

PROJECT 2:

THE READING OF HEBREW AND JEWISH TEXTS IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Conveners: Joanna Weinberg and Piet van Boxel

The purpose of the research project will be to examine how the study of Hebrew and Jewish texts in the early modern period affected relations between Christian and Jewish scholars. The research will focus on the phenomenon of Hebraism: the scientific study of Hebrew and Aramaic and methods of exegesis and legal discourse, as well as on central figures in Jewish tradition - Maimonides and Abravanel - whose works were read and admired by diverse and learned Christian scholars. In addition, attention will be given to other literary remains such as dedicatory poems, Hebrew letters of diplomats and *belles lettres*. Underlying the specific topics of research will be the larger question: to what extent did the study of a shared tradition affect a change in attitudes of Christians towards Jews and Judaism, and of Jews towards Christians and Christianity?

For a variety of reasons Christians were propelled to acquire knowledge of Hebrew and Hebrew/Aramaic texts: to return *ad fontes* and to read the sacred biblical text in its original language, to read the rabbinic texts which somehow testified to the historical world in which Christianity was born and to read the esoteric texts of Jewish tradition, Kabbalah, which allegedly contained deep mysteries of the Christian faith. In addition, the acquisition of Hebrew was regarded as part and parcel of the scholar's accoutrement which enabled him/her to enter the republic of letters and to converse with its members. In the great volumes of humanist correspondence, Hebrew and matters related to Jewish tradition often occur in the scholarly exchange - Hebrew is even on occasion used as the medium of communication. By the end of the seventeenth century certain Christian scholars had an immense knowledge of Hebrew writing, becoming familiar with works recently hot off the printer's press.

Some of the above story has been told in disparate contexts such as in the volume compiled by Alison Coudert and Jeffery Shoulson entitled *Hebraica Veritas*, Philadelphia, 2004. Our treatment of the subject, however, would be more far-reaching and nuanced than that of previous studies. The mandate given to the seminar would be to attempt to understand the nature of the Hebraism outlined above, by comparing Jewish and Christian canons of Hebrew and Jewish writings. To date, all research has concentrated on either Christian or Jewish Hebraism, resulting in a skewed version of Jewish culture among Jews

and Christians. Here, instead, the purpose would be to pinpoint the texts which inform the discussion of both Jews and Christians in their scholarly writings. Did Christians read the same books as Jews and if so, were they reading the books through the same lenses? Crucial for such a study would be an in-depth study of the Jewish libraries of Christian scholars, and an examination of how Christian reading related to Jews' study of their own texts. For example, the works of the important Jewish bible exegete and philosopher Isaac Abravanel (1437-1509) were already being read by Antoine Chevalier and his pupil John Calvin by the mid-sixteenth century. What was it about Abravanel that appealed to these reformed Christians, and was their immediate reception of Abravanel's works congruent with that of contemporary Jews? Such fundamental questions have never been posed. Central to the discussion would be to understand at what point Jewish legal writings came to be read and utilised by Christians. The case of John Selden (1584-1654), who read the entire Babylonian Talmud while languishing in Her Majesty's prison and who applied his Jewish learning to matters of natural and Roman law, is known; but clearly there were other Christian scholars before Selden who took an interest in this centrepiece of Jewish tradition. Who were they and how did they read the '*halakhic*' texts? What were the reasons that lead Christians scholars to revere Maimonides as the only 'rational' Jew and to what extent is this reverence mirrored in Jewish reading of the same author?

The narrative of Jewish texts in a Jewish and Christian scholarly context will be formulated by a series of questions:

1. How did Hebrew books and works of Judaic content circulate among scholars in the early modern period in Europe: what did they read and how important was Hebrew and Hebrew writings in the Republic of Letters?
2. Is there a separate Jewish and Christian canon of Jewish writings in the early modern period?
3. How did Jews and Christians study together?
4. What kind of shared cultural world is manifested in the diverse forms of Hebrew letters, inscriptions and poems produced by Jews and Christians?

The seminar will bring together scholars of international repute who have already worked on topics related to the proposed research. The weekly sessions will take the form of papers given by one of the participants and workshops focusing on specific texts related to one of the questions outlined above. The result of the research will be published in a monograph.