an important point because it is highly relevant, yet it has not been the object of accurate studies. The importance of the Hebrew Bible and Hebrew grammar is obvious, especially when the Latin Vulgata began to lose their authority. Kabbalah offered Christian audiences a new method and a privileged field of research because of the alleged antiquity of the Jewish mystical doctrine. However, the Christian Hebraists transcended these interests. The Jewish religious and common law, the Halakhah, and the Talmud and Talmudic exegesis constituted new fields of interest, as Dr. Steimann notes (187ff.). She connects the reason for this change in perception to the Ashkenazi world being more concerned with practical issues of Jewish cultural heritage than with philosophical texts.

This book makes a true contribution to the history of the Christian Protestant interest in Jewish contemporary tradition and in its Ashkenazi counterpart. It is also highly accessible for readers who are not acquainted with Jewish Studies.

GIUSEPPE VELTRI

Universität Hamburg

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39795>