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ARCHIVES

BRIEF STUDIES

LUTHER AS A STUDENT OF HEBREW

(An essay read before the Sixth University of Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, Lexington, Ky., April 23—25, 1953, by Walter H. Koenig, pastor of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, Sanborn, N. Y.)

In 1483, when Luther first saw the light of this world, the earliest dawning of Hebrew study among Christians had barely begun. In Jewish circles there was indeed some activity in the field of Hebrew grammar. In far away Lisbon, David ben Moses Iben Yahya (1440 to 1504) had just produced his *Lesbon Limmudim* ("Tongue of Learners"), a concise grammar of the Hebrew language; and in Provence, Isaak ben Kalonymos had fathered *Meir Natib* ("Light of the Path"), the first concordance of the Hebrew Bible (1447).¹ In Italy, Hebrew books had been printed since 1475.² But in Christendom, Hebrew was a dead language except in the case of a few converted Jews. Charles Singer, after carefully surveying the entire medieval period, must confess: "Looking back on the history of the knowledge of Hebrew in the Middle Ages, one is struck by its excessive rarity. Despite the obvious importance of ascertaining the exact meaning of the words of Scripture, only four Latin Christians in the Middle Ages have left records which showed they attained to anything that can be called real Hebrew scholarship—a) the unknown translator of the thirteenth-century Latin Bible used by Robert Grosseteste, b) the unknown correspondent of Toulouse, c) Nicholas of Lyra, d) Paul of Burgos; and of these a) probably and d) certainly were converted Jews."³

In 1483 Nicholas of Lyra had been dead 140 years, Paul of Burgos 48. It would be three years before Pico della Mirandola would begin his study of Hebrew under Jochanan Alemanno—and nine before Johann Reuchlin would start learning Hebrew from Jakob Loans, the Emperor's Jewish physician. Five years it would be until Bologna University⁴ would found a chair in Hebrew, the first since Grosseteste's efforts to introduce Hebrew into Oxford had aborted around 1330.⁵ The general opinion was that of the unknown French monk quoted by Sismondi in his *History of France*: "A new language has been discovered called Greek. It should be carefully avoided, for it gives rise to heresy; as for the Hebrew language, anybody who learns it becomes a Jew."⁶

When Luther matriculated at the University of Erfurt in 1501, the

knowledge of Hebrew grammar was still bound up securely in grammatical works written in Hebrew or Arabic and "dependent upon the services of a good teacher, who was by no means easily found" (Box).⁷ Neither Luther nor the University of Erfurt, both entrenched in the *via antiqua*, were interested in Hebrew.⁸ In the *contubernum*, or fellowship, to which Luther—as well as the later humanist Crotus Rubianus—belonged, Scholastic philosophy was discussed, and Luther was known as "the philosopher."⁹

In 1505 Luther entered the monastery. Not until 1506 did Johann Reuchlin have his *De rudimentis Hebraicis* printed at Pforzheim.¹⁰ Now at least there was a Latin book from which Hebrew could be learned; but the sample page given in E. G. Schwiebert's *Luther and His Times*¹¹ shows how extremely difficult it must have been for a beginner without formal assistance to get much from its pages. Just when Luther came into contact with this book, from which, as he himself tells us,¹² he learned his first Hebrew, the sources have left unclear. Clear it is that as soon as Brother Martin had completed his novitiate, the powers that were in the Augustinian order of Germany decreed that Luther should return to his studies at Erfurt University.¹³ Here he soon felt some of the breezes of humanistic thought blowing over him, especially in his association with such fellow students as George Spalatin and Johann Lang,¹⁴ who, according to a letter quoted by Enders,¹⁵ assisted Luther not only in Greek but in Hebrew as well. In his exegetical courses he was introduced to the commentaries of Nicholas of Lyra and Paul of Burgos, and in the university library he could also read works of such humanists as Nicholaus Marshalk, Maternus, and Emser, all of whom had been formerly associated with Erfurt University. Already in his preparation for his initial lectures on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard in 1508, we see a thoroughly humanistic striving to get at the sources in his critical attempts to fix the true text of the good doctor.¹⁶

When Luther left Erfurt for Wittenberg, his Hebrew was still extremely rudimentary. He could read and pronounce the Hebrew characters well enough to make use of the lexical part of Reuchlin's textbook. But soon Luther had a much more urgent reason to study Hebrew. In September, 1512, the convention of his order in Germany, meeting at Cologne, decreed that Brother Martin should prepare to become a doctor of theology and take over the chair of theology at Wittenberg University, heretofore filled by the vicar general of the order in Germany, Johann von Staupitz, himself. He would now be oath and duty bound to expound both the New Testament and the

Old Testament faithfully. A year of careful, intense study followed this decision. Thilonius Philymnus, the Greek and Hebrew instructor at Wittenberg¹⁷ — for Wittenberg had Hebrew since 1502 — may have given him some help. Most of his time was given to a painstaking preparation for his forthcoming initial lectures on the Psalms. These he based on the Vulgate as given in Lefevre's scholarly *Psalterium Quintuplex* of 1509.¹⁸ Not until he neared the end of these first lectures (1513—1515) did Luther seriously doubt the inspiration and authority of the Vulgate text.¹⁹ At some time during these years Luther obtained his own copy of the Old Testament in Hebrew (the Brescia edition of 1494), which up to the time of the Second World War was still preserved in a Berlin museum.²⁰ Luther was also aided in his Hebrew studies by Reuchlin's new book for beginners published in 1512, which gave the seven penitential Psalms in Hebrew together with a word-for-word Latin translation and grammatical notes. Already in 1517,²¹ Luther published his translation of these Psalms in German — and, what is most significant, on the basis of the original Hebrew, thus, in the words of Bainton,²² "leaping beyond the tradition of a thousand years"; for all the 14 translations of the whole Bible into German, as well as the 22 of the Psalms and the 120 of various portions, appearing heretofore, had followed only the Vulgate.²³

In Luther's *Operationes in Psalmos* of 1519, compared with his notes of 1515, we notice the great progress which Luther made as an exegete and linguist in the midst of all his other work, although in his modesty he confesses in the introduction that Hebrew grammar "was not yet fully employed therein." But the Hebrew text was now always taken into consideration and the Septuagint at least occasionally.²⁴ The same progress we note also in the three major works of 1520.²⁵

But it was not so much from a study of Hebrew grammar as from direct reading of the Hebrew Bible itself that Luther's knowledge of the language derived. Once he himself said:²⁶ "I have learned more Hebrew in my own reading and comparing words and passages in the original than by going merely by the rules of grammar." And in this Luther was assisted immeasurably by his almost photographic memory, as displayed, for instance, in his memorable Leipzig debate in 1519, where the humanistically inclined Mosellanus marveled that he had such a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew at his finger tips.²⁷ It is certainly also striking evidence of Luther's familiarity with Biblical Hebrew as well as Greek that, on the way from the Diet of Worms, when he was "waylaid" near Castle Allenstein, he had ready at his side for this very emergency just two books to be snatched up at

a moment's notice, the two books that he wished to take with him into his "prison" on the Wartburg—his copy of Erasmus' Greek New Testament and his Hebrew Old Testament.²⁸ For weeks he had literally no other reading material, for at first he was kept hidden from the sight of all except the steward of the castle. Yes, in his "Patmos" he worked not only on the New but also on the Old Testament.²⁹ This is borne out by the incident at the Bear Inn on his way back to Wittenberg, as reported by John Kessler of St. Gall.³⁰ Marveling at the unknown knight's reading in a Hebrew book, he expressed the wish to be able to read Hebrew also. Luther (for it was he, as he later learned) answered, "I work hard at it every day."

Only if we remember this studiousness, can we understand how the first part of the German translation of the Old Testament containing the whole Pentateuch came out only a few months after the New Testament went to press.³¹ A few months more, and the second and third parts, containing the rest of the historical books and the Hagiographa, were before the world. Luther had been busy indeed on the Wartburg. 1523 and 1524 were as busy years as Luther had in all his busy life, as busy as 1525 and 1526. Yet not till 1526 did the next part, comprising only Jonah and Habakkuk, appear. In 1528 Zechariah and Isaiah, in 1529 Wisdom, in 1530 Daniel, and finally in 1532 all the Prophets appeared—followed in 1534 by the entire Bible, somewhat revised and printed in a single volume. Of course, he used all the best helps available in his work, as well as the assistance of his friends on the faculty of Wittenberg, especially Melanchthon, who had learned Hebrew from his great-uncle, the great Reuchlin himself. There was also Aurogallus, who wrote a Hebrew grammar of his own in 1525,³² as well as Amsdorf, Jonas, Bugenhagen, Ziegler, Roerer, and later in the revisions, Cruciger (another Hebrew professor at Wittenberg) and Foerster (another pupil of Reuchlin). But it is certainly significant that Luther's main difficulty lay not in obtaining the sense of the Hebrew—he had an uncanny intuitive feeling for that, flowing from an inner sympathy for the Bible message and an inner rapport with the Hebrew temperament—but rather in forcing the Prophets to speak "the barbarous German."³³

Luther's method was certainly scholarly. After obtaining a literal rendering of the original in the word order of the original, he labored long and hard at rendering the sense of the Hebrew in idiomatic German.³⁴ His first editions were much stiffer in their literalness, the later ones smoother in their German.³⁵ And yet it was for the later editions especially that he made use of the help of his friends. Luther,

modest though he was, certainly was right in calling the entire Bible "his" work — and more especially the Hebrew scholarship it displayed was his. And that was of a high order. The judgment of H. G. Ganss is not overstating the case: "From the standpoint of philology, Luther's Bible translation is worthy of the highest commendation."³⁶ As a true scholar, Luther was never satisfied with his work, revising it again and again to the very year of his death. Not only has Luther's translation survived until the present, it has never been seriously challenged in German-speaking lands and has even become the basis of the German Catholic Bible³⁷ as well as the Dutch, Icelandic, Swedish, Danish, and to some extent of the versions of Tyndale and Coverdale.³⁸

Though Luther "showed his linguistic mastery primarily as translator of the Bible,"³⁹ his work as an exegete is also remarkable. Boehmer: "Even as an interpreter of Scripture, Luther achieved a great deal more than is usually ascribed to him. He is, if not the first, at least one of the first professors who in their work of expounding the Bible as a matter of principle followed the original text in natural grammatical and historical exegesis."⁴⁰ He also worked hard to stimulate the study of languages, also Hebrew. When Reuchlin was in difficulties with the Holy Office because of his advocacy of Hebrew learning, Luther wrote him a hearty letter of commendation.⁴¹ In the reorganization of Wittenberg University he had the Elector introduce a separate chair of Hebrew.⁴² In his famous *Letter to the Magistrates* he insisted on the necessity of Hebrew study for theologians.⁴³ He sought long and hard for suitable Hebrew instructors for Wittenberg and brought to the Elector's university such able scholars as Aurogallus, Cruciger, and Foerster.⁴⁴ One of his main criticisms of the theological training of the Bohemians was their omission of the study of Greek and Hebrew.⁴⁵ He insisted that every theological library should have its quota of books on Hebrew⁴⁶ and was unremitting in having Spalatin purchase the latest works also on Hebrew grammar. He himself studied these works to the end of his life, and, in addition, he gained information personally on Rabbinical literature and exegesis from Jew and proselyte alike.⁴⁷ This knowledge was especially reflected in works answering the attacks of Jewish writers on him and his writings. Mackinnon's judgment is that Luther can argue with the rabbis on linguistic questions — as on Is. 7:14 — on equal terms.⁴⁸ It is certainly remarkable that the very last polemical writing of the great Reformer, a tract against the Universities of Lyons, Cologne, and Paris, lay unfinished on his desk when he left on his final journey to Mansfield and his death, at a passage in which he described the three

universities by means of Hebrew homonyms of their names.⁴⁹ To the very end, Luther remained a student and master of the Hebrew tongue.

Luther was, of course, no Hebrew scholar like Reuchlin or Sebastian Muenster, Aurogallus or Foerster, Pagninus or Pellicanus, for these were interested primarily in the language as such, its grammar and lexical features. Luther's interest — also in Hebrew — was entirely practical. As far as he was concerned, it was intended by God to be a sharp sword in the hand of a fighter for the Lord and His truth. As such he mastered it, used it, and kept it ever bright. Luther is certainly an inspiring example for all who wish to acquire Hebrew as a tool for learning and teaching "what the Lord says." Like Erasmus,⁶⁰ he recommended the study of Hebrew highly; but, unlike Erasmus, he undertook the difficult task of actually acquiring it, literally lifting himself up in this endeavor "by his own bootstraps."⁵¹ T. M. Lindsay's judgment that "Luther never knew much Hebrew"⁵² is certainly a snap judgment that does not hold up under careful consideration of the sources. Luther was a true Hebrew scholar. We should have more such scholars today — also in our Lutheran Church.

In conclusion, it should not be forgotten that the Reformation as such provided a mighty impulse to the study of Hebrew generally.⁵³ As Burkitt points out,⁵⁴ Hebrew had been learned previous to Luther's day, even by a Reuchlin, primarily to discover the key of knowledge, which the Jews were believed to possess, especially in the cabala. With the Reformation it became imperative that all Christian theologians learn Hebrew as well as Greek in order to speak with finality on the basis of the original text and to proclaim with all assurance Jesus as Christ, Savior, Lord.⁵⁵

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Meyer Waxman, *History of Jewish Thought* (N. Y.: Bloch, 1933), II, 16, 17.
2. In Bevan-Singer (eds.), *The Legacy of Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), p. 313. The title of the essay in question, written by Charles Singer himself, is "Hebrew Scholarship in the Middle Ages Among Latin Christians."
3. Singer, *op. cit.*, p. 314.
4. Singer, *op. cit.*, p. 313.
5. "A tax of a farthing a pound on ecclesiastical goods was imposed in the province of Canterbury in 1320 for 'the stipend of the convert teaching the Hebrew tongue at Oxford.' 1325 a contribution of 17½d. was received by the abbot of Westminster out of the revenues of one of his churches 'for the expenses of the masters lecturing in the Hebrew, Arabic, and Chaldean language at the University.' No other references have been found." (Singer, *ibid.*, p. 306.)

6. Quoted in Franz-Funk Brentano (trans., E. F. Buckley), *Luther* (London: Cape, 1936), p. 140.
7. G. H. Box, "Hebrew Study in the Reformation Period and After," in Bevan-Singer, p. 319. Hausrath, in *Aleander und Luther* (Berlin, 1897), speaks of Aleander's "ungewöhnliche Kenntnis des Hebräischen und Chaldäischen" (p. 9). Aleander lectured in Paris in 1508 in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, according to Box, *ibid.*, p. 341.
8. Robert H. Fife, *Young Luther* (N. Y.: Macmillan, 1928). "As late as 1514 Mutianus asserts in his gentle fashion that 'the apes of theology and the sophists dominate the whole school [Erfurt Univ.],' " p. 68.
9. James Mackinnon, *Luther and the Reformation* (London: Longmans, 1929), I, 26.
10. Kluepfel in *Herzog's Realencyklopaedie*, III, 756, sub "Reuchlin." The book sold at the rate of three copies for a *gulden* (about \$13.40 in terms of our 1913 currency), according to E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), p. 258. But Amerbach of Basel, who bought up the entire edition from Reuchlin, complained bitterly that he could find very few customers for the book.
11. Schwiebert, p. 279. The page pictured shows first a method of writing the Hebrew alphabet, and this is immediately followed by a paradigm showing the participle with pronominal endings, with no other explanation than that the forms are variations of לְיָמֵינוּ and בְּיָמֵינוּ respectively and that they should be studied.
12. In a letter to his friend Lang as cited by Fife, p. 146.
13. Mackinnon, III, 214 ff.
14. Both had been pupils of the humanist Nicholas Marschalk. Cf. Schwiebert, pp. 281, 294, 296; also Fife, p. 146.
15. Luthers Werke (Weimar Ed.), *Briefe*, II, 548.
16. Fife, p. 69.
17. Schwiebert, p. 296.
18. Fife, p. 172.
19. Heinrich Boehmer, *Road to Reformation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1946), p. 56.
20. Fritzsche in *Herzog's Realenc.*, III, sub "Deutsche Bibeluebersetzungen," p. 340.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 337, 338.
22. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), p. 326.
23. Franklin Gruber, "Wittenberg Originals of the Luther Bible" (in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society*, Vol. XII [Chicago U., 1912], 1; also Bruce, *Luther the Educator* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1928), p. 132.
24. Boehmer, p. 264.
25. Schwiebert, p. 281.
26. Luthers Werke (Erl. Ed.), LXII, 314.
27. Mackinnon, IV, 275.
28. Boehmer, p. 429.
29. Edwin P. Booth, *Martin Luther, Oak of Saxony* (N. Y.: Round Table Press, 1933), p. 165.
30. Franz-Funk Brentano, p. 146.

31. Gruber, pp. 2, 19. Freitag, in *Studien und Kritiken* (1927—1928), showed that Luther occasionally used Zainer's German Bible of 1475.
32. Seidemann, in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (Leipzig, 1875), on "Aurogallus."
33. "Mein Gott, welch eine grosze und mühsame Arbeit ist es doch, die hebräischen Schriftsteller gegen ihren Willen zum Deutschreden zu zwingen! Wie sträuben sie sich, ihr Hebräisches zu lassen und das barbarische Deutsch nachzuahmen, wie wenn man die Nachtigal zwingen wollte, den Kuckuck nachzuahmen!" So Luther complains in a letter to Link (June, 1528) quoted in Berger, *Martin Luther*, Vol. II, Part II, p. 641 (Berlin, 1919). Mackinnon (Vol. IV, 276) assures us: "He could, as a rule, make out the sense of the original without much difficulty," that is, the Hebrew Old Testament.
34. Bainton, p. 327.
35. Fritzsche, p. 338. Ps. 6:10 read in the first edition of 1524: "Got erhöret hat mein Gebet, Gott hat aufgenommen mein Bitten," while in the last edition of 1545 it read: "Der Herr höret mein Flehen, mein Gebet nimpt der Herr an."
36. *Catholic Encyclopedia* (N. Y.: Appleton, 1910), *Sub* "Luther."
37. Fritzsche, p. 345.
38. Gruber, p. 33.
39. Wilhelm Walther, "Luthers Deutsche Bibel," as quoted in Mackinnon, IV, 278.
40. Heinrich Boehmer, *Luther in the Light of Recent Research*, translated by Carl F. Huth, Jr. (New York, The Christian Herald, 1916).
41. This is found in Enders' *Briefe*, I, 321, 322. Hyma, in *Luther's Theological Development* (N. Y.: Crofts, 1928), translates it: "Those who have the cause of learning at heart have long wished for one like you. The Lord has achieved through you that the king of sophists may learn to be more slow and cautious in opposing sound theology. A German may breathe again through the teaching of Holy Scriptures, which, alas, for so many has been smothered and suppressed!"
42. Schwiebert, p. 299; Boehmer, *Road*, etc., p. 269.
43. This memorable tract is translated in full in F. V. N. Painter, *Luther on Education* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928), p. 183 ff. The original is found in Weimar Edition, XV, 27 ff. A few quotations from this work show Luther's high esteem for Hebrew study. "In the first place, for the understanding of the Gospel, the study of Greek and Hebrew and other *artes liberales* is essential. . . . Germany will not long retain the Gospel without a knowledge of these languages—let there be no mistake about it. . . . They are the scabbard wherein the sword of the Spirit is sheathed, the shrine in which this treasure is hid. . . . How many errors disfigure the exegetical writings of Augustine, Hilary, and other Fathers who were ignorant of the original languages of Scripture! . . . While a preacher may preach Christ with edification though he may be unable to read the Scriptures in the originals, he cannot expound or maintain their teaching against the heretics without this indispensable knowledge. . . . It is so much more sin and shame that we do not learn the languages, especially since now God offers and gives us people and books and all other things which serve that end."
44. Schwiebert, p. 296.
45. *Luthers Werke* (Weimar Ed.), XI, 455, "Von Anbeten des Sakraments" (April, 1523).

46. Cf. Painter, p. 207.
47. Boehmer, "Luther in Light," etc., p. 181.
48. Luther, *Dasz Jesus Christus ein Geborener Jude war, Die Juden und Ihre Luegen*, and the calmer *Die Letzten Worte Davids*. Mackinnon's judgment, IV, 194.
49. Georg Buchwald, *Dr. Martin Luthers Letzte Streitschrift* (Leipzig: Wigand, 1893), pp. 6, 12.
50. Erasmus, *Novum Instrumentum* (1516), as quoted in Box, p. 318: "A fair knowledge of the three languages, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, is of course the first thing. Nor let the student turn away in despair at the difficulty of that. If you have a teacher and the will, these three languages can be learned with hardly more labor than is spent over the miserable babble of one mongrel language under ignorant teachers." Box adds the interesting comment: "It is certainly strange that, despite this explicit avowal, Erasmus himself made no serious attempt to acquire Hebrew."
51. Boehmer, "Luther in Light," etc., p. 94.
52. T. M. Lindsay, "The Reformation" in *Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. II, p. 119. Cf. also Henry E. Jacobs, *Martin Luther* (N. Y.: Putnam, 1898), who three times in his short biography confesses to Luther's inadequate Hebrew knowledge (pp. 105, 208, 225). So also Berger, II, 64: "At the Wartburg, Luther would have liked to start at the beginning of the Bible, but he dared not risk it without the help of his Wittenberg friends." Much more sympathetic is the judgment of Robert Montgomery in his long epic poem "Luther" (London, 1842):
- There was the Word almighty, from the grave
Of ancient language into modern life
Summoned, in saintly glory to arise,
And spoke to souls what souls could understand.
Oh, to have seen him in the toil august,
Lifting to heaven his bright, large, burning eyes
With radiant wonder, as the depths of truth
Eternal gave their hoary secrets up,
When God's own language into Luther's passed.*
53. Jebb, in *Cambridge Modern History*, I, p. 343, puts it well: "Whatever else the Reformation meant, it greatly stimulated Biblical study. The diffusion of the Scripture in vernacular versions based upon the Hebrew and Greek originals were [sic] immensely developed by the Reformation. Hebrew study and Hebrew scholarship came to play an all-important part."
54. F. C. Burkitt, "Debt of Christianity to Judaism," in Bevan-Singer, p. 94.
55. Luther once said: "When we go to the sources, we are led to Christ."