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Reassessing the "Basel-Wittenberg Conflict": Dimensions of the Reformation-Era Discussion of Hebrew Scholarship

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Reassessing the "Basel-Wittenberg Conflict":
Dimensions of the Reformation-Era Discussion of Hebrew Scholarship

Stephen G. Burnett

The study of Reformation-era Christian Hebraism has benefited from increased scholarly attention over the past fifty years. Sebastian Münster, Paul Fagius, Wolfgang Capito, and Conrad Pellican have all been the subjects of biographies. Luther scholars have analyzed not only Luther's use of Hebrew but to a lesser extent the Hebrew scholarship of Melanchthon, Bugenhagen, and Goldhahn. Historians of the book trade have provided analytic bibliographies and studies of prominent Christian Hebrew printers, including Heinrich Petri, Thomas Anselm, and Robert Estienne as well as studies of the Hebrew book trade in Augsburg and Basel. The role of Jewish scholars in facilitating the growth of Hebrew studies has received less attention but has been advanced through Weil's study of the life and works of Elias Levita. Yet despite this intense scholarly activity, Christian Hebraism in the Reformation era still lacks a convincing synthetic study relating the activities of Christian Hebraists to wider trends.

In this essay I will offer such a synthesis, based upon publishing data of Christian Hebrew books and a study of leading German Hebraists of the Reformation era. I will identify the most important authorities on the Hebrew language and examine their close personal and professional connections. Christian Hebrew scholarship grew at a dramatic rate in Germany in this period, thanks to their activities, which grew out of a commitment to the humanist ideal of a return to the sources (ad fontes) and, in most cases, the Protestant theological doctrine of sola Scriptura. The spread of Hebrew studies inevitably provoked discussions about what Christians could profitably learn from Jewish scholarship. The utility of Jewish scholarship became an important concern for Reformation-era Christian Hebraists.

There have been three recent attempts to fill the conceptual gap in the scholarly literature: Jerome Friedman's Most Ancient Testimony (1984), a series
of articles written by R. Gerald Hobbs and Bernard Roussel on the activities of the “Upper Rhineland School of Biblical Exegesis,” conveniently summarized by Roussel in *Le Bible de Tous les Temps*, volume 5 (1989), and Karl Heinz Burmeister’s little-known but programmatic article “Johannes Campensis und Sebastian Münster” (1970). Each of these authors emphasizes the differences of opinion between scholars living in southern Germany and the Wittenberg Hebraists concerning the use of Jewish biblical and linguistic scholarship. Friedman emphasizes this contrast most sharply when he chooses Johannes Forster as a typical representative of Lutheran scholarship. Forster, he argues, adopted a warped approach to Hebrew philology under Luther’s influence. Friedman coins the phrase the Basel-Wittenberg Conflict, portraying the Hebraist “schools” of Basel and Wittenberg as irreconcilably opposing camps espousing fundamentally different approaches to Hebrew studies. Friedman’s schema masks a number of features of Hebrew studies that were common to Protestant Hebraists throughout Germany. The most important commonality was a discussion that took place in published books, correspondence, and in person on the value of Jewish scholarship for biblical translation and exegesis. This discussion took place between 1525, when Oecolampadius’s *Isaiah* commentary appeared, and midcentury, by which time most of the generation of pioneering Hebraists had died. The Christian Hebraists who wrote and responded to the most important, trendsetting exegetical studies that appeared during these years received similar training in Hebrew language, read most of the same books, and often posed the same questions concerning the utility of Jewish sources. This scholarly conversation cut across geographical and confessional lines, often pitting some members of the Upper Rhineland sodality, such as Pellican, against others such as Bucer as well as against the Wittenbergers. This conversation took place largely in Latin and focused primarily on the exposition of biblical texts rather than on dramatic changes to the received Latin biblical text.

The Hebraists of the German Reformation were a surprisingly small group of scholars, many of whom knew each other or had the same Hebrew teachers. I have defined the “community of the competent” for the early German Reformation primarily as those who taught Hebrew either at Louvain or one of the German universities and those who wrote or edited Christian Hebrew books, such as grammars, dictionaries, portions of the Bible, and biblical introductions. I have limited my sample to those scholars whose careers began before 1535 because these men set the trends in Hebrew study that would endure through midcentury, both through the books they authored and edited and through their often critical reception of these works.
Reassessing the “Basel-Wittenberg Conflict”

### Table 8.1. Professors of Hebrew in Louvain and German Universities to 1535

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professor</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Hebrew Instructor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adrianus, Matthaeus</td>
<td>Wittenberg, Louvain</td>
<td>Jewish education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnold Halderen of Wesel</td>
<td>Cologne</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boeschenstein, Johannes</td>
<td>Wittenberg</td>
<td>R. Moshe Moellin, Reuchlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campensis, Johannes</td>
<td>Louvain</td>
<td>Adrianus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capito, Wolfgang</td>
<td>Strasbourg</td>
<td>Adrianus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellarius, Johannes</td>
<td>Leipzig, Frankfurt/O</td>
<td>Reuchlin, Berselius¹⁴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleinmann, Valentin</td>
<td>Heidelberg</td>
<td>Heidelberg; Basel (Münster?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delius [Déle], Michael</td>
<td>Freiburg, Strasbourg</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forster, Johannes</td>
<td>Wittenberg</td>
<td>Reuchlin¹⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gennep, Andre</td>
<td>Louvain</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldhahn, Matthaeus</td>
<td>Wittenberg</td>
<td>Cellarius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grossmann, Kaspar</td>
<td>Bern</td>
<td>Zurich (Ceporin? Pellican?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonas, Jacob</td>
<td>Tübingen</td>
<td>Goldhahn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard, David</td>
<td>Ingolstadt</td>
<td>Jewish education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonicerus, Johannes</td>
<td>Freiburg, Marburg</td>
<td>Wittenberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaritha, Antonius</td>
<td>Leipzig, Vienna</td>
<td>Jewish education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molitoris, Johann</td>
<td>Freiburg/Br</td>
<td>Freiburg/Br (unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Münster, Sebastian</td>
<td>Heidelberg, Basel</td>
<td>Pellican, Adrianus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouzen, Sebastian</td>
<td>Marburg</td>
<td>Louvain/Adrianus?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pellican, Conrad</td>
<td>Basel, Zurich</td>
<td>Adrianus, Reuchlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reuchlin, Johannes</td>
<td>Tübingen, Ingolstadt</td>
<td>Loans, Obadiah Sforno¹⁶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siboldi, Georg</td>
<td>Heidelberg</td>
<td>Heidelberg (Münster?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uelin, Wilhelm</td>
<td>Tübingen</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Werner Einhorn of Bacharach</td>
<td>Ingolstadt, Erfurt</td>
<td>Jewish education, Von Karben</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziegler, Bernhard</td>
<td>Liegnitz, Leipzig</td>
<td>Cellarius or Novenianus?²⁷</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to these new professors of Hebrew, a second group of capable Hebraists who wrote on Hebraica-related topics but who did not teach Hebrew at a university must be considered.¹⁸

### Table 8.2. Authors/Editors of Hebrew Books in Germany, 1505–35

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/Editor</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bucer, Martin</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesar, Bartholomaeus</td>
<td>Reuchlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricius, Theodor</td>
<td>Goldhahn¹⁹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marschalk, Nicolaus</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oecolampadius, Johannes</td>
<td>Adrianus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potken, Johannes</td>
<td>Bishop Robert of Lecce²⁰</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uranius, Heinrich</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westheimer, Bartholomaeus</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two most important teachers of Hebrew prior to the Reformation were Johannes Reuchlin and Matthäus Adrianus. Adrianus’s students, includ-
Stephen G. Burnett

ing Reuchlin, Capito, Pellican, and Münster, were the most enthusiastic users of Jewish biblical commentaries and other postbiblical Jewish literature of this period. Apart from the teacher-pupil relationship, ties of acquaintanceship bound many of these men together. Philipp Melanchthon was not a professional Hebraist but had been well trained in Hebrew, and Luther frequently asked his help when revising his German Bible translation. He was distantly related to Reuchlin, who helped to guide his academic career. Oecolampadius met Reuchlin through his friendship with Melanchthon. Both Pellican and Münster knew Reuchlin from their years in Pforzheim.²¹ Reuchlin generously made his library available to other scholars. For example, he allowed Sebastian Münster to make a copy of his manuscript of Sefer Nizzahon, which Münster would go on to use throughout his career.²² Reuchlin had not only studied with Adrianus but also used his influence to bring him to Tübingen in 1513.²³ When Elector Frederick of Saxony invited Reuchlin himself to become the first professor of Hebrew at the University of Wittenberg, he politely declined but suggested Oecolampadius and Pellican as well as Matthäus Lang and Paul Riccius as suitable candidates for the post.²⁴

This small circle of Christian Hebrew scholars, active in Germany during the early Reformation, was closely knit through common, mainly Christian, teachers and acquaintances. By contrast only a few of the Christian Hebraists of the early German Reformation received direct help from Jews in the development of their field. Reuchlin, the fountainhead of Hebrew scholarship in Germany, studied with Jacob Loanz, the German emperor’s personal physician, and with Obadiah Sforno when he lived in Rome.²⁵ Johannes Boeschenstein learned some Hebrew from R. Moshe Moellin of Weissenburg.²⁶ Johannes Eck studied with Elias Levita when he lived in Rome (1520–23), and Paul Fagius would do so when Levita worked for the Isny Hebrew press in 1540–41.²⁷ Four of the twenty-three professors of Hebrew—Adrianus, Leonard, Margaritha, and Werner Einhorn—were converts from Judaism though only Adrianus had a major impact upon Christian Hebrew scholarship.²⁸ The most important role that professing Jews would play in the development of Reformation-era Hebrew studies was not as tutors but as Hebrew printers and authors.

The production and consumption of Hebrew texts was crucially important for the growth of Christian Hebrew scholarship. Basic Hebrew grammars and dictionaries, written in Latin rather than Hebrew, were essential for beginning students, as were Bibles and portions of the Bible to study. More advanced students and their instructors sometimes sought books printed primarily with a Jewish readership in mind, especially the Bomberg rabbinical Bibles of 1517 and 1525. The Hebrew presses of Germany (and Paris after 1535) dominated this trade to a remarkable degree during the Reformation era.²⁹
Between 1500 and 1555 I have identified 396 Hebrew books produced primarily with Christian customers in mind. Before 1536 German presses produced an astounding 56 percent of all Christian Hebraica books produced in Europe (104 of 186 imprints). French Hebrew presses did not begin producing large numbers of titles until after 1535 when the discussion of the appropriate use of Hebraica was already well advanced among German Christian Hebraists. By 1555 over 85 percent of Christian Hebraica books printed in Europe (338) were produced either in Germany, Louvain, or France. During this same period Italian presses produced only 32 Christian Hebrew imprints and Spain produced 20 imprints. Among these was the Complutensian Polyglot, which had an important impact upon scholarship despite its limited circulation. Clearly, German Christian Hebraist writers dominated academic and theological discussions through 1535 due to the sheer number of works that German Hebrew printers produced and distributed.

Because German scholars, beginning with Reuchlin and Pellican, began to write for publication much earlier than their counterparts in other countries, they helped to ensure German dominance in the field of Christian Hebrew printing. Reuchlin’s *Rudimenta Linguae Hebraeae* (Pforzheim, 1506)
was not the earliest Hebrew grammar available for purchase; it was preceded by several printings by Manutius of Adrianus's short introduction to Hebrew (Venice, 1500) and by Pellican's short grammatical sketch (Strasbourg, 1504). Reuchlin's book, however, was complete in itself, since it contained both a Hebrew grammar and a Hebrew dictionary based upon David Kimhi's *Mikhlol*. Reuchlin's work was not only far more substantial than any other Christian Hebrew grammar that had yet appeared, it would remain in a class by itself until Pagninus's translation of Kimhi's *Mikhlol* was published in Lyons, 1526. Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, and Bucer all owned and used copies of Reuchlin's grammar. Pagninus's dictionary was first printed in 1523, the same year that Sebastian Münster printed the first edition of his Hebrew dictionary. The Germans were also the first to produce portions of the Hebrew Bible with linguistic help for the student: Reuchlin's printing of *In septem psalmos poenitentiales interpretatio* (Tübingen, 1512) was followed by another edited by Johannes Boeschenstein (Augsburg, 1520) and by a whole series of works edited by Pellican and Münster, the latter for his students first in Heidelberg, then in Basel.

Surprisingly, given the amount of attention that Friedman and others have devoted to it, Kabbalah apparently played only a modest role in the German discussion of Hebrew studies after 1525. It had of course been the focus of sharp scholarly debate during the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy, but judging from the very modest amount of kabbalistic-related Hebraica, only five books in Germany during this period, and three of them by Reuchlin, there was clearly only limited demand for kabbalistic texts and aids that would help Christian readers understand these texts in their original language. Capito, Pellican, and for a time even Johannes Forster utilized kabbalistic interpretations and collected kabbalistic texts. This remained a private interest, communicated in person and by letter rather than in print. Those scholars who were interested in reading kabbalistic texts were also more likely to seek out Jewish tutors, especially in Italy but occasionally also in Germany. This phenomenon became common enough to spark a fierce debate among Jews about how much they could legitimately teach Christian pupils.

Beginning with Reuchlin, a relatively small number of German Christian Hebraists came to dominate public discussion of Hebrew scholarship, as their impressive publication statistics indicate.

But mere statistics do not tell the entire story of whose works of Hebrew scholarship had a significant impact and whose did not. Adrianus's imprints were all exemplars of his small grammatical sketch of Hebrew, the first of which appeared in Constantine Lascaris's *De Octo partibus orationis Liber primus* (Venice: Manutius, 1500). Thereafter, Manutius often included the work
TABLE 8.5. AUTHORS/EDITORS OF HEBREW BOOKS PRINTED IN GERMANY BEFORE 1555

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/Editor</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Editor</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Münster, Sebastian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reuchlin, Johannes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boeschenstein, Johannes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pellican, Conrad</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrianus, Mattheaues</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11^2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldhahn, Mattheaues</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westheimer, Bartholomaeus</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uranius, Heinrich</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marschalk, Nicolaus</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capito, Wolfgang</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellarius, Johannes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabricius, Theodor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesar, Bartholomaeus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaritha, Antonius</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouzen, Sebastian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potken, Johannes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

as an appendix in the grammar books he printed. Boeschenstein’s works were all pamphlet length. Münster’s works were often Bible portions or translations of Elias Levita’s books, published at his initiative in Basel. Nonetheless, the sheer volume of publications that Münster, Pellican, and Reuchlin, and the other most prolific writers, produced ensured that they had a reputation as Hebraists and that their ideas and approaches to Hebraica had a good chance of being heard.

German Christian Hebraists had a long start on their French and Italian counterparts, but they were quick to seize on new Hebrew scholarship from these regions as it became available, whether by written by Christian or Jewish authors. For example, Münster’s old teacher Pellican gave him a copy of the first printing of Pagninus’s lexicon. Münster also had access to a rare copy of the Complutensian Polyglot for his studies. Christian Hebraists also made considerable use of books intended primarily for Jewish readers, most famously the Bomberg rabbinical Bibles of 1517 and 1525. Sebastian Münster and Martin Bucer each owned copies of both of these monumental works. Melanchthon purchased a first-edition Bomberg rabbinical Bible (1517) in 1518. His younger colleague Caspar Cruciger may have owned a Bomberg second-edition rabbinical Bible, as apparently did Luther himself. Perhaps the most profound example of indebtedness to Jewish scholarship may be found in Münster’s fifteen-year-long effort to translate and transmit the scholarship of his older Jewish contemporary Elias Levita to the scholarly public at large. Eventu-
ally, Münster corresponded with Levita in Venice, and no fewer than thirteen Levita imprints would ultimately be printed in Basel between 1525 and 1552.47

The holdings of the Wittenberg University Library in 1536 indicate that the Wittenbergers were reading much the same works as Bucer, Münster, and their colleagues and that they too followed the emerging Hebrew scholarship closely. The catalog contains references to twenty-five Hebrew books, seventeen written or edited by Sebastian Münster. The two most important non-German Christian Hebraist works were Pagninus's *Thesaurus linguae sanctae lexicon Hebraicum* (Lyons, 1529) and Giustiniani's famous polyglot Psalter (Genoa, 1516). Jewish imprints included a second-edition Bomberg rabbinical Bible (1525), Nathan b. Kalonymous's Hebrew Bible Concordance, and Abraham de Balmes's Grammar (1523).48

Wittenberg's scholars, then, were linked to the general discussion of Hebrew scholarship that had been initiated by Reuchlin and continued with great vigor by his and Adrianus's students. Reuchlin had greater influence in Wittenberg than Adrianus, both because of the latter's inauspicious attempt to teach there and because of Reuchlin's textbook, which Luther, Melanchthon, and Bugenhagen all used.49 Eight of the sixteen German Hebraist authors and editors lived either in Wittenberg or in nearby Leipzig: Boeschenstein, Adrianus, Goldhahn, Fabricius, and Marschalk had all taught at Wittenberg for varying lengths of time, and Cellarius and Caesar were both invited to teach there; Cellarius and Margaritha both taught at Leipzig. While the Wittenbergers' relations with the churches of Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel became strained, especially over eucharistic theology, they continued to read and study the linguistic and exegetical works of Oecolampadius, Bucer, and Münster just as they continued to read and use Erasmus's New Testament-related works, regardless of their theological differences with him.50

The most impressive evidence for a common conversation over Hebraica is the conscious, if often selective, way that Luther and his colleagues used exegetical studies of biblical books written by the Upper Rhinelanders. Their response to these books was similar to the reactions of Pellican and Zwingli. The responses of Protestant scholars to three books in particular, Oecolampadius's *Isaiah* commentary (1525), Bucer's *Psalms* commentary (1529), and Münster's annotated Hebrew Bible (1534–35) provides strong evidence that the discussion about the utility of Hebrew studies was general and not limited to Wittenberg. These three books demonstrate a progressively greater use of Jewish biblical scholarship. They also provoked an argument over the utility of Jewish scholarship for biblical interpretation throughout German Protestant scholarship.51

Oecolampadius's *Isaiah* commentary was the earliest and least controversial of the three. As letters from both Luther and Bugenhagen to Oecolampad-
Reassessing the "Basel-Wittenberg Conflict" 189

ius attest, the Wittenbers eagerly anticipated it.52 When it finally arrived in Wittenberg, the commentary did not disappoint its readers. Oecolampadius's approach to the translation and interpretation of the text matched Luther's needs and priorities quite well. Oecolampadius wrote, "Since a number of my listeners had begun Hebrew studies, I wished to be content with the Hebrew text and be tied to no other translation; even though I did not despise the others, but consulted and even on occasion adduced them by way of commentary. For this same reason anywhere that idioms of the Hebrew people sounding somewhat harsh in Latin have been retained, this was deliberate, consideration having been taken of the students who might thereby read Hebrew more easily."53 Luther used Oecolampadius's literal translation as an aid to understanding the Hebrew text of Isaiah and as a resource for his lectures on Isaiah (1528–30).54

Bucer's commentary on the Psalms (1529) was less gladly received by Luther, but he used it in the third revision of his Psalms translation.55 Luther's response to Bucer's Psalms commentary can best be adduced through his Defense of the Translation of the Psalms (1531).56 In his Defense Luther made it clear that not only were he and his colleagues aware that Jewish biblical commentaries existed, but that they had consulted them in their work. Luther crossly added that his detractors would see that when he differed from the rabbis and Jewish grammarians, "we have not acted out of a misunderstanding of the languages or out of ignorance of the rabbinical commentaries, but knowingly and deliberately."57 When Luther discussed how the rabbis interpreted Psalm 58:9 (10) and Psalm 118:27 in both his Defense and in the Psalms revision protocol, he closely followed Bucer's account of rabbinical opinion.58

Luther's statement of principle about using the rabbinical commentaries and Jewish scholarship in general "with care," though given in an ill-tempered tone, was precisely what Upper Rhineland scholars of all shades professed to do. These scholars differed among themselves, however, about what constituted "careful" use of these commentaries. In fact, Pellican's opinion of Bucer's use of Jewish biblical commentaries in the Psalms commentary, given in a private letter, was far more critical than Luther's. "I... have read almost all of the first book of Hymns [Ps. 1–41], and am compelled to approve your effort and your judgment, save that I am pained by your labors in searching out and sifting the opinions of the rabbis, which you repeat time and again while they disagree with one another both in grammar and in sense." He went on to comment that the Jews generally "though not always" have some wisdom where it concerns the grammatical sense of the Bible.59 Rather than sounding a note of caution unique to Wittenberg and himself, Luther's concerns about the usefulness of Jewish Bible commentaries were shared by Pellican and also by Zwingli.60
While Luther could receive and use with relative equanimity the commentaries of Oecolampadius and Bucer, Münster’s biblical annotations (1534–35) were quite another matter. Münster employed a far wider variety of Jewish biblical commentaries than his predecessors and, like Bucer before him, would sometimes quote several conflicting opinions, leaving the reader to decide which (if any) of the rabbis had understood the text correctly. In his introduction Münster stressed that his role was that of a philologist, a language expert who sought to clarify the meaning of individual verses as Erasmus had for the New Testament, leaving the theological aspects of the text for others to clarify. Münster’s aloofness from theological interpretation gave his annotations a wide readership among Catholics and Protestants alike but also raised Luther’s ire since it contradicted one of his strongest held principles concerning an interpreter’s responsibilities.

Luther began to discuss Münster’s biblical annotations in his Table Talk in 1536, a year after they appeared in print, and he would continue to read them carefully, discuss them with his colleagues, and argue against some of them until the end of his life. Luther made particular use of the annotations in the revision of his German Bible from 1539 to 1541 and in his decade-long lectures on Genesis. Yet whenever Luther mentioned Münster, he would always mix praise with blame. In a Table Talk passage of December 1536 Luther called Münster “the best of the Hebraists” but then went on to criticize his interpretation of several passages in Genesis.

Luther referred to Münster several times in Table Talk as employing “judaizing” or “rabbinizing” interpretations. Luther did not mean by this that Münster was consciously in league with the Jews or in sympathy with Judaism. In the last of these passages (winter of 1542–43), Luther admitted that Münster was hostile to the Jews, but “he does not take it to heart as much as I do.” Luther considered Münster to be theologically naive and criticized him for his willingness to concede too much to the rabbis both in grammatical matters and in biblical interpretation.

Luther believed that Münster used “judaizing interpretation” for three distinct but closely related reasons: Münster frequently failed to relate the individual words of Scripture (verba) to their “subject matter” (res); he had too much naive optimism concerning the state of Hebrew knowledge among both Jewish and Christian scholars; and, finally, Münster was not always diligent in seeking to establish the single simple meaning of Scripture. All of these, according to Luther, were failings Münster shared with the rabbis. During his second series of lectures on the Psalms (1518–21) and in his attack on Erasmus, The Bondage of the Will (1525), Luther formulated his position on the relationship between philological investigation and theological perspective. He argued for a distinction between the overall “subject matter” (res) of the Bible
and the individual words of particular Bible verses (verba). While individual verses might contain obscurities "because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar," the overall message of Scripture was clear. Much of the obscurity of Scripture was due to the "blindness or indolence" of those who refused to trouble themselves to learn from it, whether they be lazy Christians or the Jews. Expressing the "subject matter" properly meant rendering Old Testament passages in light of the new, in light of Christ and the Gospel. The rabbis did not know the "subject matter" because they could not understand the Bible. Therefore their guidance in interpreting the biblical text was of severely limited value.

Luther frequently criticized Münster in his Genesis lectures for failing to relate words and subject matter properly. In his memorable discussion of Cain's complaint to God that his sin was too great to bear (Gen. 4:7), Luther delivered a broadside against the rabbis and "those who pattern themselves after them." He wrote, "Gerondi [Moses Nahmanides] has an excellent knowledge of the words (just as there are many today who far surpass me in their knowledge of the Hebrew language); but because he does not understand the matter (res), he distorts the passage with which we are dealing." Luther learned what Nahmanides thought at this point through Münster's biblical annotations, making it clear whom he meant by the phrase "those who pattern themselves after the rabbis."

Luther's second criticism of Münster was that he was too confident about the state of scholarship on the Hebrew language. Luther's comments on Hebrew grammar have sometimes been understood to mean he had a cavalier attitude toward Jewish grammarians and the Hebrew language itself. But Luther understood the tasks of theologian and grammarian to be complementary. He believed that study of the theological and grammatical aspects of particular verses could not be separated. The minutes of Luther's translation committee meetings of 1531 and 1539–41 attest to the struggles of the Wittenbergers with the grammatical difficulties of particular verses. They frequently consulted rabbinical Bible commentaries, whether directly in their copies of rabbinical Bibles or indirectly through works such as Bucer's Psalms commentary or Münster's biblical annotations, though they did so in a very selective fashion. Through over twenty years of biblical interpretation and lecture preparation Luther had come to realize how woefully inadequate all existing Hebrew grammars and lexicons were in dealing with figures of speech and proverbs. On several occasions Luther commented in the Genesis lectures that neither he nor the rabbis knew what particular words meant. While Münster was prone to "beat" Luther with the "whip" of the fallible rules of grammar, Luther's response was to question the authority of Jewish grammatical scholarship. Part of Luther's skepticism stemmed from his belief that the
Hebrew vowel points were a postbiblical addition made by the rabbis to the canonical biblical text and were a man-made aid for reading which was subject to human error. Luther felt that the Jewish grammarians were not nearly as well informed as they thought they were and that to depend too much on rabbinical scholarship was ill advised on both theological and philological grounds.

Luther's final criticism of Münster involved the latter's unconcern for establishing the single simple meaning of each and every biblical passage. Luther's commitment to "single meaning" reflected not only his position on the necessary relationship between the grammatical and theological meaning of each passage but also his lifetime work of Bible translation. By quoting so many different, frequently conflicting rabbinical comments in his biblical annotations, Münster gave them credence as possible interpretive options. When commenting on the meaning of the Hebrew word *kibrat* (distance), Luther wrote that neither he nor the Jews knew what the word meant (Gen. 35:17) but that ignorance spurred rather than stifled rabbinical creativity. "When the Jews have doubts about a word, they resort to equivocation and multiply meanings and make it more obscure by their glosses."

Luther's concern that the presence of Christ, the "subject matter" of Scripture, be absolutely clear in exposition of the Old Testament was shared by members of the Upper Rhineland school. Luther's practice of biblical translation and exegesis and his objections to aspects of Münster's annotations find echoes in the writings of Pellican, Capito, and even Bucer. Six years before Luther began his Genesis lectures Pellican had questioned Jewish Hebrew grammatical scholarship, and he criticized Bucer's habit of quoting contradictory rabbinical opinions for the same passage. In 1527 Capito asserted in the introduction to his German translation of Hosea that since Christ "is the end of the Law and the prophets; accordingly I have determined to expound a prophet, namely Hosea, in a Christian manner." Bucer too, for all his concern to identify the historical setting and meaning of the Psalms text, did so with the goal of identifying those passages in the Psalms where Christ's coming is genuinely prophesied. The Hebraists of Zurich and Strasbourg shared many of Luther's fundamental hermeneutical principles.

What set Luther apart from members of the Upper Rhineland school was not an unwillingness to use Jewish biblical commentaries or Jewish grammatical scholarship but an abrupt change in his understanding of the danger that Jews and Judaism posed for Christianity, brought about by what he interpreted as a direct attack upon the Christian faith by Jews in 1542. Luther had become increasingly worried about the growing popularity of what he termed "judaizing" forms of biblical interpretation, and he believed that, if unchecked, such scholarship would damage the church from within when it was already under
external attack from the devil's minions, the pope, the Jews, and the Turks. In both Against the Sabbatarians and frequently in his lectures on Genesis, Luther offered refutations of Jewish interpretation of particular passages in order to "strengthen the faith" of his hearers-readers. Luther first linked Christian "misinterpretation" of the Old Testament with the activities of living Jews in his Against the Sabbatarians (1538) and would do so again in his anti-Jewish treatises of 1543. By Luther's own account, his rejection of Jewish biblical scholarship did not occur until 1542 when he received a pamphlet that he described as "a little book in which a Jew engages in a dialogue with a Christian. He dares to pervert the scriptural passages which we cite in testimony to our faith, concerning our Lord Jesus Christ and Mary his mother, and to interpret them quite differently." Luther took it as evidence that his fears expressed in Against the Sabbatarians had been realized: that Jews were taking advantage of the confusion surrounding the Reformation and seeking converts among Christians.

Although Luther had previously decided that he was not going to write any more anti-Jewish polemics, he changed his mind and took up the task with a vengeance. In Luther's mind Christian Hebraists were responsible for part of the problem because their works gave Jewish biblical interpretations a patina of respectability. In two of the three treatises, On the Ineffable Name and On the Last Words of David, Luther appealed to Christian Hebraists directly, urging them to stop following the lead of Jewish commentators and to remember that they were Christians first, Hebraists only second. Some Christian Hebraists, he complained, were more "rabbinical" than "Christian." Indeed, he named two of these Christians in his seldom-read conclusion to On the Ineffable Name (1543). "The two fine men, Sanctes [Pagninus] and Münster, have translated the Bible with incredible zeal and matchless (inimitabili) diligence, accomplishing much good. But the rabbis were sometimes too powerful for them, so that they chipped away at the analogy of faith, and were too dependent upon the rabbinical glosses." Before 1542 Luther had come to believe that Jewish scholarship had less to offer the Christian interpreter than Münster and others like him believed. After 1542 he consciously repudiated much of what he and his colleagues had done previously. In On the Last Words of David (1543) Luther stated at the outset that he regretted having paid too much attention to Jewish scholarship in his Bible translation.

Luther's end-of-life rejection of Jewish biblical and Hebrew scholarship did not mean that all Lutheran Hebrew scholars would follow Luther's admonitions, and Christian Hebraism within the Lutheran tradition is still a relatively unexplored topic. The evidence of Hebrew printing, however, suggests that Lutheran scholars remained strongly committed to Hebrew studies. After 1560 Wittenberg would become the third largest Hebrew printing center in
Europe, Lutheran scholars continued to read, interpret, and write expositions of the Hebrew Bible text.

The Reformation-era discussion of Hebrew scholarship was narrowly focused upon interpreting the Hebrew Bible. Other uses of Jewish scholarship, including the composition of anti-Jewish polemical literature or in various nontheological pursuits, were never controversial. Jewish linguistic scholarship was clearly useful for Christian interpreters as were Jewish biblical commentaries. All Christian Hebraists from the most enthusiastic, like Münster, to the least, such as Luther, agreed that these commentaries had to be used with care and discretion, not haphazardly or thoughtlessly. In many respects the readiness of Christian Hebraists to follow the lead of Jewish interpreters was proportional to how much help they felt was needed to interpret the text at hand. There was also no necessary correlation between an interpreter’s skill as a Hebraist and his willingness to use Jewish biblical commentaries. Conrad Pellican translated a number of Jewish commentaries into Latin and German, yet he believed that Jewish biblical commentaries were of limited use to Christians. He even had reservations about Jewish philological scholarship. But there was room at Wittenberg as in Basel, Strasbourg, and Zurich for Jewish help until the very end of Luther’s life. Johannes Mathesius recalled that when the translation committee would meet in 1540, when he lived as a boarder in Luther’s household, “Dr. Martin Luther came... with the Old Latin and new German Bible in addition to the Hebrew text. Herr Philip [Melanchthon] brought the Greek text, and Dr. Cruciger both the Hebrew Bible and the Targum. The professors all brought their rabbis.” The Wittenberg Sanhedrin (as Luther called his colleagues who advised him in translating the Hebrew Bible) met to advise Luther on how to understand the Hebrew Bible text and to translate it into German, using the most current scholarship to support their efforts.

Like their colleagues in the Upper Rhineland, Luther and his circle were participants in a single conversation on Hebrew studies. Thanks to the dominance of German Hebrew printers before 1535, German authorities and German texts defined the terms of this discussion and supported it philologically. The Wittenbergers were trained directly or indirectly by Reuchlin and Adri anus and were equipped with the same linguistic tools and texts as their colleagues in the Upper Rhineland. They faced many of the same interpretive challenges as their colleagues in southern Germany and often used the same hermeneutical principles to resolve these challenges. The Bible translations of Luther and Münster both incorporated the findings of Jewish scholarship, if to different degrees. The Basel-Wittenberg Conflict can best be understood as the Reformation-era discussion of the value of Jewish scholarship, a discussion
that took place not only in Basel and Wittenberg but also among German Protestant Hebraists generally.

Notes

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1. The following abbreviations have been used in this essay: WA = D. Martin Luthers Werke; kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar, Ger.: H. Bohlau, 1883–2001), 104 vols. (in all four series); WA Br = Briefwechsel; WA TR = Tischreden; WA DB = Deutsche Bibel; LW = Luther’s Works, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehman (Saint Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1955–86).


10. Friedman, Testimony, 165–76.

11. I have followed a distinction proposed by Friedman in Testimony, 122. The actual revisions made to the received Latin biblical text were far less drastic than the rhetoric employed by Protestant scholars would suggest. See Martin Brecht, Martin Luther, vol. 3: The Preservation of the Church, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 102; Hobbs, “Conrad Pellican,” 90; and Benjamin Keder-Kopfstein, “Sebastian Münsters lateinische Psalmenübersetzung,” Theologische Zeitschrift 53, nos. 1–2 (1997): 52.

12. I have included Louvain professors of Hebrew because of their connection with Erasmus and his connection with a number of other Hebraists, such as Capito, Pellican, and Oecolampadius, but also because several German Hebraists were trained there and because Campensis had important German connections, especially with Sebastian Münster. It was the only non-German university whose alumni figured in the pre-1535 discussion of Hebrew.

13. A further nine Hebrew instructors taught at German universities for less than a year. They were Johann Andernach (Ingolstadt, Ger., 1523 only), Gregor Casel (Strasbourg, Fr., 1525), Jacob Ceporin (Zurich, 1525), Antonius Foelix (Frankfurt, 1524), Bernard Gibingen (Wittenberg, part of 1519–20), Sebastian Hoffmeister (Bern, 1528), Philipp Melanchthon (Wittenberg, Ger., 1519), Philipp Novenianus (Leipzig, Ger., 1520), and Robert Wakefield (Tübingen, Ger., 1520–21). Wakefield (1519) and Robert Shirwood (1519) also taught at Louvain, each for less than a year. Apart from Melanchthon and Wakefield, all of them are marginal figures who were unimportant for developing trends in Reformation-era Hebrew studies.

14. Berselius was a humanist in Liege and a correspondent of Erasmus: Gustav Bauch, “Die Einführung des Hebräischen in Wittenberg,” Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums 48 (1905): 287. Bauch’s seven-part article (all published in volume 48) remains one of the finest studies of Hebraists, not only in Wittenberg but elsewhere in Germany at this time.


17. Ziegler was a member of the arts faculty at Leipzig from 14 January 1521 through at least 1524, possibly later. There was no professor of Hebrew on the faculty when he studied at Leipzig as a student or after Novenianus ceased to teach Hebrew in
1520 or 1521. He could conceivably have studied with either Cellarius (1519–20) or his student Novenianus (fl. 1520). On Ziegler, see WA Br 5: 119 n. 1.

18. A small third category of participants in the conversation over Hebrew included those such as Andreas Osiander, a student of Boeschenstein, who did not publish in the field but whose expertise was recognized: Gerhard Philipp Wolf, “Osiander und die Juden im Kontext seiner Theologie,” Zeitschrift für Bayerische Kirchengeschichte 53 (1984): 52.

19. Robert Stupperich, “Theodor Fabricius,” Westfälische Lebensbilder 15 (1990): 32, commented that the Hebrew teachers changed frequently during Fabricius’s stay there, but Goldhahn was already teaching there by the time Fabricius had arrived.


25. Friedman, Testimony, 21, 24.


27. Weil, Lévita, 90, 133–35.


30. “Other” includes German cities where three or fewer Hebrew books were printed during this period: Rostock, Constance, Solingen, Dortmund, Erfurt, Marburg, Nuremberg, Pforzheim, Worms, and Zurich.

31. Forty of these imprints are complete Hebrew Bibles or portions of Bibles printed by the Estienne (Stephanus) printing house. See Antoine August Renouard, Annales de L’imprimerie des Estienne ou Histoire de la Famille des Estienne et de ses Éditions, vol. 1 (Reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.).

32. The Collège Royale would become a remarkable center for Hebrew studies later in the sixteenth century but was founded in 1530. Agathius Guidacerius (1530–40) and Pierre Paradis (1530–49), two of its first three professors of Hebrew, began their careers in Italy. Paradis was a Jewish convert. They used the grammars of Campensis and Münster for at least some of their instruction. See Sophie Kessler Mesguich, “L’enseignement de l’hébreu et de l’araméen à Paris,” in Les origines du Collège de France (1500–1560), ed. Marc Fumaroli (Paris: Collège de France, 1998), 360–61.
33. The Polyglot, printed by 1517, did not receive papal permission to be sold until March of 1520. Only six hundred exemplars of the Bible were printed, and a number of them were destroyed in a shipwreck off the coast of Italy, making the surviving copies more costly still, and severely limiting its impact upon the development of Hebrew scholarship: Basil Hall, "The Trilingual College of San Ildefonso and the Making of the Complutensian Polyglot," *Studies in Church History* 5 (1969): 144–46.


38. Reuchlin, *De Arte Cabalistica Libri Tres* (Hagenau, Ger.: Anselm, 1517; Hagenau, Ger.: Setzer, 1530); idem, *De Verbo Mirifico libri tres* (Cologne: Cervicornus, Eucharius, 1532); Pietro Galatinus, *Opus de Arcanis Catholicae Veritatis* (Basel: Herwagen, 1550); and Paulus Ricius, *De coelesti agricultura* (Augsburg: Steiner [Stayner], Heinrich, 1541). There were a number of other Ricius and Reuchlin imprints that discussed kabbalistic texts but that do not contain Hebrew type.


41. For a discussion of my Christian Hebrew imprint database project, see section 2 below.

42. This figure does not include the twenty-five printings of his small grammatical sketch in Italy and one in France during these years.


44. Prijs, *Drücker*, 489.


46. Hans Volz, "Anhang IV. Hebräische Handpsalter Luthers," WA DB 10, 290–320. Volz, "Melanchthons Anteilt," 202 and n. 28 and, idem, introduction to Martin Luther, *Die gantze Heilige Schrift Deutsch Wittenberg*, 1545 (München: Rogner and Bernhard, 1972), 105; and Volz, Introduction, 43; and n. 32. Goldhahn provided a list of common abbreviations used in rabbinical Bible commentaries in his *Compendium Hebrae Grammatices* (Wittenberg, Ger., 1523), indicating the early interest of Wittenberg Hebraists in the use of these commentaries.


55. Luther was never entirely satisfied with his German translation of the Bible and spent considerable time over the course of his career revising parts of it or all of it. The process of revision involved returning to the Hebrew Bible text and reconsidering how it could be best translated into German. Luther revised his Psalms translation in 1531, the entire Bible in 1534, and again between 1539 and 1541. Melanchthon, Goldhahn, and other less regular members of Luther’s “Sanhedrin” of Hebrew experts met regularly to discuss how best to render particular passages: Brecht, *Luther*, vol. 3, 104–5.


63. Ibid., 93–97.

64. WA TR 3: 362, 12–363, 6 (#3503), 12–16 December 1536.


66. “... wie wol er den Juden auch feind ist, abr er nimbt sichs so hefftig nicht an als ich.” TR 5: 218, 11–12 (#5533), winter 1542–3 = LW 54: 445


68. Luther, *De servo arbitrio* (1525) WA 18: 606–9 = LW 33: 25–27; Armin Buch-

69. TR #312 (summer/fall 1532) = LW 54: 42–43.


73. We have already considered Luther’s use of Bucer and Münster above. Several references to the rabbinical Bible in his translation protocols for 1539–41 include Psalm 68:27 where the notes read, “Sic exponunt Rabini Bibliam” (WA DB 3: 554, 10) and Psalm 127: “Rabbi Kimchi est deus Rabinorum” (WA DB 3: 574, 2).


76. “Munsteri Hebraismus. 27 Martii fiebat mentio Munsteri et aliorum Hebraeorum, qui Lutherum flagellarunt in translatione bibliae omnia ad regulas grammaticas referentes: Grammatica quidem necessaria est in declinando, coniugando et construendo, sed in oratione sententiae et res considerandae non grammatica den die grammatica soll nicht gregnare super sententias.” WA TR 3:619, 25–30, 27 March 1538.


78. Luther, *Enarrationes*, WA 44: 197, 34–38 = LW 6: 266 (Gen. 35:17). Luther’s source for Jewish opinion at this point, as in so many others, was Münster’s annotations. See Münster, *Biblia Hebraica*, 37b, 49a.


82. When commenting on circumcision in Genesis 17:1, Luther wrote, “Therefore this discussion concerning circumcision should not be slighted but should be carried on most diligently, not so much to confute the Jews as to strengthen and fortify our own people.” *Enarrationes*, WA 42: 603 = LW 3: 77. In *Ein Brief D. Martini Luther. Wider die Sabbather an einen guten Freund*, Luther states that his purpose is to “refute” the rabbis and to “fortify” Christians. WA 50: 313, 6–11 = LW: 47: 65–66. In the Genesis lectures, see *Enarrationes*, WA 42: 448–51 = LW 2: 261–65; WA 42: 519, 13–14 = LW 2: 359; WA 42: 574, 24–25 = LW 3: 36.


89. Münster insisted in the Latin introduction to his *Biblia Hebraica* (1534–35) that he was not slavishly copying the Jewish biblical commentators but only did so "cum iudicio." Burmeister, "Campensis," 454.