

REVIEW

David H. Price

*Johannes Reuchlin and the
Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books*
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In 1509, the Jewish convert to Christianity, Johannes Pfefferkorn, supported by the Dominicans and the Franciscans, persuaded Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I to authorize the confiscation and burning of Jewish books. Opposing Pfefferkorn stood the German Christian lawyer and Greek and Hebrew scholar Johannes Reuchlin. David H. Price has produced a study of the “Battle of the Books” that stands in the historical tradition of the work of nineteenth-century scholars Heinrich Graetz and Leopold Zunz. He adds much to what we know about the episode and what it tells us about Christian hatred of Jews, Jewish economic and political power, and the rise of humanistic language studies and biblical exegesis.

Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books constitutes almost three books. The largest number of pages is dedicated to Reuchlin and humanism. Price presents a focused and meticulous biography of Reuchlin’s education and how he became the leading Greek scholar in Germany. His study of Hebrew (he produced a Hebrew grammar and dictionary for Christians) made him a prominent Hebraist. His academic stature and mastery of Hebrew led to his appointment to a committee formed to evaluate the campaign to confiscate and destroy Jewish books that Pfefferkorn claimed defamed Christianity.

Price’s second focus is on Pfefferkorn and his role in anti-Jewish propaganda, which led to the confiscation of Jewish books. Pfefferkorn’s conversion, life, and works are presented

in detail and accompanied by insightful analysis. Perhaps no intellectual treatment of Pfefferkorn is so informative and clear. After his conversion, Pfefferkorn was tireless in encouraging persecution of Jews. His efforts to secure imperial permission to confiscate and destroy Jewish books were a culmination of his efforts to suppress Judaism.

Price's third focus is the story of how the Jews of Frankfurt am Main, with the help of other German and Italian Jews, successfully thwarted Pfefferkorn and the theology faculty of the University of Köln that supported him. By using their financial and political contacts, the leaders of the Frankfurt Jewish community persuaded Emperor Maximilian to revoke Pfefferkorn's warrant and to have their books returned. The efforts of the Jews exposed the conflict between Reuchlin, Pfefferkorn, and the Köln theologians, especially Jacob Hoogstraeten, as one that concerned not the Jews alone but also the conflict between humanism and traditional scholastic theology.

When Reuchlin, to the surprise of Pfefferkorn and the theologians, opposed destroying Jewish books, fault lines between the humanists' biblical studies based on original languages and established doctrines appeared. Matters worsened when Reuchlin was charged with heresy. As a friend of Pope Clement VII and several humanist cardinals, Reuchlin had powerful allies. Nonetheless, legal maneuvering kept the conflict alive for more than a decade. Price details the charges, counter-charges, briefs, and behind-the-scene politics with great skill. He is especially good at dealing with the effects of Luther's appearance on the stage of history and how that complicated matters.

Humanists throughout Europe came to take Reuchlin's side because they saw the theologians as enemies of their linguistic approach to scriptural studies. Nonetheless, Price is quite clear that the humanists, perhaps especially Erasmus, hated Jews as much as did Pfefferkorn and the theologians of Köln. They were defending the study of Greek and, to a much lesser

extent Hebrew, as necessary to understanding the Bible and correct Christian doctrine. But *Judenhass* was one issue upon which almost all, humanist and scholastic theologian, could agree.

Reuchlin emerges as an evolving scholar. He began defending the Jews' books to preserve a source of scholarly understanding. As one of the elite lawyers in Germany, he was suited to that task. As time went on, he came to evince less dislike of Jews. Toward the end of the dispute and with his vindication from heresy charges, Reuchlin glimpsed the humanity and genuine religiosity of Jews. (Only one other contemporary Christian scholar, who was not as significant as Reuchlin, seems to have dared to speak of Jews with understanding and admiration. That man was Johann Boesenstain, who in about 1523 translated some Hebrew prayers into German. Price does not mention Boesenstain, who was not involved in Reuchlin's travails, but both men were unusual in a world where even defenders of Jewish and Hebrew works despised Jews.)

A brief review cannot do justice to Price's careful research and telling of an important story about the relationship between Christians and Jews and Christians and Christians. Price has done more than one would think possible in a few hundred pages. Most of us who work in sixteenth-century German Jewish studies would be proud to have written *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books*.