

Bibliography and Cabala: a new perspective

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Professor Alfredo Serrai has published a series of lengthy essays in the Italian journal *Il Bibliotecario*¹ about the links between the development of “systematic bibliography”² and the birth of Christian Cabala at the end of the fifteenth century. The author’s hypothesis—which is based not only on an accurate and extensive examination of the pertinent literature, but which also takes into consideration the mentality and the cultural apparatus of the men involved, i.e., bibliographers, librarians and encyclopaedists³—is that there seems to be a close connection between the gnostic attitude that is typical of the cabalistic tradition, and the interest in books, lists of books, and libraries as repositories of knowledge and of both human and divine wisdom.

From the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, it is striking to note how many of the people professionally interested in books were cabalists, or entangled in esoteric, magical, neoplatonic, or neopythagoric speculations. There is also a close nexus between cabalism and the world of language, based on the power of signs as the medium for the expression of reality and of literature. The substance of semiotics—divine in the Bible and in Creation, human in language and books—is inherent in the value of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and in the meanings of their various compositions. Bibliography is therefore exalted and exercised as a statement of faith in Jewish Cabala and, afterwards, in Christian.

The beginning of Christian Cabala—in which a combination of Judaic, neopythagoric and neoplatonic thought was used as evidence for the truth of Christian revelation—dates back to Marsilio Ficino’s translation of *Corpus Hermeticum* (1463), and to the bold philosophical synthesis of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a genius who had an immense influence on European thought. For Pico, there is only one truth, and there cannot be any contradiction among the Old Testament, rabbinical literature, philosophy (especially that of Plato), and the New Testament. Truth is contained, and can be recognized, in the book of nature and in holy books. This attitude contributes to the explanation of the genesis of interest in the natural world and, con-

sequently, in the formation of the intellectual medium from which modern science eventually developed. There can be no contradiction between the creation of the physical universe and the revelation of God to Moses, and between the written revelation in the Scriptures and the oral one in the cabalistic tradition.

After Pico, there follows a personage of recognized importance in the history of bibliography: Johannes Trithemius, the “father of bibliography.” He was a Benedictine monk, abbot of Sponheim, and the author of the first outstanding bibliography of Christian writers (*Liber de scriptoribus ecclesiasticis*, 1. ed. 1494), which was used up to the eighteenth century. Trithemius is considered in his cultural milieu by Serrai, who explains the relations Trithemius had with Johann Reuchlin, Johann von Dalberg, Johann Wimpfeling, Arnold Bostius, Agrippa von Nettesheim, and others. Serrai also explains the dependence of the bibliographical work of the Benedictine abbot on former bio-bibliographical models, established by St. Jerome and Gennadius and

followed by their medieval successors, and, just before him, by Giacomo Filippo Foresti, the historian in whose chronicles there appeared for the first time bibliographical lists in tabulated form. Trithemius was an Hebraist and a cabalist; he was accused of practicing magic and, in spite of his protestations, was the subject of an international scandal.

After Trithemius, Serrai treats Johann Reuchlin, also an Hebraist and a cabalist, whose life was marked by a deep respect for books and for Jewish culture. Reuchlin (librarian to the Elector palatine and, possibly, to Johann von Dalberg) was involved in the so-called “war of books” engaged by Johann Pfefferkorn—a Jew converted to Catholicism and supported by antisemitic circles—who called for the destruction of all Hebrew books. Reuchlin fought strongly and successfully against such a demand, but this did not prevent the papal condemnation of his own works. The title page of one of Reuchlin’s books on the Hebrew language is reproduced in Figure 1.

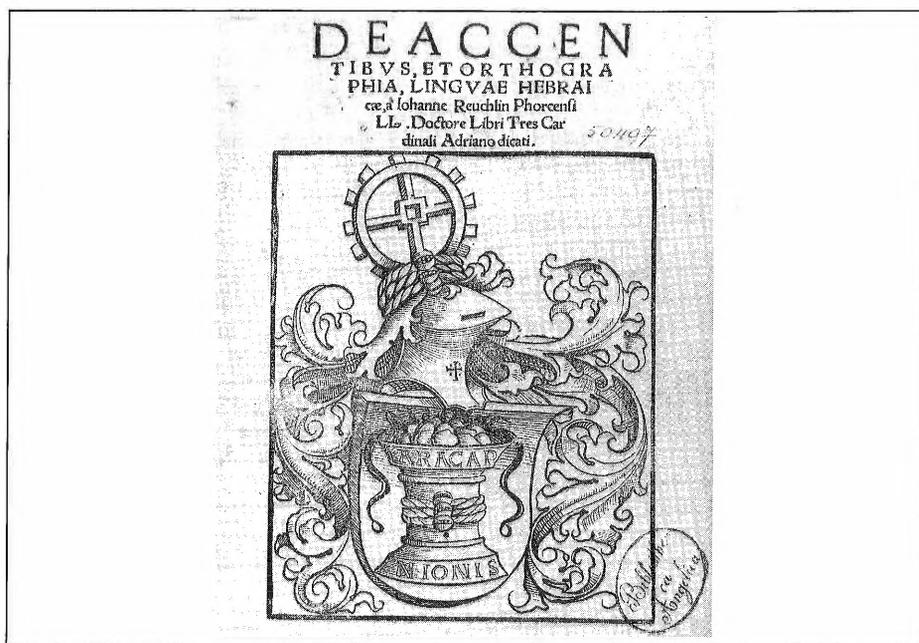


Figure 1. Title page of *De accentibus et orthographia linguae Hebraicae*, by Johann Reuchlin, a Christian Hebraist and Cabalist.

The survey continues with Domenico Grimani, a great book collector, who acquired the library of Giovanni Pico, and whose apparent sympathies for Christian Cabala were tested by the support he gave to Reuchlin in the "war of books," and by his relations with the Jewish philosopher and physician Elia del Medigo and with the cabalist Abraham de Balmes.

Cardinal Gilles of Viterbo, minister general of the Augustinian Friars, had a more important and recognized role in the landscape of Christian Cabala. He was an authority on Hebrew and Near Eastern languages, and a tenacious hunter for manuscripts. For him, Cabala served as the means of finding Christian truth in the Old Testament; and the Hebrew language, in which God spoke, is the only language fit to express supernatural mysteries.

Symphorien Champier, the French polygraph, author of the first bibliography of medicine (*De medicinae claris scriptoribus*, Lyon, 1506), believed that Hermetic theories were forerunners of Christian theology. He published, in Latin translation, the last treatise of *Corpus Hermeticum*, which was not included in Ficino's *Pimander*.

Much more analytical attention is devoted to Conrad Pellikan, a librarian and Hebraist, and adviser to the typographers Froben, H. Petri, and Amerbach. His life and work are minutely examined under the guidance of his autobiography. Pellikan, a Franciscan Friar, became a follower of the Reformation (he was editor of some writings of Luther), and eventually left the habit and became a professor of Hebrew in Zürich at the college known as Schola Tigurina (see Figure 2). Pellikan was the librarian of the Bibliotheca Carolina, a library that he reorganized, setting up four catalogs: alphabetic by author, by location, classified, and according to alphabetical subjects. This work was of primary importance in the history of cataloging, because the methods used were adopted by the great Conrad Gessner, a student of Pellikan, who in his *Bibliotheca Universalis* followed and developed the cataloging system initiated by his master.

Pellikan is the last author treated in the essays published to date. The series will continue with dozens of other personalities, among them Pansa, Fichard, Gaffarel, Neander, Chacon, Pancirolli, Doni, Du Verdier, etc. Their exposition will be structured around another concept, that of encyclopaedias. There is really a vacuum in relation to studies on the encyclopaedias of the Renaissance. Serrai is not only reconstructing the encyclopaedia's panorama in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but is using the term as it was applied then, i.e., as a unifying

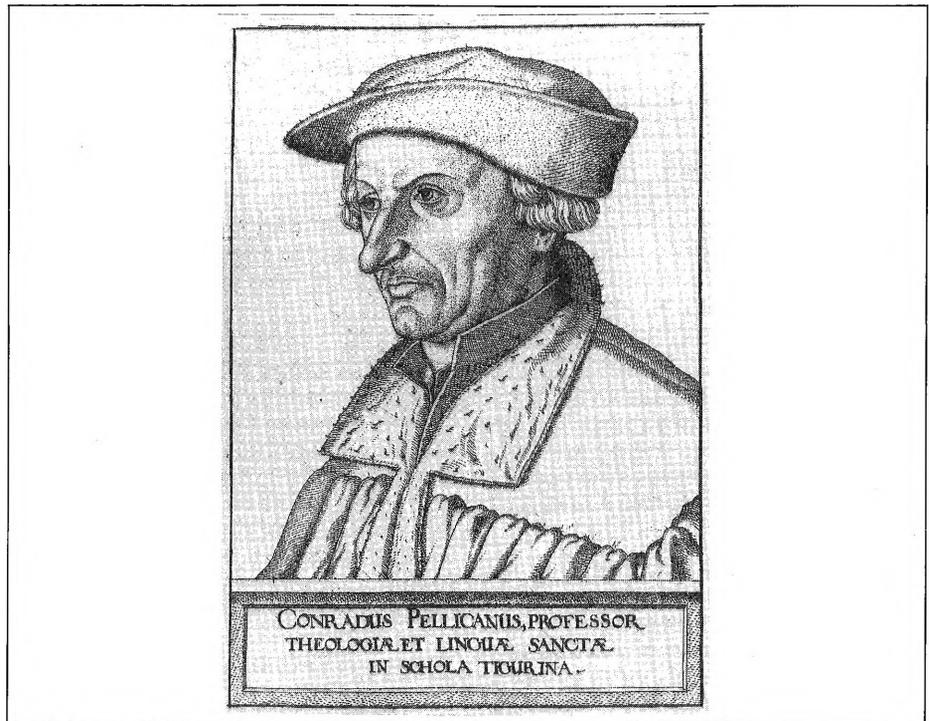


Figure 2. Conrad Pellikan, Professor of Theology and of the "Holy Tongue" at Schola Tigurina. The portrait is reproduced from his *Commentarii Bibliorum*, Zürich, 1532-39.

concept for knowledge and literature. *Encyclopedia* was, in the Renaissance, the equivalent of what was later to be *historia litteraria*, the discipline from which arose our enumerative bibliography. Within such a perspective, Serrai has divided the encyclopaedists into seven groups, namely:

- 1) philologists and antiquarians, concerned especially with classical languages and civilizations (about 40 authors; among them Celio Calcagnini, Celso Rodigino, Sabellico, Poliziano, and Beroaldo);
- 2) lexicographers (such as Balbi, Francesco Alunno, and Brack);
- 3) encyclopaedists *stricto sensu* (30 names, including Giorgio Valla, G. Reisch, Maffei, and Zwinger);
- 4) poet-encyclopaedists (Pontus de Tyard, Ronsard, Peletier, and Le Fèvre de la Boderie);
- 5) encyclopaedists concerned with the definition of disciplines and *ratio studiorum* (Vives, Sadoleto, R. Savonarola, and about 20 other names);
- 6) compilers of *florilegia* and of polygraphical works (Ravisius Textor, Garzoni, Polidoro Vergilio);
- 7) encyclopaedist-bibliographers, who, in order to organize lists of books, adopted a systematic classification of disciplines (40 authors; among them Gessner, Constantin, Spach, and Bolduanus).

The work of Professor Serrai will be in progress for a long time. At its conclusion, we shall have a new and more precise interpretation of the cultural history of the first two centuries following the invention of printing, as well as an original and, in part, totally new history of the bibliography of printed books for that period.

Notes

¹Serrai, Alfredo, "Bibliografia e Cabala: Contributo alla storia della Bibliografia," *Il Bibliotecario*, N.3 (Marzo 1985) onwards.

²The definition goes back to the work of Theodore Besterman, *The Beginnings of Systematic Bibliography* (1. ed. Oxford, 1935; 3. ed. Paris, 1950), which is, until now, the only complete, although sketchy, account of the origins of printed bibliography.

³Bibliographers, librarians and encyclopaedists are grouped together in a conception of bibliography which is much more comprehensive than the traditional one, with the purpose of providing a framework for the organization of both books and knowledge. There is, moreover, an historical justification for such a unified conception: it would be anachronistic to separate these three categories with terms that have a much later origin.

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