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Book review: Rajmund Pietkiewicz, *In Search of 'the Genuine Word of God': Reception of the West-European Christian Hebraism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Renaissance*, translated from Polish by Monika and Jacek Szela, Göttingen 2020, pp. 346

This book is a highly informative and erudite work. The first part provides a comprehensive survey of Hebraism and Bible translations in Renaissance Western Europe (pp. 23–92). Like many of the scholars whom he deals with, the author is *Homo trilinguis*. His significant contribution here is a thorough study of Polish Hebraism and a detailed research of Bible translations into Polish. The structure of the book makes the comparison of Hebraism between East and West almost unavoidable, and Pietkiewicz draws conclusions from this comparison. The Polish Hebraism, in all its aspects, was inferior to its Western precursor, so it had to largely depend on it. Furthermore, the majority of Hebraist scholars in Poland were not Polish by origin. Some were Italians, such as Francesco Stancarò (c. 1501–1574) and Giorgio Biandrata (Blandrata, 1515–1588); one was Dutch, Jan Van den Campen (Johannes Campensis, c. 1490–1538) and one was a “baptized Jew,” namely Dawid Leonard, to mention only a few prominent ones. However, Pietkiewicz concludes that besides at least several dozen people who mastered Hebrew to the degree of being able to teach and translate the language (p. 154), hundreds of Polish or Lithuanian people knew basic Hebrew, and this knowledge “could have been more widespread than today” (p. 281).

Centers of Hebraist scholarship were created in Königsberg, Pińczów, Vilnius and – first and foremost – Cracow. The historic capital city owed its Hebraist significance to the initiatives of Bishop Samuel Maciejowski (1499–1550) and the

subsequent efforts of Bishop Piotr Tomicki (1464–1535), who established (c. 1528) the first Hebrew chair at the University of Cracow, headed by Dawid Leonard (p. 101).

Jan Laski (1499–1560) was an important figure of the Reformation both in and outside Poland. In 1526 he returned to Poland from Basel – he belonged to Erasmus’s circle – and became known as the patron of Polish humanists (pp. 126–127). Importantly, it was he who purchased Erasmus’s precious book collection. It contained 413 volumes of classical and religious works and was to remain, by agreement, with Erasmus until his death. Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski (1503–1572) brought the collection to Cracow. Erasmus was, to say the least, not fond of the Hebrew language and feared what it would mean for the tender Christian soul. Therefore, he recommended that it should be left “to the Jews and theologians. Besides, there is the risk that a boy might absorb some Judaism with his alphabet” (*The Right Way of Speaking Latin and Greek: A Dialogue* in CWE 26, 389). This brings to mind what Pietkiewicz rightly marks: in Poland and elsewhere, people interested in Hebrew were accused of Judaizing tendencies, and the learning of Hebrew was considered to promote heresy and confusion that might put Christendom at risk (p. 100).

Some flaws in this work should be pointed out. Pietkiewicz quite often sounds like an exclusivist theologian. For example, in referring to Jan Laski, he writes (p. 127) that at the end of his life and after his death, Francesco Stancaro and Giorgio Biandrata, the two Italian promoters of the Reformation in Poland who both play important roles in Pietkiewicz’s book, were “spreading heresy that was detrimental to unity” [of the church]. The study of Hebrew put at risk those scholars who devoted themselves to it, but a Protestant conviction might put a scholar at even greater risk, as suggested by Stancaro’s bitter experience. Bishop Maciejowski brought him to Cracow where he presided over the Hebrew language chair. However, when Stancaro’s adherence to the Reformation was exposed, he was imprisoned and had to escape and flee throughout Poland, until he settled in Königsberg. Pietkiewicz has no leniency for him because “In all the circles in which he appeared, he was involved in Christological and soteriological disputes, introducing dissensions, unrest and splitting Polish Protestantism” (p. 108).

The above-mentioned Dawid Leonard is defined by Pietkiewicz as “a baptized Jew” (pp. 101, 137) – Was Leonard’s Christian faith a camouflage? Was he a pretender? Is it necessary to use this derogatory term when referring to a sincere and genuine convert from Judaism to Christianity? Similarly, the man who read the Old Testament to Szymon Budny – a Hebraist and important Bible translator (c. 1530–1593) – was also “a baptized Jew” (p. 137). Again, why does Pietkiewicz use this derogatory term? Szymon Budny himself is called

a heresiarch, and not just by his contemporary opponents but by Pietkiewicz too (pp. 137, 183, 207). A more pluralistic or balanced religious attitude in defining or describing issues of faith-controversy would have prevented the uneasiness that intermittently accompanies the reading of this book.

Pietkiewicz's exclusivism is also discerned when he deals with Christians who chose to reject the Trinitarian version of Christianity and follow Unitarianism. He refers to them as heretics. Thus, Biandrata is called a heresiarch, and Bernardino Ochino (c. 1487 – c.1564/1565) is a heretic (p. 123). Unmistakably, Pietkiewicz wholeheartedly dislikes these “antitrinitarian heresies brought to Poland by the Italians, mainly by Biandrata” (p. 125).

A few typographical issues are probably unavoidable, especially when dealing with Hebrew. Thus, the singular of *parashot* (פרשות) is *parasha* (פרשה) and not “parash” (פרש) (p. 197). Jakub Wujek – perhaps the most outstanding among these Renaissance Polish Bible translators – commenting on Ps. 2: 1, explained that “The Hebrew word גוים *Goim* is generally translated as heathens and לאומים *leumim* means the faithful Jewish nation” (p. 198). This is simply wrong, since *leumim* does not mean “the faithful Jewish nation;” rather, it means nations, in plural form, and in general. This last is more than just a typo, and yet passed through into the present book unnoticed.