
ERNST Voss

Thomas Murner, Franciscan (1475–1537) born near Strasburg; he led the life of a wandering scholar in France, Germany, Bohemia, and Poland—studying theology at Paris and law at Freiburg. In 1505 he received a poet’s crown from the emperor Maximilian. Though later the bitter opponent of Luther, none attacked the abuses of the Church more violently than Murner. He is best known by his rhymed sermons, the Narrenbeschwörung (Exorcism of Fools) and the Schelmenzunft (Rogues’ Guild), 1512, and his satire Von dem grossen Lutherischen Narren, 1522, against the Reformation.

Among the numerous writings of Thomas Murner there are also two that deal with the Hebrew language and things Hebrew. They betray the great ease, if not to say the great haste with which he worked and like his other writings they have aroused the praise of his admirers and the criticism of his enemies.

While the famous Willibald Pirckheimer in his letter to Laurentius Beheym of August 30th, 1517, (published in Böcking’s edition of Ulrich von Hutten’s works, Vol. I, 151–153) numbers Murner amongst the scholars, who with Staufitz, Erasmus, Eck, Cochlæus, Luther and others have expressed themselves in favor of Reuchlin, and who considered the study of Hebrew as absolutely necessary for the student of theology, Utz Eckstein, the witty opponent of Murner in his Reichstag (Scheible, Kloster VII, 890), makes fun of him by telling us that Murner, while at the
university of Krakau, stole some books from a Jew, as if he wanted to insinuate that Murner’s pretended knowledge of Hebrew was not acquired by hard study, but that it was stolen property.

In his book entitled: Op der König von England ein Lügner sei oder der Luther, Murner takes the floor in his own defense with regard to his knowledge of Hebrew when he remarks: You (Luther) are just as poor a student of law as you are a student of Hebrew. If perchance you should have read a Hebrew word in a shop window, you would have put it into your books and paraded with it as if you had made a close study of all the twenty-four books of the Holy Writ. I have studied Hebrew for thirty years and yet know mighty little about it, but you apparently got it all in a moment’s notice and you want us to consider you a great Hebrew scholar. If you really want to be such a great Hebrew light, let me give you some good Hebrew advice that will serve you well if you should use it.

“Negor leschoncka meva vsfasecha midber mirmah.” I should have liked to print it for you in Hebrew characters, but we have none here. The Hebrew reference refers, as the Professor of Hebrew at our university informs me, to Psalm 34, 13 and reads as follows: Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile.

However, Murner has given us an opportunity to test his real knowledge of Hebrew. He has translated two books from the Hebrew, which he could not have done, if he had been entirely ignorant of the Hebrew language. The large one deals with the Easter customs of the Jews; it is in Latin and bears the title: Ritus et celebratio phase judaeorum cum orationibus eorum et benedictionibus etc. and was published by his brother Batt Murner at Frankfort in 1512, although no date is given. In the preface to the book which is addressed to the fathers of the Franciscan Order, Murner tells us that the Fathers gave him 24 tracts to translate, while he was engaged in defending Nicolaus of Lyra against the insinuations of Paulus Burgensis, that he did not know anything about the Hebrew language. “Here is”, he continues, “the translation demanded of me and I trust, Holy Fathers, that it may not be distasteful neither to the hypersensitive Jews nor to the Christians. If how-
ever I should have made mistakes, you must forgive me, because I was not early enough instructed in the Hebrew language, but what I know about it I have picked up here and there late in life.”

Now follows a translation of the prayers spoken by the Jews in the celebration (at home) of the first and second Easter evening, the so-called Hagadah. In the introduction he says (simply stating the facts) that these prayers really were meant only for Jerusalem, and to speak them outside of the Holy Land is therefore a crime against the command of God. About this translation Ludwig Geiger in his article: Zur Geschichte des Studiums des Hebräischen in Deutschland, published in the Jahrbuch für Deutsche Theologie, 1876, pp. 190–223, remarks, that it is a wonder that amongst the many faulty renderings one actually finds here and there a really correct one. And the same compliment he pays to the second book translated by Thomas Murner from the Hebrew into German, the Benedicite Judaeorum, the Jewish blessings for the meals. His knowledge of Hebrew, says Geiger, is very defective, even compared with that of his contemporaries, who throughout knew very little indeed about Hebrew.

But these two translations of Murner from the Hebrew demand a far greater interest, when considered not from a linguistic point of view, but from that higher point of view, the history of civilization.

Three years before Murner issued his booklet, there had appeared under a similar title a pamphlet by Johannes Pfefferkorn, the baptized Jew who has become famous through his controversy with the great German humanist Reuchlin and the letters published in Reuchlin’s defense by his friends and admirers, known as the letters of the Obscuranti, the Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum. Most of these letters as we know now, * were written by Crotus Rubianus and Ulrich von Hutten, some probably by Hermann von dem Busche, and addressed to Magister Ortwin of Graes, who was hated and despised by the rising generation of humanists, not only as an anti-Reuchlinist pamphleteer, but as a renegade. Like Mutianus Rufus and

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many another he had enjoyed the privilege of being a pupil of the great scholar Alexander Hegius. His scholarship was sound for the day, his Latinity was respectable, yet was his crime unforgivable. The fact that Ortwin had abased himself to become the kept humanist of the Cologne theologians suffices to explain all. "The light of the new day had shone upon his face," says Stokes in his English edition of the Epistolae," as upon the other Poets and yet—perhaps for a handfull of silver—he had prostituted his scholarship in the defense of the Barbarians."

After describing briefly in this Easterbook the customs of the Jews during the Passah festivals and after referring to the fact, that these customs rightly interpreted are nothing but further proof and justification of the Christian Religion, Pfefferkorn, the baptized Jew and rabid Christian, turns with great length to a subject that has nothing to do with the contents of the book, but which was always very near and dear to his heart, his obsession or mania to insult the Jews and to paint them as black as possible.

In the third chapter of his Easterbook he tries to prove that the Jews do not obey the law of Moses to which they always refer as the foundation of their faith, and for that, he says, they deserve to be called heretics of the old testament. He stresses especially that they violate the laws against usury and that they will not open their ears, will not listen to the Messianic prophecies.

The same favorite subject he dwells upon in the fourth chapter of his Easterbook, exposing especially the cunning trickery of the Jews against the Christians.

And in the fifth and last chapter he admonishes all Christians and especially those named Johannes like himself not to tolerate the Jews any longer amongst them, in order that they cannot any longer repeat their blasphemies against the Saints.

This is only one of the many writings of Pfefferkorn, directed against the Jews, in which he finally demands that all the books of the Jews, printed in the Hebrew language, should be burned, which demand gave rise to the famous controversy between himself and Reuchlin, a lover and defender of Hebrew literature.

In this Reuchlin Controversy that took on greater dimen-
sions from year to year, until finally the humanists of all of Europe were involved in this struggle, we find Thomas Murner on the side of Reuchlin. Without declaring himself directly for him, he meant to work for him indirectly by exposing the ignorance and malice of Reuchlin's opponent Pfefferkorn.

Since Pfefferkorn had tried to convey the idea that everywhere in the prayers and customs of the Jews in connection with their Easter celebrations could be detected signs of heresy, or of animosity against the Christian religion, Murner now published in a translation these prayers so that everybody interested might see for himself whether they were actually as dangerous as Pfefferkorn had made them out to be.

For there can be no doubt that Murner was on Reuchlin's side. At three different places in the Letters of the Obscure Men (lib. II, epp. 3, 9, 59) he is mentioned as friendly to Reuchlin and opposed to the theologians of Cologne and Johannes Pfefferkorn.

The first letter is addressed by Magister Stephan Rume- lant to Magister Ortwin Gratius and reads as follows in Stokes' translation: "Forthwith and without preface, I would have your worthiness to know that a Doctor of Theology hath just come hither, Thomas Murner by name. He is of the order of St. Francis, an Oberlander, and he is vain-glorous beyond belief. It is said that he maketh certain cards and whosoever playeth with these cards learneth grammar and logic. He hath contrived a game of checkers, too, which dealeth with the quantities of syllables. He boasteth that he knoweth Hebrew and he cometh in verses in German. And the report goeth that this Doctor wotteth somewhat of every art.

But when I heard this, I said, 'Jack-of-all-trades, and master of none' and some that stood by laughed.

Now this Doctor is a great crony of Johann Reuchlin's—devil take him. I fear that here he will so work upon the Canons and other Clerks that they will side with Reuchlin. He declared before many who heard, that a child could discern the folly, and the stupidity, and the malice of the Theologians of Cologne and their adherents. And he swore by the Holy of Holies that unless the Pope took heed, and cor-
rected them in their perversity, a schism would spring up in the Church and the Christian Faith; for if the Pope permitted them to act thus, it would come to pass that no man would study, nor desire to gain knowledge. Moreover he said that Reuchlin could in one day be of more profit to the Church of God than could his enemies in a hundred years."

"And if", he went on, "they are upright men, and have any just cause against Reuchlin, wherefore do they not act for themselves? Why do they need a baptized Jew to do their work for them, and why do they write scandalous books against the worthy doctor, and father them on that renegade? If they could have lighted upon a viler or more malicious man in all Germany they would have joined themselves to him! Yet this is nothing strange. 'Like draws to like'.

Thereupon I could no longer hold my peace, but said: "Herr Doctor, by your favour, Johann Pfefferkorn is an honorable man; he is the trusty counsellor of his Imperial Majesty, and he cometh of the tribe of Naphtali. That, be well assured, is a most ancient stock. He might, and he would, boast himself to be of noble birth—but doth not for humility's sake." Then said the Doctor: "Take a spoon and bib your words." Then said I, "Think you that I know naught of men? I am a Magister of Paris, and I have studied Theology at Cologne for two years. Be not so arrogant, Herr Doctor, ere you know to whom you speak." Doctor Murner made answer that he knew not that I was a Magister, and he added: "Of Johann Pfefferkorn's honour, I have heard but little, but from what I have heard of him I can safely say that unless the Jews had sought to put him to death by reason of his crimes, he would never have become a Christian."

Said I, "Herr Doctor, hear me yet a little: the Jews do Johann Pfefferkorn an injury, for he never stole aught, nor did he commit any crime, even when he was a Jew—as is piously to be believed. And to prove that this is true, I may tell you that two Jews once sought to saddle him with the shame of theft—merely out of envy and execrable malice—whereupon he cited them before the Imperial Chamber, and they handed him thirty florins for costs, wherewith he was content. Johann Pfefferkorn was indeed born of a
good stock, but when he was a Jew he did as other Jews. For as the proverb says, “He who is among wolves, must howl with the wolves”. But now he eateth swine’s flesh, and behaveth like a good Christian.” Then answered Doctor Murner, “Doth Pfefferkorn also eat sausages?”

I answered, “I have not with mine eyes beheld him eating them, but it may be piously presumed that if he eateth pork, he also eateth such things as are made of pork.” Quoth he, “You have made good apologies for Johann Pfefferkorn: hath he still two ears?”

I answered him that he had them still when I was at Cologne, and that I believed he still had them, and he will have them for ever. Then said he, “What opinion do you hold concerning Johann Reuchlin?” I replied that I knew him not, but that I was well aware that the Theologians and the Church for the most part regarded him as a heretic, because he hath assailed with undeserved calumnies Johann Pfefferkorn and other very eminent men. Then quoth he, “By the Lord, you do right well in defending Johann Pfefferkorn and the other very eminent men.”

Then said I, “Hear yet more; this Pfefferkorn is very useful to the Church, for he hath won twelve souls for God, as he hath himself candidly confessed.” Quoth Doctor Murner: “Where gave he those souls to God? In the Böhmer Wald? Maybe he, with other robbers, slew sundry folk whose souls passed to God.”

I replied: “Not at all; but by converting them to the Christian Faith.” Said he: “And how do you know that these souls were added to God?” I answered that this might be piously presumed. Then asked Murner: “And what doeth Pfefferkorn now?” I answered that he perchance visiteth the church, and attendeth Masses and Sermons, and, while defending himself against Johann Reuchlin, awaiteth the Day of Judgment.”

“Think you”, saith he, “that Pfefferkorn will live that long?”

“Ay,” said I, “with respect to his soul, but not with respect to his body.” Doctor Murner made answer “Good! Pfefferkorn deserves to have such a champion!” Thereupon he dismissed me, and all who stood around laughed, and said: “Pardy, Herr Stephan, you have answered him
stoutly.” Then said I, “I will write every word of this to Magister Ortwin”—and this, as you see, I am now doing. Write to me in reply. I am yours to command.

Now follows under II, 9, Magister Philipp Schlauraff’s Rhythmical Poem that he composed and compiled when he was Cursor in Theology and perambulated the whole of Upper Germany. Toward the end of the poem, which is 7 pages long, we find the following passage:

“As beside the Rhine I wandered, Doctor Murner met my sight!

In a boat upon the river—Thomas Murner, Minorite!

“‘Tis my dignity that saves thee!” cried he, “or thou straight shouldst lie,

Underneath the rolling waters.” Shivering I made reply:

“Wherefore?” “Knap and fool!” he shouted,

“Reuchlin’s wrongs will tell you why!”

In the last letter vol. II, 59, we find another reference to Thomas Murner. Johann Löffelholz sendeth greetings to Magister Ortwin Gratius. “You desired me to inquire of the merchants who flock hither from all parts during the fair, concerning that complot you have heard of; to wit, the conspiracy entered into by sundry poets and jurists to defend Johann Reuchlin, and write against the Theologians of Cologne and Dominicans, unless they forthwith leave the aforesaid Johann Reuchlin in peace.

You must know, therefore, that I made great diligence in inquiring and searching out, and at last I lighted upon a bookseller from the Oberland who told me many astonishing things. He named me sundry of the conspirators, and said that he had seen the writings that they send to one another. In the first place he declared Doctor Murner to be the head of the junto, and he assured me that this fellow was the author of a book concerning the misdeeds of the Friars Preachers, and of another in defence of Reuchlin.

Then he mentioned Hermann Busch, and said that he had seen a letter of his, in which he promises his companions that he will not be backward, but will stand up boldly for Reuchlin. Next he specified the Graf von Neuenar, Cano
of Cologne, as being of the plot; this man hath concocted wondrous accusations against the Theologians, and they are shortly to be published.

Then there is Wilibald—something or other—who, I suppose, lives at Nuremberg, he hath uttered many threats; declaring that he will send all the Theologers packing with his writings.

Then he named to me one Eoban Hesse, of Erfurt—a young man, it seemeth, and a poet of great skill. He hath a comrade, Petreius Aperbach by name, and the twain are now composing certain books that they will forthwith publish unless the Theologians make peace with Reuchlin.

Then there is at Leipsic an Englishman—I know not what his name may be, but I know that it is he who two years ago dwelt at Cologne,—and he also is one of them. Besides these, there is Vadianus at Vienna, who is said to be a wondy great poet. At the Cardinal’s Court, too, there is one Caspar Ursinus, who knoweth how to make Greek verses, and hath promised Reuchlin his aid: he is among the band. The bookseller moreover told me that he had heard that Philipp Melanchthon and Jakob Wimpheling, and Beatus Bhenanus and Nicolas Gerbellius were all of the plot. He averred, moreover, that they write letters to Ulrich Hutten, who studieth at Bologna, seeking that he should join them. Besides these he had heard of none.

Then I inquired in other quarters whether Erasmus of Rotterdam taketh their part? And a certain merchant answered, saying: Erasmus taketh his own part; but, be assured he will never be the friend of those Theologians and Friars; and he hath, evidently, in his words and writings, defended and vindicated Johann Reuchlin and hath addressed letters to the Pope on his behalf. From others I learnt that Paul Ricius is also of the number. Some say that Johann Speisshammer and Konrad Peutinger who are in high favour with the Emperor—also consort with this crew and do all in their power against the Theologians of Cologne and in honor of Johann Reuchlin. A certain student of Erfurt, a friend of mine, tells me that Konrad Mutianus is the bitterest of all, and that Theologians are so hateful to him that he cannot endure to hear those of Cologne as much as named; he saith, too, that he hath seen
full twenty letters of his, in which he urgeth certain students to join the Reuchlinists. This is all the information I have gathered so far; when I learn more, I will impart it to you.

Farewell in Christ.” Frankfort on Main.

In the 59th letter of the second volume of the Epistolae, almost all of them credited to Ulrich von Hutten, it is mentioned that Murner wrote a book to defend Reuchlin (composuit unum librum in defensionem Reuchlini). The question is which book, which pamphlet does this notice refer to?

Ludwig Geiger in his article mentioned before is of the opinion that it can only refer to Murner’s translation of the Jewish prayers, if one may call it at all a book in defense of Reuchlin, for in no place does Murner refer in it to Reuchlin’s controversy with Pfefferkorn. If Murner meant to defend Reuchlin in this pamphlet, it was indeed a rather lame defense. For that reason, Spanier in an article “Üeber Thomas Murner’s Übersetzungen aus dem Hebräischen,” published in the Jahrbuch für Geschichte, Sprache and Literatur Elsass-Lothringens, 1892, 63–75, comes to the conclusion that the book referred to in the 59th letter could not possibly have been his translation of the Jewish prayers. It cannot be regarded as a polemic of Murner in the Reuchlin controversy, for he definitely states in the introduction that he is afraid that it will neither be pleasing to the Jews nor to the Christians.

From this one might deduct the conclusion that the translation was made, sine ira et studio, quite impartially by a man who wanted to give the layman a chance to convince himself whether these prayers were really as bad, as vicious and dangerous, and hostile to the Christian Faith as the baptized Jew Pfefferkorn in his fanaticism had pictured them.

The Jewish prayers are not the only translation that Murner published from the standpoint of fair play or for the illumination of those who could not read the originals. I refer to his translation of Luther’s De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae, of Justinian’s Roman Law, of Virgil’s
Aeneid, of Hutten's treatise on the use of the Guaiacum wood by which he thought the uninitiated might profit.

To accuse him of improper motives, that he did it for mercenary reasons or vain glory, as Spanier seems inclined to do, is certainly very unjust and unfair, although in keeping with the treatment that Murner has received from his opponents from the sixteenth century down to the middle of the nineteenth, when at last men like Karl Goedeke and Ch. Schmidt came to the rescue of this much maligncd Franciscan, who was by no means an unworthy opponent of Martin Luther.

In recent years Murner has received a great deal of attention from eminent scholars, but there still remain some moot points in the life of this certainly interesting and prolific writer of the Reformation period.

As a student of Thomas Murner of long years, I am inclined to think that Goedeke is much more nearly right, when he remarks in the introduction to Murner's Narrenbeschwörung that whatever we may think of Murner as a scholar of the Hebrew language, we must certainly give him credit for his courage of openly confessing his interest in Jewish literature in such a critical period. That he actually met a need is proved by the fact that of Murner's translation of the Jewish prayers the first edition was soon exhausted so that a second printing became necessary.

However unimportant these translations from the Hebrew may appear to us nowadays, they certainly created quite a sensation amongst Murner's contemporaries. For they formed a supplement to the famous Memorandum of Reuchlin about the books of the Jews and a refutation of Pfefferkorn's hate inspired Osterbuch, in which he strongly had advocated that all books of the Hebrews should be destroyed. To this no doubt came local interests. In Frankfort was one of the richest and most numerous Jewish congregations. Here Pfefferkorn had actually begun the confiscation of the Hebrew books to which he was authorized by a special order of the emperor. On that account there was in Frankfort a lively interest in this controversy.

Murner's translation must have been very welcome indeed to the general public and those not versed in the He-
brew language. The service that Murner rendered then was that he made accessible to the general public some of these writings about which the controversy centered. This popularizing appeared to his contemporaries who did not weigh every word on the gold scale, as a real service.

To the educated Jews he did not render a great service because his translation lacked exactness, and besides he had made in the introduction the remark that these prayers were really meant only for Palestine and that to speak them outside of the Promised Land was against the command of God.

Murner was by no means a Hebrewophile. In his Baden-fahrt he ridicules the conception of the Israelites, who claim that the picked stear (shore harbor) and the Leviathan were saved as favorite dishes for the Pious Ones in Paradise.

In his translation from the Hebrew Murner wished to act as translator only, not as a spokesman of the Jews nor as their prosecutor. He satisfied the curiosity of the multitude in this controversy but not the demands of the Hebrew scholars. It would have been much safer for him to have kept quiet in this affair, but Murner was a fearless man who had the courage of his convictions.