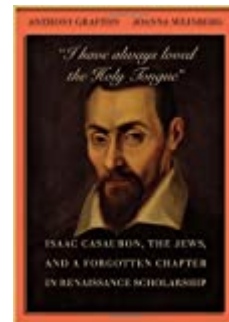




**Anthony Grafton, Joanna Weinberg.** *"I have always loved the Holy Tongue": Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. x + 380 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04840-9.



**Reviewed by** Deborah Goodwin (Gustavus Adolphus College)

**Published on** H-Judaic (April, 2012)

**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

## Isaac Casaubon's Christian Hebraism: From Margin to Center

This volume derives from the authors' jointly presented Jackson Lectures, sponsored by Harvard University's Department of Classics in 2008. The book bears felicitous traces of its origins in the spoken word. Joanna Weinberg and Anthony Grafton sustain a series of complex arguments, bolstered by meticulous detail and generous illustrations, with exceptional clarity and wit. Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614) was renowned as a classicist or philologist, and sometime controversialist for the cause of Reformed Protestantism. Grafton and Weinberg's goal is to demonstrate that Casaubon was a "serious student of Jews and Judaism" (p. 4), a role heretofore unacknowledged. The authors achieve something larger: the reframing of convenient but limiting categories ("classicist," "Hebraist") to capture the unity of Casaubon's scholarly and religious life. His great nineteenth-century biographer, Mark Pattison, focused on Casaubon's achievements as a humanist and classical scholar, while deriding his study of patristics (and ignoring his study of Hebrew altogether). Weinberg and Grafton by contrast undertake to "study a classical

scholar historically ... [a study that] by its nature [is] not easy to link with larger contexts, social, cultural, and religious, in which he lived and worked" (p. 9). They bring us the whole man in a series of involving, chapter-long "case studies" (p. 20; the term doesn't do justice to the richness of argumentation and evidence presented in each chapter).

The whole Casaubon was "an ascetic Christian humanist who tried to combine his scholarly and Christian lives" (p. 102). The authors demonstrate the centrality of the study of Hebrew language, the Hebrew Bible, and rabbinic literature to the whole of his scholarly endeavor. Their principal resources are Casaubon's heavily, often cryptically, annotated collection of books (many now in the British Library), his notebooks, letters, and diary. From elliptical and allusive references, they masterfully reconstruct the "webs of thought" by which Casaubon managed masses of data, deployed in the service of refuting the "Catholic culture of erudition" (p. 169) in his final work, *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI ad Baronii annales* (hereafter, *Ex-*

*ercitationes*). Marshaling the most telling examples from the many spheres of his work, each case study illuminates the through-line of Casaubon's Hebraism. Chapter 1, "Rabbi Isaac Casaubon," illustrates the interaction of Casaubon's widely acknowledged skills in classical philology and his heretofore unacknowledged Hebraism by describing his efforts to unveil pious frauds, one Greek, one Hebrew. The first involved the Hermetic Corpus, Greek texts that purported to be translations of Egyptian hieroglyphics. This ostensibly pagan testimony to later Christian claims, on the order of the Sibylline oracles, was widely accepted by Catholics and Protestants as an authentic proto-Christian work. Casaubon argued conclusively, from linguistic evidence, that the work was a fraud. Having examined marginalia in Casaubon's working copies of relevant texts, and letters exchanged with fellow humanist Joseph Scaliger, Weinberg and Grafton found that around the same time (1601-3) Casaubon punctured the assertions of an earlier Christian Hebraist, Pietro Galatino, who claimed to find prophecies of the coming of Jesus in the writings of certain "ancient" rabbis: "The method that Casaubon used to demolish the [rabbinic] quotations in Galatino was the same one he used in the case of Hermes, in the same period" (p. 41). Establishing this claim is crucial to their overarching thesis that Casaubon approached the study of Hebrew as well as biblical and post-biblical Jewish literature with the same tools and dispositions that he applied to classical languages and literatures. Indeed, as they contend, Hebrew *was* a classical language for Casaubon. The chapter also sets the pattern for the whole work, setting forth one of its most exemplary features: the authors' reproduction of Casaubon's notes and queries that larded his books, and from which they re-weave the fabric of his investigations.

In the second chapter, "How Casaubon Read Hebrew Texts," the authors advance further evidence from material culture—diary, notebooks, letters—and offer a detailed review of Casaubon's extraordinary library. Unlike other Hebraists, Casaubon had little interest in Kabbalah and little patience for non-narrative exegetical approaches such as gematria. His reading generated little sympathy for Jews *qua* Jews: he consulted Jewish commentaries on scripture to fill out his "very Christian reading" of the Old Testament text (p. 103). Casaubon also honed his skills at reading biblical and rabbinical Hebrew, as did other Protestants, with an eye to debunking Catholic ecclesiology that rested on claims of continuity between the life and times of Jesus and the Catholic Church polity. He regarded the study of Hebrew to be

propagandistic to learning Arabic, and dreamed of unlocking a realm of advanced scholarship inaccessible to most Westerners. In common with other Christian Hebraists, then, Casaubon took a largely instrumental view of Hebrew study. Weinberg and Grafton endeavor to paint him as a relatively irenic figure vis-à-vis Judaism, but acknowledge that the evidence on this score is mixed. They contrast his attitude with that of Johan Buxtorf in their third chapter, "Wider Horizons in Hebraic Studies," which discusses the rise of "ethnographers" of early modern Jewish life, both Christian and Jewish. Casaubon recognized that Buxtorf's goal in his *Juden Schul* was the condemnation of rabbinic Judaism (on the grounds, rehearsed by Christians since late antiquity, that the Jews had ceased to be faithful to the Torah, studied only Talmud, and departed from their ordained role in the unfolding of salvation history). Buxtorf's ethnography features harsh, stereotypical condemnations of Jews; Weinberg and Grafton note that Casaubon neither condemns nor approves Buxtorf's prejudices, and endeavor to show in chapter 5, "The Teller and the Tale," that Casaubon's "gifts for scholarly friendship" extended to include Jews. Notwithstanding these contacts, and in ways similar to other Hebraists, Casaubon's attitudes toward Judaism remained ineluctably ambivalent.

Chapter by chapter, these "cases" ably illuminate the contributions of Hebrew study to a wide range of Casaubon's interests, from personal piety to studies typically docketed under the heading of classical philology. But for Casaubon as for these authors, his last work stands as the summative interweaving of his scholarly capacities and religious convictions: the *Exercitationes*, framed as a decisive refutation of Cardinal Cesare Baronio's *Annales ecclesiastici*. Baronio's massive work defended the Catholic Reform's ecclesiology, claiming that the contemporary church was the true successor of, and in direct continuity with, the church founded by Jesus Christ. By contrast, Casaubon and other Protestants insisted on the essential "otherness" of Jesus's religious milieu within Second Temple Judaism. To determine which of Jesus's teachings were continuous or discontinuous with his Jewishness, Casaubon insisted that scholars be capable of "surveying the Jewish beliefs and institutions that he had known and worked with" (p. 189), which required significant expertise in rabbinics, not merely a mastery of Josephus or Philo Judaeus. He inveighed against the grand outlines of Baronio's claims, while undermining at every turn the Italian cardinal's scholarly competence. Casaubon's principal weapon in this campaign was his knowledge of Jewish tradition and Hebrew

philology, deployed to prove that Baronio failed to handle Jewish sources with convincing insight or rigor. While the whole of Grafton and Weinberg's book is an intellectual tour de force, never failing to be less than engaging or erudite, their discussion of Casaubon's refutation of Baronio (in view throughout the text, but detailed in chapter 4) is perhaps its most satisfying aspect. The authors locate Casaubon's specialist studies in their larger, living context, relating his classical, Hebraist, and patristic scholarship to his Huguenot piety, and to his duties as polemicist-on-call to Protestant rulers Henry of Navarre and James I. They liberate Casaubon from easy categorization, and in the process help us to reimagine (and in some ways, to repopulate) the landscape of early modern humanism. Grafton and Weinberg also bring to life a scholar whose sensitivity to the otherness of the past

often overrode his investment in polemic.

As previously noted, this volume is copiously illustrated with evocative examples of Casaubon's annotated working texts, his letters, and extracts from notebooks, highlighting again the author's masterful reconstruction of the *realia* of scholarly life. Grafton and Weinberg's text is accompanied by two valuable appendices, one that discusses his researches into the history, development, and reliability of the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible; the other, by Alastair Hamilton, details Casaubon's efforts to acquire competence in Arabic and his correspondence with similarly inclined scholars. Finally, in an era when even academic publishers pay scant attention to copyediting, it is a distinct pleasure to read a book so carefully prepared for the press.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Deborah Goodwin. Review of Grafton, Anthony; Weinberg, Joanna, *"I have always loved the Holy Tongue": Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. April, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33109>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.