

# Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

---

---

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

## *In Search of an Explanation for the Suffering of the Jews: Johann Reuchlin's Open Letter of 1505*

Franz Posset

Volume 5 (2010)

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol5>

In 1505, the humanist Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) published a booklet titled *Doctor iohannis Reuchlins tütsch missiue, warumb die Juden so lang im ellend sind*<sup>1</sup> (Johann Reuchlin's German-language open letter [discussing] why the Jews have been in "exile"<sup>2</sup> so long). One may debate whether or not Reuchlin's "German open letter" is to be understood as merely repeating the "conventional view that they [the Jews] were suffering for the sins of their forefathers who had murdered Jesus."<sup>3</sup> However, such an interpretation is a far too simplified summary of this rather unusual, "somewhat mysterious tract."<sup>4</sup> Reuchlin felt sincere concern over the continued suffering of the Jews and sought to understand it for many years.

First of all, Reuchlin's macaronic text is far from "conventional" as it is very unusual for a non-Jewish author of that

<sup>1</sup> Reuchlin finished this work after Christmas 1505 and had it printed in his home town, Pforzheim, by Thomas Anshelm, as indicated in the colophon. I use the critical edition in Widu-Wolfgang Ehlers, Hans-Gert Roloff, and Peter Schäfer, *Johannes Reuchlin Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1996-), hereafter quoted as *SW. Missiue* is found in IV.1: 1-12. The original is available digitally at [http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/~db/bsb00006194/image\\_1](http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/~db/bsb00006194/image_1) and succeeding pages.

<sup>2</sup> The English translation of *ellend/elend* is 'exile'; see Jonathan West, *Early New High German - English Dictionary Part E*, [http://www.germanstudies.org.uk/enhg\\_dic/enhg\\_dice.htm](http://www.germanstudies.org.uk/enhg_dic/enhg_dice.htm) (accessed October 2010). Max Brod translated *ellend* as "Exil" in his book *Johannes Reuchlin und sein Kampf. Eine historische Monographie* (Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne, Mainz: W. Kohlhammer, 1965), 170. *Ellend* also carries the modern German connotation of *Elend* (misery); see Erika Rummel, "Why the Jews Have Lived in Misery for So Long," in *The Case against Johann Reuchlin: Religious and Social Controversy in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>3</sup> So says Rummel, *The Case against Johann Reuchlin*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> David Price, "Johannes Reuchlin," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1978-), 179:237.

time to use Hebrew phrases, given in Hebrew characters,<sup>5</sup> within the Early New High German text. If Reuchlin had written the text in Latin as one scholar to another, it might not be particularly exceptional, but he writes in 1505 in the then non-scholarly vernacular language. The only other document of the very early sixteenth century written in German and Hebrew is the pamphlet by the former Jew, Johann Pfefferkorn (1469–1523), titled *The Enemy of the Jews* and published in 1509,<sup>6</sup> i.e., four years after the *Missiue*. Pfefferkorn may have deliberately mimicked Reuchlin.

Secondly, in terms of content, Reuchlin's *Missiue* represents more of an expression of "philosemitism" (for lack of a better word)<sup>7</sup> than of conventional anti-Judaism. It seems misplaced among *adversos iudaeos* (Against the Jews) texts. Reuchlin is admittedly a rare exception to contemporary (i.e., pre-Reformational), antagonistic attitudes toward Jews. While more commonly discussed in connection to his role in the controversy over Jewish books (that would erupt about four years later, often referred to as the Reuchlin affair), his attitude to Jews can also be demonstrated from his *Missiue*, our focus here.

<sup>5</sup> Earlier writers (such as Nigri) used transliterations of Hebrew phrases.

<sup>6</sup> *Ich bin ain Buchlinn der Juden veindt ist mein namen* (Augsburg, 1509).

<sup>7</sup> One may question Heiko A. Oberman's assertion that philosemitism did not exist in the sixteenth century, but one may simultaneously agree that Christians as "friends of Jews" are rare exceptions. See his *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 101; and the critical comments by Stephen G. Burnett, "Philosemitism and Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500-1620)," in *Geliebter Feind, gehasster Freund: Antisemitismus und Philosemitismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Julius Schoeps*, ed. Irene A. Diekmann and Elke-Vera Kotowski (Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2009), 135.

The *Missiue* (and Reuchlin's other works) is better placed within a minority medieval tradition that was guided by tolerance, exemplified by Gilbert Crispin (ca. 1046-1117), a Benedictine monk at Westminster.<sup>8</sup> In his own time, Reuchlin's *Missiue* reflects the influence of the benevolent attitude toward the Jews of Emperor Frederick III (1440-1493).<sup>9</sup> Coming of age in this imperial milieu, Reuchlin apparently had no personal bias against Jews. This allowed Reuchlin and his work to play an important role in the beginnings of changes in social attitudes toward the Jews.

The tendency to understand Reuchlin as sharing in the prejudices of his age and social class, and to find proof of this in his *Missiue*, began almost as soon as it was published. This understanding, though, accepts the perspective of Johann Pfefferkorn. He found certain passages in it to his liking and quoted from it for his own purposes in his *Hand Mirror* (1511), *Fire Mirror* (1512), and *Compassionate Complaint over all Complaints* (1521),<sup>10</sup> as part of his self-appointed task to convince Christians to eliminate Jewish books as an aid to converting all Jews to Christianity. Reuchlin's *Missiue* appears to have been the

<sup>8</sup> See *Religionsgespräche mit einem Juden und einem Heiden: lateinisch-deutsch*, trans. Karl Werner Wilhelm and Gerhard Wilhelmi (Freiburg: Herder, 2005) and Ole J. Thienhaus, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: The Example of Gilbert Crispin* (Frederick, 2006). As the prior of the abbey Crispin offered a Jewish scholar the opportunity to dialogue and conduct a rare, respectful exchange of ideas concerning the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>9</sup> On Emperor Frederick, see Paul-Joachim Heinig, *Kaiser Friedrich III. (1440-1493): Hof, Regierung und Politik* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1997). For other aspects of this time period, see Dean Phillip Bell, *Jewish Identity in Early Modern Germany: Memory, Power and Community* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> See Hans-Martin Kirm, *Das Bild vom Juden im Deutschland des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts dargestellt an den Schriften Johannes Pfefferkorns* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 184.

main reason that Pfefferkorn submitted Reuchlin's name to Emperor Maximilian I (1493-1519) as a potential expert on the books of the Jews.<sup>11</sup> Some passages in Reuchlin's early work *On the Wonder-Working Word (De verbo mirifico, 1494; reprinted 1514)*<sup>12</sup> may also have been to the liking of the anti-Jewish Christian convert Pfefferkorn. The fact that Pfefferkorn could read (or better, misread) Reuchlin in this way may indeed have something to do with passages in Reuchlin's work that appear to be open to a variety of interpretations. However, the overriding tone and style of the *Missiue* demonstrate Reuchlin much more to be a friend of the Jews than their enemy, as is consistent with his overall biography.

To understand Reuchlin's *Missiue* adequately, it is crucial to avoid two errors in interpreting it. First, Reuchlin lists three talking points that must be read within their context in the document itself. If one isolates these three points, one ends up reading the text as if based exclusively upon them, and then the entire document does indeed wrongly appear "conventional." Secondly, the *Missiue* must be contextualized within the rather benevolent imperial attitude toward the Jews that dominated the reign of Emperor Frederick III and that presumably continued for some time after his death in 1493. Otherwise, one may mistakenly read the *Missiue* as just another expression of anti-Semitism. The medieval, anti-Jewish tradition of Western Christianity admittedly regained influence during the time of Frederick's successor, Maximilian I, but did not necessarily shape Reuchlin's own understandings.

<sup>11</sup> See Matthias Dall'Asta and Gerald Dörner, "Introduction," in *Johannes Reuchlin: Briefwechsel*, ed. Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2007), xiv; hereafter quoted as *RBW* with volume and page.

<sup>12</sup> See *SW I*: 106-109.

### Motivation for Composing the Text

Some suggest that Reuchlin's *Missiue* was his response to the request of a nobleman looking for help "on how to convert Jews."<sup>13</sup> However, neither the text of the *Missiue* itself nor Reuchlin's other writings support such a claim. In his *Defensio* of 1513, Reuchlin recalls the *Sitz im Leben* from which the question, "Why the Jews are in exile for so long," had arisen. Reuchlin explains that in early 1493,<sup>14</sup> an unnamed nobleman had asked him what he should talk about with "his Jews" during times of leisure, but without giving cause for scandal.<sup>15</sup> There is no mention of a question of "How to convert Jews."

In response, Reuchlin composed "something short in which you in times of leisure may want to talk about with your Jews which would not cause offense, but real improvement."<sup>16</sup> Reuchlin encourages dialogue. The nobleman should ask the Jews themselves what the main reason is why they must suffer "imprisonment" (exile) for such a long time. Reuchlin then

<sup>13</sup> Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 119. Compare Willehad Paul Eckert, "Die Universität Köln und die Juden im späten Mittelalter," in *Die Kölner Universität im Mittelalter: Geistige Wurzeln und soziale Wirklichkeit*, ed. Albert Zimmermann (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 493, 504. Charles Zika, *Reuchlin und die okkulte Tradition der Renaissance* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1998), 128-130, wants to see a connection between Reuchlin's *Missiue* and Pico's concept of employing the Cabala as a "weapon against the Jews." This appears to me more an *eise-gesis* than an *exegesis* of the given source.

<sup>14</sup> About half a year before Emperor Frederick III died on 19 August 1493 at Linz, Austria, in Reuchlin's presence.

<sup>15</sup> *...et ad dispuationem multa formavi argumenta, hinc inde tam gravia quam levia, qualia poteram excogitare, quorum sibi iusseram postulare solutiones (Defensio); SW IV.1: 370, 5-7.*

<sup>16</sup> *Etwas kurtz zů verzeichnen, dar inn ir euch zů müssigen zyten mitt ewern Juden möchten ersprachen, dar uß kein ergernüß, sunder mercklich beserung entstünde; SW, IV.1: 5.*

primarily delves into pertinent passages of the Scriptures in order to tackle this issue. Reuchlin hopes that he may find answers from dialoguing on the controversial biblical texts. Reuchlin envisioned a friendly and private atmosphere in which his specific talking points would provide substance. This was its primary purpose. He apparently did not want to present theological theses in the style of Martin Luther's so-called "95 Theses" of 1517. Reuchlin's *Missiue* was also not meant for use in formal, public disputations, like, for example, the famous Leipzig Disputation of 1519 in which Martin Luther and Johann Eck attacked each other. In Reuchlin's *Defensio*, he points out that in the *Missiue* of eight years earlier he did not intend to provide dogmatic theological determinations or definite conclusions on faith-decisions.<sup>17</sup> This disclaimer suggests that he felt compelled to safe-guard himself against potential heresy charges that might result from his over-friendly views of the Jews.

Thus, it is fully legitimate to place the origins of Reuchlin's *Missiue* in the spiritual climate that had developed during the reign of Emperor Frederick III, one that was not poisoned by hatred of Jews.<sup>18</sup> In this rather relaxed atmosphere, conversations concerning the lives and the fate of Jews could address the key question that Reuchlin indicated in the title of his *Missiue*, the length of Jewish exile. Providing assistance "on how to convert Jews" was at best a secondary goal.<sup>19</sup> The *Missiue* is a letter with discussion points meant for use in private. It was

<sup>17</sup> See SW, IV.1: 370,6-12.

<sup>18</sup> See Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* vol. IV: *From the Rise of the Kabala (1270 C. E.) to the Permanent Settlement of the Marranos in Holland (1618 C. E.)* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956); first English edition in 1894), 293. Salo W. Baron, *A Social and Religious Vol. IX Under Church and Empire* (New York, London: Columbia University Press, 1965), 31, 167-168.

<sup>19</sup> This does not mean that one should take the *Missiue* as a document of tolerance. There was no tolerance in the modern sense of the word.

made public in order to aid others like Reuchlin's anonymous nobleman who found themselves in similar situations. For such private talks with "his" Jews, noblemen could rely on the talking points that Reuchlin offered.

### A "Moment of World-Historical Significance"

Reuchlin's study of Hebrew began or continued at the court of Emperor Frederick III in 1492 with the emperor's Jewish physician, Jacob Jehiel Loans (Lohans) (d. 1505) as his teacher.<sup>20</sup> Reuchlin's acquaintance with Loans, whom the emperor greatly favored and knighted, forms the immediate backdrop for the *Missiue*. Frederick's favor to Jews, especially to Loans, including his instruction to his son, co-regent, and successor Maximilian I to "do good to Jews,"<sup>21</sup> may have been a decisive factor influencing Reuchlin. Loans was also aware of Reuchlin's interests in *Hebraica*. In the spring of 1492 Loans arranged that Reuchlin received from the emperor a particularly valuable 12-13<sup>th</sup> century Bible manuscript, a parchment codex of the Pentateuch in Hebrew with the Aramaic translation Targum Onqelos. This priceless codex was the emperor's farewell present to Reuchlin who received it at the end of his diplomatic mission at the imperial court in Linz.<sup>22</sup> The encounter between Reuchlin and Loans, which evidently developed into friendship, is a "moment of world-historical significance," as Ludwig Geiger convincingly wrote in his Reuchlin biography of 1871.<sup>23</sup> Reuchlin's *Missiue*, written in the year of Loans' death in 1505, may be Reuchlin's literary monument to the memory of his Jewish

<sup>20</sup> Loans' surname refers to the French town, Louhans.

<sup>21</sup> As was rumored among the Jews themselves. See Baron IX: 168.

<sup>22</sup> Now known as *Codex Reuchlin 1* or the "Reuchlin Bible." See Greschat, *Johannes Reuchlins Bibliothek Gestern & Heute*, 69-72, 92 (with illustrations).

<sup>23</sup> *Johann Reuchlin: Sein Leben und seine Werke* (reprint Elibron Classics, 2007), 105.

friend. Whether or not it specifically referred to this friendship, the thorny question about the long Jewish exile raised in the title required an answer.

### An Open Letter in German and Hebrew

Reuchlin's *Missiue* is probably best defined as an "open letter" or a pamphlet in which he shared his benevolent thoughts on the "Jewish Question" in German interspersed on every single page with numerous Hebrew phrases. For each Hebrew phrase Reuchlin provides a German translation. Such a mix of languages, i.e., of the vernacular with Hebrew, is quite rare in sixteenth-century texts written by non-Jews (while the mix of Latin and Hebrew is more common). Apparently, Reuchlin employed the so-called "Rashi script" for his Hebrew words, while in his later *Rudiments of Hebrew* he applied the common square form of the Hebrew alphabet.<sup>24</sup> A decade earlier, Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico* had been printed without Hebrew or Greek characters (by Amerbach in Basel).

The use of Hebrew characters makes one also wonder whether, indeed, this letter was meant as an answer to the question of a real or of an imagined German nobleman. The readers would also have to be familiar with the Cabala (see below), something that cannot be expected from an ordinary German nobleman of the time. Words given in Hebrew characters were not something even a highly educated German nobleman would have been able to decipher. It is not inconceivable, then, that the anonymous nobleman is a literary fiction or represents Reuchlin himself. Emperor Frederick III had elevated him to the rank of nobility in 1492. However, Reuchlin's description of the situation at Frederick's court supports his claim that a real person had asked him to suggest discussion points for conversation with Jews.

<sup>24</sup> *Raschischrift*, Brod, 174.

## Content

For the imagined, private conversations that make up the *Missiue*, Reuchlin presents a series of talking points which are allegations to which he hopes Jews will be able to respond properly. Reuchlin's Christian nobleman should propose to the Jews the following allegations as talking points.<sup>25</sup> (1) This Jewish exile is lasting longer than the Babylonian captivity. Therefore, the sin which led to this punishment must be yet greater. (2) God has promised to punish a person's misdeed only up to the third and fourth generation. Yet, the punishment of the Jews has now endured for more than one hundred generations. Evidently, this sin cannot be that of an individual, but rather that of the entire nation. (3) The reason why the Jews cannot recognize the reason for their punishment is that God himself has made them obdurate.

Reuchlin comes up with the following explanations to prove that the Jewish people have sinned collectively:

First, Reuchlin cites Dt 25:2 (in Hebrew with his own German translation added). A guilty person is to receive the number of stripes his guilt deserves. Evidently the greater the sin the greater the punishment should be.<sup>26</sup> However, God grants mercy (*begnadet*), as Ps 106:43-46 and Neh 9:16-20 teach.<sup>27</sup>

Second, and in contrast, God gave them notice that he is a jealous God who does not tolerate idol worship; for this he will punish the children down to the third and fourth generation (Ex 20:5 and 34:7). The present day Jews are punished not

<sup>25</sup> *Dar vff moegen ir inen fürwerfen dry gegründte wahrhaftige meinungen nemlich wie hernach volget*; SW IV.1: 5,11-12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ye groesser die sünd ist ye mer die zal der straff soll sin*; SW, IV.1: 5,24.

<sup>27</sup> See SW, IV.1: 5,30-33.

only to the fourth generation, but down to the hundredth generation. From this fact, one must derive that these sins were not committed by just one or two Jews. If the sin were that of one person, the saying of Ez 18:20 would apply: "Only the soul of the one who sins shall die. The son shall not be charged with the misdeed of the father."

Reuchlin seeks to harmonize these conflicting words of God. If it is true that an innocent child should not be charged with his parent's sin, then some other sin must have been committed, i.e., by all Jews, based upon the obvious experience that Jews suffer continuously. He calls the sin under consideration the *gemeine sünd*, by which he means a sin which was committed publicly by an entire nation including all its members.<sup>28</sup> How is the Early New High German adjective *gemein* to be translated into English? The Latin equivalent is *communis*. In contemporary German it is *allgemein*, or perhaps, *gemeinsam*, "common," as it has something to do with "community" (*Gemeinde*).<sup>29</sup> Thus, Reuchlin's choice of words, *gemeine sünd*, means the common sin that is publicly committed by the community as a whole; thus it is a universal, general, or, "collective sin" of all generations (parents and children). It should not be translated, however, with "collective guilt"<sup>30</sup> because Reuchlin explicitly uses *sünd* and not *schuld*, although these may at times function as synonyms.

<sup>28</sup> *...Darumb so muß es ein gemeine sünd syn ...eins gantzen volcks mit alenn iren glidern*; SW, IV.1: 6,18.

<sup>29</sup> But the expression has nothing to do with contemporary German *gemein* or *Gemeinheit* which means "mean" and "meanness."

<sup>30</sup> As found in *Roots*, 28. Whereas one may agree that the translation of "collective" for *gemein* is not controversial, this is not necessarily the case for the translation of *sünd* as "guilt." A theological discussion of the distinction between sin and guilt would go beyond the scope of this study. For the non-theologian, sin and guilt may be the same. The philological fact remains that Reuchlin used *sünd*, not *schuld*.

In Reuchlin's view, another biblical saying applies to the situation of a collective sin, namely that God punishes the children down to the third and fourth generation (Ex 20:5). However, this applies only *if* the children are following the misdeeds of their fathers. The *targum* on Ex 20:5 establishes this condition, which Reuchlin quotes in Hebrew characters along with the comments by Rashi (1040-1105)<sup>31</sup> and Nahmanides, whom he calls Moses Gerundensis (1194-1270)<sup>32</sup> on the same verses (Ex 20:5 and Ex 32:34).<sup>33</sup> These authors had connected the ancient crime of the golden calf with the Jews' miserable imprisonment in their day. Reuchlin disagrees with the interpretation by the great Jewish masters, on biblical grounds, because their view contradicts both Ez 18:20 (see above) and Neh 9:16-20. The latter reads:<sup>34</sup>

But they, our fathers, proved to be insolent; they held their necks stiff and would not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and no longer remembered the miracles you had worked for them. They stiffened their necks and turned their heads to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God of pardons, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in mercy; you did not forsake them. Though they made for themselves a molten calf, and proclaimed, "Here is your God who brought you up out of Egypt," and were guilty of great effronteries, yet in your great mercy you did not forsake them in the desert. The column of cloud did not cease to lead them by

<sup>31</sup> The commentary on the Pentateuch by Rabbi Solomon of Troyes, who is known as Rashi, is now lost from Reuchlin's library; see Wolfgang von Abel and Reimund Leicht, eds., *Verzeichnis der Hebraica in der Bibliothek Johannes Reuchlins* (Ostfildern, 2005), no. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Moses ben Na[c]hman; Rambon, Ramban, Moyses Gerundensis, Gerondi, i.e. from Gerona; Spanish, Talmudist, Cabalist and commentator on the Pentateuch; on him, see *Verzeichnis*, 228.

<sup>33</sup> See SW, IV.1: 6,22-31.

<sup>34</sup> New American Bible translation.

day on their journey, nor did the column of fire by night cease to light for them the way by which they were to travel. Your good spirit you bestowed on them, to give them understanding.

With this gift of the "good spirit," God forgave them all their sins of any kind. Furthermore, not all Jews sinned, as one finds among them those who hate sin. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the entire Jewish people finds itself in miserable exile. Reuchlin concludes from this that the sin for which they were dispersed is a different category of sin, the *gemeine sünd* of the entire people to which all Jews belong "as long as they are Jews."<sup>35</sup> Reuchlin seems to imply the element of an "inherited sin," perhaps implying the German term *Erbsünde* (inherited sin) usually translated with "original sin" (which does not evoke the element of inheritance present in the German). The theological concept of "original sin" refers to the general sinfulness that every human being inherits from Adam and his first (i.e., original) sin described in Gn 3. However, although Reuchlin discusses all kinds of biblical passages in his *Missiue*, the biblical story of Gn 3, the classical source of original sin is not among them. Nor does he use the technical language that points to this concept.

Reuchlin's third deliberation about the sin for which the Jews have suffered for so long a time results in the statement that it must be the greatest sin that ever was. It was a *gemeine sünd*, and it was a sin that they themselves do not consider a sin. Were they to recognize it as the sin for which they were being punished, they would cease doing it in order that they might return home. But they remain blind, and such blindness is God's special punishment. They do not want to recognize their sin. You can tell them whatever you want; they do not want to hear any of it, as is written in Jb 21:14, "They say to God,

<sup>35</sup> *Ein gemein sünd deß gantzen geschlechts ..., darin all Juden verharren so lang sie iuden sind*; SW, IV.1: 7,17-19.

'Depart from us, for we do not like to know your ways.'" Even Isaiah was told to tell the people that they had become sluggish (Is 6:8-10). Even though God's word to Isaiah was communicated in its literal sense,<sup>36</sup> Reuchlin argues that according to cabalistic learning, it is to be understood as applying to Jesus.<sup>37</sup>

Reuchlin's reference to Cabala draws from traditional Christian hermeneutics of the Hebrew Bible and he understands by "cabalistic interpretation" the christianized (christological) version. Through this lens, the prophetic words are spoken as if addressed to "Jesus our Lord God." Only "the learned Jew" (*der gelert iud*) may understand this if he knows the "familiar art" (*heimliche kunst*).<sup>38</sup> He will understand that "God Jesus" (*got Jeschuh*)<sup>39</sup> is the same one who said to his heavenly Father, "Send me" (the words of Isa 6:8). It becomes clear, then, that Reuchlin's vernacular expression (*inn der hohen heimlichkeit verstanden*) is based upon the traditional

<sup>36</sup> *Nach dem buochstaben*; SW, IV.1: 8,7.

<sup>37</sup> "Inn der hohen heimlichkeit verstanden vff Jeschuh vnsern hern got." SW, IV.1:8,8-9, spelled here as *haimlichkeit*. Reuchlin's Early New High German keyword *heimlichkeit* should be rendered in English as something to do primarily with *heim* (English *home*) and *Heimat*. *Heim* is the realm which only members of the household are familiar with; to others it is unfamiliar, secret (i.e., *heimlich*). In medieval German it had the meaning of "familiarity", "pleasantness", and "joy." See *Der Große Duden: Etymologie*, s. v. *heimlich/Heimlichkeit*. The original meaning is not "secrecy"; it has nothing to do with occultism. In medieval spirituality, *heimlichkeit* is a significant concept; see Marianne Heimbach-Steins, "Gottes und des Menschen 'heimlichkeit': Zu einem Zentralbegriff der mystischen Theologie Mechthilds von Magdeburg" in *Contemplata aliis tradere. Studien zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Spiritualität*, eds Claudia Brinkler et. al. (Bern etc: Lang, 1995), 71-86. The expression *hohe heimlichkeit* is a synonym for Cabala, as Reuchlin defines Cabala with exactly this term in his Expert Opinion (*Ratschlag*) about Jewish books and he writes in his Eye Mirror (SW, IV,1: 28,27-28), *Zum dritten find ich die hohe haimlichhait der reden vnd woerter gottes / die sie haissent Cabala*.

<sup>38</sup> Not to be misunderstood as "occult practices."

<sup>39</sup> SW, IV.1: 8,11.

Christian hermeneutics of the Hebrew Bible and it means the "cabalistic interpretation" in the christianized (christological) version.

In Reuchlin's macaronic language mix, his *German* sentence includes the Hebrew characters for God's name (*Tetragrammaton*, *YHVH*). As Reuchlin explains, by inserting the Hebrew consonant *ש* (*shin*) it becomes the Hebrew name for Jesus יהושה (*YHShVH*, *lehoshuha*).<sup>40</sup> This insight allows Reuchlin to understand that the heavenly Father told Jesus to make the hearts of the people sluggish. The Messiah as the Son of God, sent by God, is thus the source of the Jews' trouble (*plag*, plague). Jews of their own free will (*vß eigem frien willen*) are blind and obstinate, with the fatal consequence that they do not acknowledge the sinful obstinacy for which they are punished. The highly learned Rabbi David Kimhi had understood this very well in his commentary on Is 6, says Reuchlin.<sup>41</sup>

Reuchlin sums up his thoughts: You heard three essential reasons (*drüw wesentlich stück*) about the sin for which God punished the Jews for such a long time, a sin that was the greatest sin there ever was: it was a *gemeine sünd*; it was a sin that they themselves did not consider a sin; and it is the sin of blasphemy which their forefathers committed against the true Messiah, our Lord Jesus, and which their children perpetuate, up to this day.<sup>42</sup> Reuchlin further elaborates on the charge of blasphemy as he continues with his christological interpretation of Ps 37:32 that "the wicked man spies on the just [Jesus] and seeks to slay him." The fact that Jesus indeed was a just man

<sup>40</sup> Reuchlin proclaimed this discovery first in 1494 in his book on the Wonder-Working Word, *De verbo mirifico*. It is not the place here to discuss the flaws in Reuchlin's philology and theology.

<sup>41</sup> He cites the original Hebrew and then translates it; SW, IV.1: 8,3-19.

<sup>42</sup> See SW, IV.1: 9, 6-30.

was witnessed by Pilate according to Lk 23:14-15.<sup>43</sup> The Jews' sin of blasphemy was that they supposedly labeled both Jesus a sinner and sorcerer (*ein sündler vnd ein zouberer*) who was hanged and the Virgin *Maria* as a *haria*. This which Reuchlin gives in transliteration, not in Hebrew letters, etymologically stems from the Hebrew word for "getting angry," חרה. It is a deliberate play of words (*Maria – haria*), i.e., (M)aria [Mary], the one "who is full of anger" which in Reuchlin's vernacular is rendered with *ein wüterin*. In addition, they call Jesus' disciples "heretics" (*ketzer*) and us Christians a "non-people" (*ein vnfolck oder nit volck*) and foolish heathens.<sup>44</sup> All Jews as long as they are Jews "participate" in this blasphemy.<sup>45</sup> After Reuchlin sums up all the essential talking points he offers some concluding thoughts which he draws from a great Jewish master.

### Reuchlin's Concluding Thoughts

Toward the end of the *Missiue* (for the first time in Reuchlin's entire opus), the work מורה הנבוכים (*Guide for the Perplexed*) of the famous Jewish philosopher and theologian, Maimonides (died 1204) shows its impact as Reuchlin quotes it by its Hebrew title.<sup>46</sup> Reuchlin introduces Maimonides as the highly respected and learned master, *Rabi Mose*, the Jew from Egypt,<sup>47</sup> and gives two quotations in Hebrew characters from

the *Guide for the Perplexed* III:23. We do not know from which version Reuchlin took them. We do know that Maimonides' book was available in print by 1480,<sup>48</sup> but it is not found in Reuchlin's library, and it remains a puzzle from whence Reuchlin would have copied these quotations or if he even knew the *Guide* first hand. The fact that Reuchlin quotes Maimonides in his concluding deliberations signals to the reader that Reuchlin identifies with the wisdom of this medieval Jewish sage and that Reuchlin considers Maimonides' words to be the best answer to his question about the reasons for the continued suffering of the Jews. He cites only two brief passages.<sup>49</sup> The first states, "Whoever commits evil must suffer condemnation."<sup>50</sup> The second reads, "Everything that happens to a person happens in justice, but we lack the knowledge of our defects for which we are punished."<sup>51</sup> Reuchlin, the conservative Christian Hebraist, may have considered these two phrases by Maimonides good summaries of the issues that had been raised.

---

(1512), but there, too, on a different subject, namely, on the purity of Hebrew; *RBW* 2: 325, line 143 (no. 206).

<sup>48</sup> See Reimund Leicht, "Johannes Reuchlin – der erste christliche Leser des hebräischen *More Nevukhim*," in *The Trias of Maimonides. Jewish, Arabic, and Ancient Culture of Knowledge / Die Trias des Maimonides: Jüdische, Arabische und Antike Wissenskultur*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 414. Reuchlin will make use of Maimonides' book also in his commentary on Athanasius (1519); I am grateful to Dr. Matthias Dall' Asta (Germany) for pointing this out to me.

<sup>49</sup> Although Reuchlin has: *capitulo xxiiij*.

<sup>50</sup> *Wer boeß tüt der muß verdammus liden*; *SW*, IV.1: 11,20-21. He does not identify the reference to Daniel.

<sup>51</sup> *Vnsere gebrechenheitten alle, daruff die ver damnus gesetzt Ist verborgen vor vns ir missetat*; *SW* IV.1: 11,26-29. Other possible translations could be: The fate of man is the result of justice, but we do not know all our shortcomings for which we are punished; or: Any definite insights into all our failings and sins, for which we deserve to be punished, remain hidden from us.

---

<sup>43</sup> See *SW*, IV.1: 9, 31 - 10,2.

<sup>44</sup> See *SW*, IV.1: 11, 1-4.

<sup>45</sup> *An soelcher gotzlesterung teilhaftig syen*, *SW*, IV.1:11,9. Reuchlin will refer to these statements in his *Eye Mirror* for further clarification, when he talks about Pfefferkorn's twenty-seventh lie; *SW*, IV.1:163,19-164, 3.

<sup>46</sup> *SW* IV.1:11, 24-26.

<sup>47</sup> *Als do schreibt der hochgelert meister Rabi Mose, der Jud von Egiptten inn dem büch genant morra הנבוכים libro iij, capitulo .xxiiij...;* *SW*, IV.1:11, 24-29. Maimonides is referred to in *Eye Mirror* (1511), *SW* IV.1: 40, 32; 114,19; 153, 24; and again in the Reuchlin's Preface of the Seven Penitential Psalms

Without starting a new paragraph, Reuchlin immediately connects the two Maimonides quotations with his prayer for the Jews: "I pray that God may enlighten them and convert them to the right faith so that they may be liberated from the devil's prison, as the community of the Christian Church devoutly prays for them on Good Friday."<sup>52</sup> Once the Jews recognize Jesus as the right Messiah everything will be fine here in this world and in eternity. However, Reuchlin's prayer is not so much a proof for his conscientiousness as a Christian missionary, but more an expression of his own Catholic faith conviction. He remains a Christian who is ready to discuss theological issues with the Jews. He is somewhat anxious to ask them for explanations of how they themselves see things and how they interpret the biblical texts which he cited. But Reuchlin does not do this with the zeal of a missionary like, for instance, Pfefferkorn. Reuchlin has a sincere desire to understand better the fate of the Jews while simultaneously thinking that it would be so much easier if all Jews would become Christians.

### Reuchlin's Postscript

In the final paragraph, clearly set apart typographically, Reuchlin states that this letter represents what he wants the (anonymous) nobleman to discuss with his Jews.<sup>53</sup> His final

<sup>52</sup> *Jch bit gott er woell sye erluchten vnd bekern zû dem rechten glouben, das sye von der gefencknis des düfels erledigt werden, als die gemeinschaft der Christenlichen kirchen an dem karffritag andechtiglich für sye bitt*, SW, IV.1: 11,29-31. Five years later, in his Expert Opinion of 1510, Reuchlin will view the Good Friday intercession somewhat differently, i.e., from the Jewish perspective, as a "public scolding" (*offenlich scheltten*) which causes the Jews to defend themselves against Christian slander: *Dan die weil wir sy alle iar ierlich inn vnsern kirchenn am karffreitag offenlich scheltten perfidos iudeos* (*Eye Mirror*, SW, IV.1: 53,20-21); on this, see Friedrich Lotter, "Der Rechtsstatus der Juden in den Schriften Reuchlins zum Pfefferkornstreit," in *Reuchlin und die Juden*, eds Arno Herzig and Julius H. Schoeps (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1993), 86.

<sup>53</sup> *Das hab ich eüch für des erst woellen endecken mit inen zû redder*, SW IV.1: 12, 2.

words are an offer himself to talk with any Jew who really wishes to be instructed about the Messiah and "our true faith" (*vnnserm rechten glauben*). He is more than ready to help such a person, who would then not need to worry about temporal food, but would be able to serve God in peace and be free from all concerns (*vnd aller sorg fry syn*).<sup>54</sup> These are the last words of Reuchlin's *Missiue*. Apparently the wealthy Reuchlin himself was offering financial support to any Jewish dialogue partner in order to exchange ideas on the unsolved mystery of continued Jewish suffering. Dialogue, not mission, was his goal. It would be an over-interpretation to view him only as being in search of Jews for the purpose of preaching to them about Christian theological claims.

### Conclusions

As Reuchlin had written at the beginning of the *Missiue*, his intention was not to "cause offense," but to achieve "real improvement" (*mercklich besserung*).<sup>55</sup> Improvement and reform of the relations between Christians and Jews appears to be the best interpretation of this phrase in this context. In other words, Reuchlin's booklet (and we must recall that it is in German, not Latin) likely functioned as a manual for non-theologians (primarily Christians but perhaps also Jews<sup>56</sup>) who wanted to prepare for dialoguing about the serious question

<sup>54</sup> SW, IV.1: 12, 2-6.

<sup>55</sup> As to Reuchlin's noun *besserung*: it is connected to the verb *bessern* which means "to improve." The noun *besserung* also carries the meaning of "repentance" or "reformation"; see Jonathan West, "Early New High German - English Dictionary Part B/P," [http://www.germanstudies.org.uk/enhg\\_dic/enhg\\_dicbp.htm](http://www.germanstudies.org.uk/enhg_dic/enhg_dicbp.htm) (accessed July 2010).

<sup>56</sup> The fact that in his text so many phrases are given in Hebrew letters may lead even to the surmise that Reuchlin is offering a manual for Jews who are able to read Hebrew and who want to familiarize themselves with Christian thinking on the issue.

that preoccupied Reuchlin and that he articulated in the title. The *primary* motivation, however, appears not to be the conversion of Jews to the Christian faith. Reuchlin's *Missiue* and the rest of his works are situated better in the minority medieval tradition of relaxed relations between Christians and Jews.

Reuchlin was a staunch Catholic, very convinced of his own faith. However, to see his *Missiue* simply as an instrument of converting Jews would mean to agree with Reuchlin's adversary, the converted Jew, Pfefferkorn. He read the pamphlet this way. Because such a misreading of his *Missiue* was possible Reuchlin was forced to clarify his position and his opposition to Pfefferkorn's claims. He refused to identify with the familiar accusations against the Jews that he had listed in the *Missiue* (that the Jews blaspheme Jesus, the Son of God, and that they enjoy such blasphemy) and expressed more clearly his real motivation, to improve relations between Jews and Christians (what he calls *mercklich besserung*). Pfefferkorn became very upset and completely frustrated with Reuchlin's unexpected clarification and total opposition. As late as in his *Compassionate Complaint over all Complaints (Ein mitleidliche clag)* of 1521 Pfefferkorn quoted Reuchlin's *Missiue* of 1505 as a proof for his own claims.<sup>57</sup> Pfefferkorn had been convinced that Reuchlin originally himself was convinced that the Jews blaspheme Jesus, the Son of God, and that they enjoy such blasphemy—accusations that Pfefferkorn kept quoting from the *Missiue*. Pfefferkorn declared Reuchlin a “Judas” for

disavowing this position, describing Reuchlin as a man who betrayed him “more than Judas betrayed the dear Lord God.”<sup>58</sup>

In his *Missiue*, Reuchlin reviewed the critical, contradictory biblical texts that needed to be discussed in a Jewish-Christian dialogue. He interpreted them as a Christian lay theologian. Puzzled by his excellent personal experience with honorable Jewish men who did not personally deserve divine punishment, he reflected on the traditional biblical reasoning why Jews lived in miserable exile. The answer Reuchlin came up with in this regard was that “collective sin” (*gemeine sünd*) was the root cause. This, he articulated through quotations from Maimonides.

The concept of a “collective sin”, which Reuchlin had introduced in his open letter of 1505, does not emerge elsewhere in his works or in his correspondence. The issue was satisfactorily settled, at least in Reuchlin's mind. His motivation and his wishes appear far from “conventional.” Reuchlin's unconventional approach caused Pfefferkorn's increased distress. Pfefferkorn preferred Reuchlin to have had retained the position that he thought Reuchlin had expressed in the *Missiue*. It fitted his purposes so much better.

<sup>57</sup> *Fur das erst so zeych ich an ein Epistel die Reuchlin eine[m] Edelma[n] vnder ander[e]n worten[n] zo geschriebe[n] hat waru[m]b die Jude[n] so la[n]g in de[m] ellendt seint...; Ein mitleidliche clag, fol. B ii; digitized edition at Munich library: [http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0002/bsb00025516/image\\_1](http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0002/bsb00025516/image_1). (digital pages 19-20) (accessed July 2010).*

<sup>58</sup> *So hat er [Reuchlin] mich ... schalckhafftiger vn[d] luge[n]hafftiger verrate[n] dan[n] Judas vnsern liebe[n] hern gott...; Ein mitleidliche clag, fol. B ii, [digital page 19].*