

## A Plurality of Religions

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Chanita Goodblatt, *The Christian Hebraism of John Donne: Written with the Fingers of Man's Hand*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2010. xii + 244 pp.

In this erudite analysis of John Donne's sermons on the Penitential and Prebend Psalms, Chanita Goodblatt provides additional evidence for the importance of Christian Hebraism in the intellectual, religious, and political lives of early modern Christians, particularly Protestant Christians. During the past thirty years, the study of Christian Hebraism has come into its own as scholars have documented the way the encounter between Christians and Jews, both through texts and in person, shaped both communities' perceptions of themselves and each other. Donne may have only been a third-order Hebraist (according to Matt Goldish's categorization<sup>1</sup>), but—as Goodblatt makes abundantly clear—Christian Hebraism cannot be measured solely in terms of a particular Christian's knowledge of the Hebrew language. What must also be considered is that individual's familiarity with the significant number of Jewish sources translated into Latin and the vernaculars (p. 22). By taking into account both sources, Goodblatt substantiates her claim “to authenticate Donne as a Christian Hebraist” (p. 2). Donne's Christian Hebraism has made more than one scholar comment on the “dry” and “academic” nature of his sermons, even to the point of suggesting that this emphasis on Jewish sources is “a bit of a drag” (pp. 59–60). But as Goodblatt demonstrates, such judgments ignore the fact that “just as poetic taste changes, so does

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<sup>1</sup>Goldish, *Judaism in the Theology of Isaac Newton* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998), p. 18.

homiletic sensibility” (p. 138). What her study highlights is how closely sixteenth- and seventeenth-century biblical readers and reformers attended to religious texts and religious sermons and how grounded they were in scholarly sources. Their attentiveness to texts and sermons, in turn, reveals the centrality of the Bible and biblical interpretation in the early modern period. The search for the meaning of the biblical text had ramifications for the way early modern Europeans conceived of themselves, their God, and their world. Early modern Christian Hebraism is therefore inseparable from larger theological issues and the way these theological issues intersected with politics. It also anticipated an issue at the forefront of modern critical theory, namely, the indeterminate nature of all texts and the futility of trying to understand a text without a thorough knowledge of the context in which it was written. Grammar and philology were consequently not the dull subjects we might think them to be, but crucial for the development of the new ways of thinking that marked the transition from the medieval to the modern world.

Goodblatt illustrates the way Christian Hebraism was implicated in two major political crises in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England: the “King’s Great Matter,” involving Henry VIII’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon; and Charles I’s dissolution of Parliament in 1629. In the first instance, the battle over Henry’s divorce was fought out over the scriptural text by pitting the Levitical prohibition of marriage to a sister-in-law (Leviticus 18:6) against the Deuteronomic obligation of just such a marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5). Modern scholars are aware of the conflict between the Levitical concern with incest and family purity in contrast to the Deuteronomic concern with dynasty and familial continuity (p. 16), but for early modern interpreters these texts presented a real obstacle to the idea of “sola scriptura” and the notion that the biblical text alone provided authoritative teachings. Such textual conflicts and discrepancies led Christian Hebraists like Donne into the thickets of rabbinical scholarship, which essentially meant that in many cases Jewish tradition trumped Catholic tradition—something of a problem for Christians who deemed their theology far superior to the tradition from which it sprang (p. 19).

A second instance of the involvement of Christian Hebraism in early modern English politics affected Donne personally. Called upon to deliver two sermons to Charles I and his court in 1629 after the

dissolution of Parliament, Donne chose the text of Genesis 1:26: "Let us make man in our image." As Goodblatt shows, Donne used this text with its Hebrew plural of God (Elohim) together with a singular verb to steer a middle course between extreme and moderate Arminianism. While Elohim implied the plural nature of God and thus supported the Christian notion of the Trinity, it also suggested that God did not act alone but took counsel with his different selves before taking action, an example Donne implied that should be followed by Charles I in his relationship with Parliament.

Donne's Christian Hebraism comes out clearly in the marginal notes he added to his sermons as well as in the references embedded in the sermons themselves. These notes and references highlight Donne's "persistent search for the meaning of the 'original' biblical text, as well as the variety of exegetical and interpretive voices echoing within his sermons" (p. 56). Donne searched for the meaning of the biblical texts by juxtaposing and discussing the relative merits of different interpretations. This allowed him to privilege certain Christian texts over other Christian texts and to present Christian interpretations of Jewish texts. In the long term, however, the effect of such juxtapositions undermined the very idea that there was any single meaning, much less a single meaning based on a literal interpretation. In *The Legend of Noah*, published in 1949, Don Cameron Allen made the point that by emphasizing the literal interpretation of scriptural texts Protestants fostered a rational approach that ultimately destroyed the credibility of the biblical narrative and stimulated developments in science.<sup>2</sup> Recent scholarship, such as that of Peter Harrison and now Chanita Goodblatt, confirms this.<sup>3</sup>

Goodblatt's book is an impressive piece of scholarship. It will be of especial interest to Donne scholars, but by demonstrating the significant role that Christian Hebraism played in Donne's own biblical scholarship, Goodblatt has added more evidence for the plurality of religious ideas

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<sup>2</sup>Allen, *The Legend of Noah: Renaissance Rationalism in Art, Science, and Letters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

<sup>3</sup>Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

and sensibilities in the early modern period as well as for the importance of Christian Hebraism.

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