

Johannes Reuchlin, *Recommendation whether to Confiscate, Destroy, and Burn All Jewish Books* (1511)

Abstract

Published in 1511, this text was commissioned by the Archbishop of Mainz at the behest of Emperor Maximilian. After the convert Johannes Pfefferkorn (urged on by Cologne Dominicans) made accusations that Jewish books—specifically the Talmud—slandered Christianity, the humanist Johannes Reuchlin was asked to weigh in on whether Jewish books should be seized and burned in the Holy Roman Empire. At the time, Reuchlin was one of the few German Christians who could read Hebrew. The crux of his argument is that one should not burn what one does not understand.

Source

[...]

To begin with, therefore, let me treat the other books, notably the Talmud. This is a collection of the teachings regarding God's commandments, as I have already stated above in the second part of my recommendation. It was compiled, according to written record, some four centuries after the birth of Christ. But I myself have read in Hebrew books that the Talmud is drawn from and comprises the works of many masters and was first assembled into a single cohesive work and issued as a book by Rav Aschi – as is the case for us Christians with the *Decretum [Gratiani]* or *The Book of [the Magister] Sententiarum* or the *Catena aurea* – and this compilation occurred 44 years after the death of Hyrkanos (one of the last Maccabbean high priests). Hyrkanos II, moreover, was the father-in-law of King Herod, and was born in the Christian era. There were, however, others likewise named Hyrkanos, a possible source of confusion in the precise dating of the text. The highborn and most learned gentleman, Count Johan Picus von Mirandel, writes in his *Apologia* that the Talmud was compiled a century and a half after the birth of Christ. There are two versions of the Talmud: the one is called the Jerusalem Talmud and other the Babylonian Talmud.

In any case, it is a fact that the Talmud has existed for far more than a thousand years. The work is divided into four parts, just as we divide our teachings into four higher faculties: Theology, Secular law, Canonical law, and Medicine. The first part deals with sacred matters, holidays and ceremonies; the second with plants and seeds; the third with matrimony and women; the fourth with legal decisions and laws – even though Petrus Nigri divides the Talmud into six parts in his book, *Star of the Messiah*, which was published in Latin and German [in 1475].

Now it may well be that when the teachers of the Jews saw how, following the death of our Lord, the Christians launched a formidable challenge, actively attempting to convert the heathens (as is written in Acts 13), they [the Jews] then called together all their scholars to prevent the demise of the teachings of the old sages, and so as better to counter the heathens and Jews newly converted to Christianity with convincing disputations and rebuttals; for that reason, they collected the decisions and teachings of their fathers and their most famous and learned scholars into a single book. And so that such great effort and work as they and their ancestors undertook in the composition and transcription not to be lost, they, therefore, charged their brethren to hold this book (of which God himself must surely approve) forevermore in high esteem. And it is only natural and perfectly reasonable that they should do their best to cite, present, write down and recite everything concerning their laws so that these

teachings may not be scorned by their descendants. And all this they did so that they could better defend themselves and hold their own in disputations with the heathens and converted Jews.

Now, alas, to my great regret, I have never myself perused this Talmud, even though I would have gladly paid double the price for the chance to read it. Thus, all my efforts to no avail, I have no direct knowledge of the Talmud itself, but only an indirect knowledge based on our [Christian] books written against it. Still I am willing to believe that the Jews have scattered throughout its pages various and sundry words and sentences directed against our beloved Lord, Jesus Christ, and his friends and followers; just as in his lifetime, they said to his face that he was nothing but the son of a carpenter and a lowborn woman (Matthew 13:55f.); and that they knew him well, that he was possessed by the devil (John 6:42); and that he was no Jew at all, but a Samaritan and a seducer of the people (John 8:48); that he defames and blasphemes against God (Matthew 26:65); and seeks to declare himself king and to rouse the land and people of the Roman empire to rebellion (Matthew 27:2; 11f.). For this reason, they instigated a trial against him and succeeded in having the imperial judge declare the death sentence against him. One will very likely find in the Talmud sentiments of this sort expressed in passages that bear upon this matter. And since we may find, side by side, in the same chapters many curious references to be used by the scholars as examples in arguments with each other, I am inclined to believe that – were we to have excerpts told or read to us – we might well find it strange and curious stuff indeed.

This I cannot, however, confirm from my own experience, since, lacking a copy, I have not had occasion to consider it. And I know no Christian in all of Germany who has himself actually studied the Talmud. Never, moreover, in my lifetime has there ever been a baptized Jew in the German realm who could either understand or read it (except for the Chief Rabbi of Ulm, who, immediately after being baptized, reportedly converted back to Judaism in Turkey). For although the Talmud is written in Hebrew letters, its language is not pure Hebrew, as we find in the Bible; but rather, we find in its phrasing diverse strains from other Oriental languages, that is, among others, from the Babylonian, Persian, Arabic and Greek. It also contains countless abbreviations, so that a great effort and lengthy study is required of the reader, which is why not many Jews can understand the Talmud, not to speak of Christians.

Thus, I reply to the question at hand that the Talmud must not be burned or otherwise destroyed, for the aforementioned reasons as for the following:

First: It is common knowledge that human reason cannot prevail over superstition and error, which are bound to exist, as Saint Paul writes in the first epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter 11 (19ff.). And this occurs with God's approval, so that the true believers and the saints may rise above the rest, as the Apostle Paul clearly states in the aforementioned passage. And such people are called superstitious who misinterpret the Holy Scripture and will fully adhere to their mistaken belief in direct opposition to the interpretation called for by the spirit of the Holy Ghost. And although the Jews are not, strictly speaking, heretics – for they have never held by the Christian Faith and have, therefore, never left it; for which reason they may also not be called heretics, nor can their practices be labeled heresy – they are, nevertheless, included amongst those referred to by the Apostle, for he speaks of those who are “divided in matters of faith,” as are we and the Jews. For this reason, it is good and useful to us that the Talmud exist and be preserved. And the more full of contradiction the Talmud may be, the more it empowers us Christians to dispute its truth in spoken word and writing.

And if we ourselves are really serious in our spiritual purpose, then preserving the Talmud is good medicine to counteract the indolence and laziness of those who, like the priests, ought to study the Holy Scriptures. It is up to the clergy to instruct themselves and become sufficiently well versed so as to be able, in turn, to pass on the true

teachings to others and “by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers,” as St. Paul writes to Titus (Ti 1:9).

Similarly, Aristotle writes in his *Elenchoi* that a wise man should possess two qualities, namely the following: that he not lie, and that he be able to counter that which is the stuff of lies. And he should not fly into a rage and burn the books of his opponents if he has not studied enough to oppose them with reasoned arguments in sermons or disputations. Does dialogue not degenerate into barroom brawl when the crude resort to fists for lack of anything more to say?

It is written in the Psalter (Psalm 141): “Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness; and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil” Yet how can anyone argue against a thing which he does not understand – as St. Jerome maintains against Jovinian. Thus someone must at least understand the language of the Talmud before asserting that it is false or intentionally offensive to us Christians. For “whosoever knows not the meaning of words and of their language easily errs in his interpretation,” says Aristotle in the aforementioned work. And similarly, St. Augustine contends (in *On the True Religion*): “The precise meaning of the Holy Scripture can only be understood according to the unique qualities of each language in which it is written. For each language has its own particular mode of expression which is unique to itself. If this [mode of expression] is taken literally in its translation into another language, it would appear to anyone reading it that the words made no sense at all” This passage is included in the Canonical Law.

From this we may conclude: Since the Talmud contains the characteristics of so many languages, as noted above, every Jew, even if he is well versed in Hebrew, cannot possibly understand it in its totality. How then can the Christians justify the condemnation of the Talmud, a work which they themselves do not even understand?

[...]

Further: As to the fourth category in my classification of Jewish books, the commentaries and glosses on the Bible, I recommend that they neither should nor may lawfully be suppressed or burned, for the following reason:

They explain precisely how every word of the Bible is to be understood in the particularity of its linguistic context – as we find, for instance, in the work of Abraham ben Ezra, Moses ben Gabirol and Rabbi David Kimchi, all of whom offer a grammatical analysis of each word. We should be no more inclined to burn these books than we would be to burn such Latin grammars as *Das Fuellhorn*, or those written by Priscianus, Servius and Donatus – all pivotal texts in our understanding of Latin. The same holds true for the commentaries and textual glosses of Rabbi Solomon [better known as Rashi], Rabbi Moses of Garona, Levi ben Gershon known as Magister Leo de Banolis, the two learned masters, father and son, Rabbi Joseph and Rabbi David Kimchi, the latter’s brother, Moses Kimchi and many others who painstakingly elucidate the Old Testament, word for word, according to the particularities of the Hebrew language; just as Eustathius [twelfth-century archbishop, rhetorician] did for Homer, and Theon [Greek astrologer] for Ptolemy and other commentators have done.

I also maintain, and have my sources to back me up, that if our clerics and exegetes of the Holy Scripture truly wish to win out in their debates with those of divergent faith, they had best familiarize themselves with such commentaries, glosses and explications to gain a complete understanding of the Biblical text. For according to sacred canonical law (*c. ut veterum librorum dis. 9*), the religious significance of the books of the Old Testament can only be established through a careful reading of the original Hebrew text. And if, for instance, all the definitions and glosses of Rabbi Solomon [Rashi], who wrote about the Bible, were to be stricken from the books of Nikolaus de Lyra, who also wrote about the Bible, then I could well sum up what’s left, namely Nikolaus de

Lyra's original contributions to Biblical research, in a few short pages.

The Christian Church can and may not cast aside such commentaries, for they keep alive the original Hebrew, a vital element which the Holy Scripture, and in particular the Old Testament, cannot do without; just as we can and dare not do without the Greek language and its grammars and commentaries for our understanding of the New Testament, as the aforementioned statute of canonical law, *Ut veterum*, clearly states. In this regard, I take the liberty to point out, with all due respect, that one can find a good many scholars in Christendom who because of their ignorance of these two languages [Hebrew and Greek], cannot rightly explicate the Holy Scripture, and in this are often made a laughing stock. Therefore, we should by no means suppress the commentaries and glosses of those who have thoroughly mastered their mother tongue, having studied it since their youth, but rather, wherever such commentaries exist, we should make them accessible, take pains to preserve them and hold them in high esteem as sources from which we may derive the true meaning of the language and the significance of the Holy Scripture. Consequently, the canonical law prescribes (*in ca. jejunium 76, distinc.*): "Many of our scholars have frequently contradicted each other. It is, therefore, necessary and imperative that we turn to the Jews and seek out the truth at its source, rather than its trickle" – quoted verbatim.

Someone might well object: I will gladly make do with our own commentaries, but why do I need the commentaries of the Jews? Here too, I have a ready reply: Whoever is obliged to "make do" is at a distinct disadvantage – like a man in winter with nothing to wear but pants. If we consider, furthermore, that our commentators often enough make so bold as to attempt to explicate books that they themselves have not rightly understood, then no friend of the truth can contend himself with the result. The illustrious teacher St. Hilarius wrote glosses and commentaries on the Holy Scripture which are lauded and accepted by the entire Christian Church. Often enough, however, he was badly mistaken in his understanding of individual words, for lack of Hebrew, a language he did not know. And as to his Greek, suffice it to say that his knowledge was breezy at best, as St. Jerome writes in his letter to Marcella concerning the 126th Psalm, and in his letter to Damascus concerning *Hosanna*, and also in many other passages enumerated and verifiable in my book, *De Rudimentis hebraicis*.

[...]

To conclude, in the matter of this dispute: I can truly not conceive how anything good can come to our Christian faith [from such a rash act] or how it can promote the veneration of God. I can, however, well imagine how much bad we would do by burning their books.

First: The Jews may claim we are taking their weapons away from them and that we are afraid of them, that they can outdebate us and are wiser than we. It is as if a duke were to challenge a shepherd to a duel, but beforehand, had the shepherd's staff, sword or knife taken from him, while he himself kept his!

Further: The Jews might well write much stranger stuff from scratch, far more objectionable than these books, and a hundred years from now they could tell their children whatever they please about the contents of the burnt books.

Third: They might likewise later assert that our scholars had falsely quoted from theirs and misconstrued their meaning. We would have nothing then to bring as proof in support of our position.

Fourth: Forbidden fruit is all the more desirable. For that reason, their rabbis and scholars would simply go to study in Turkey, and thereafter, following their return, be all the more zealous in their teachings and perhaps tell their children worse things than they learned before.

Fifth: It might well come to pass, as the world keeps changing from year to year, that we urgently need such books at future Church councils and gatherings: Just as the Council of Basel sought to consider the Koran, Mohammed's book, which then Cardinal Johannes von Ragusa brought forward – we would then have to pay dearly for having burnt the books. This is just what happened to the Romans, after King Tarquinius Priscus had the books of the Sybil Amalthea burned, all except for the last three; for which he then had to pay a full three hundred gilders in gold, very much regretting that he had had the other books burned.

Sixth: We are forbidden to enter into public debate with heretics who have fallen away from our faith (*I. dannato et I. quicumque C. de haeret.*). With the Jews, however, we may well debate and converse, so as to win them over to our faith (*c. quam sit laudabile et ibi glo. 1. ex de iudae. iuncto. 23. q. 4. c. infideles*). Yet if their books had been burned – on what sources would we base our challenge other than the text of the Bible? But the latter would count for nought, since the canonical law states (*37. dis. c. relatum*) that there are many words in the text of the Holy Scripture whose meaning can be stretched in such a way as to suit anyone's interpretation. And therefore, the wise Jews would think up interpretations other than those they learned from their forefathers, and we would consequently be forced to bow out of any future debates.

Seventh: If there were no more outsiders – whether Jews or heathens – with whom we could wrestle over the meaning of the Holy Scripture, then we ourselves would clash with each other in our scholarly interpretations – for the mind never rests. We would invent newfangled notions, or reawaken old disputes – just as has recently occurred concerning the conception of Our Beloved Lady, or over whether St. Paul was married, or if St. Augustine was a monk and other nonsense. And this sort of thing occurs when we have no one who dares to contradict us, with whom we can lock horns. Consider what the Roman historians write concerning the third war against the City of Carthage: In the course of deliberation in the Roman Senate on the fate of Carthage, Cato the Censor was of the opinion that Carthage ought to be razed to the ground. Whereupon, Scipio Nasica advised: “No, let us leave Carthage intact.” Not for love of that city – for he was just as hostile to it as the others – but rather, for the sole reason that he knew the Romans well enough to fathom that they could not remain inactive for long. And if they had no war to wage outside their realm, then they would start a civil war in their own city and set upon each other, as did indeed happen – and all Rome would have rejoiced in retrospect had they followed Scipio's advice.

Eighth: There is nothing to be gained from burning Jewish books in Germany, where the smallest number of Jews reside. For they still have other schools of higher learning in Constantinople and in the Orient, and also in Italy and in other kingdoms, schools where they may study freely and read what they wish.

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