‘Rabbinising’ in sixteenth-century polemics

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Abstract • ‘Rabbi’ is the title of Jewish scholars and teachers. Yet, in the sixteenth century, the word was sometimes employed in Christian discourse, when Christian scholars referred to their Christian peers as rabbis. How could non-Jews be called rabbis? This article explores the meaning of the term ‘rabbi’ in sixteenth-century intra-Christian polemics and discourse. It shows how the image of the ‘rabbi’, a figure of (negative) intellectual authority, penetrated the speech of Christian intellectuals and polemicists. It suggests that this ‘rabbinic’ figure was not necessarily Jewish. Although ‘rabbi’ is a Jewish term – the incarnation of Jewish intellectual life – the term also denotes Jesus as well as his opponents, the Pharisees. Thus, polemical ‘rabbinising’ of Christian scholars potentially involved very different images of scholarly authority.

Introduction

Rabbis and doctors held comparable positions within sixteenth-century society. Both were types of scholars who had to go through long, prescribed periods of education before formally achieving their titles, and subsequently their licences to teach, thereby gaining a position of authority in academic and scholarly questions, as well as the social and legal privileges reserved for qualified teachers. Yet, the titles ‘rabbi’ and ‘doctor’ were usually not interchangeable.[1] The differences between a rabbi and a doctor were substantial in terms not only of academic interest, but also of social duties, as rabbis also served as judges (Breuer 2004). That said – and precisely because historical research has often respected the institutional segregation of the (Christian) academy and the (Ashkenazi) *yeshiva*[2] – it is surprising to encounter several Christian ‘rabbis’ and multiple and quite ingenious employments of the title/noun ‘rabbi’ with reference to non-Jewish figures in the sixteenth century. For instance, more than once Erasmus maliciously referred to academic theologians as rabbis; the Hebraist Kaspar Amman called Thomas Murner a ‘most learned rabbi’; the theologian Johannes Eck labelled the erudite Hebraist Sebastian Münster ‘rabbi’, and Eck was not alone in seeing Münster as a rabbi; the lay

1 The institution of Ashkenazi (and Italian) rabbinic ordination was most probably modelled on the academic ordination of doctors. In fact, in sixteenth-century Poland, the new centre of Ashkenazi Jewry, rabbis often figured as doctors in official documents, and the yeshiva was called *studium generale*.

2 See, however, the evident analogy between the titles ‘doctor’ and ‘morenu’ in Italy in Bonfil 1979.

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pamphleteer Haug Marschalck approvingly declared Martin Luther to be a 'Christian rabbi'; Luther himself suggested that Thomas Müntzer and Andreas Karlstadt as well as Johann Agricola and Andreas Osiander wished to be rabbis; indeed Osiander was labelled a rabbi in a few polemical texts of the period (all these examples are discussed below).

Naturally, none of these Christian scholars were rabbis in the conventional sense, that is, Jewish scholars; none of them would have called themselves 'rabbi', and none of them were usually addressed as 'rabbi'. Why, then, did Christian scholars involved in polemics with their peers employ the term? What was actually gained by 'rabbinising' an opponent? The aim of this article is to explore the uses of the word 'rabbi' in the context of intra-Christian polemics and to suggest the ways in which the 'rabbi' was introduced and made significant for Christians.

Since conventionally 'rabbi' was not simply a synonym of 'teacher', 'master' or 'doctor', calling someone 'rabbi' was a polemical device. Sixteenth-century religious and scholarly polemic was often aggressive, satirical and inflammatory. Participants in textual disputes employed names and labels that implicated their opponents in all sort of religious, academic and confessional crimes.[3] 'Rabbinising' the other party to a dispute was a polemical device that tainted one's opponent with the illegitimacy of being a rabbi or appearing rabbinic. In that sense, rabbinising was a sub-category of a well-proven rhetorical device, namely judaising. By 'judaising' is essentially meant the accusation of Jewish influence (Newman 1925: 4). When persons, movements or ideologies were labelled 'judaisers' or 'judaising', their opponents were linking them to something Jewish, often those aspects that differentiated Jews from Christians, such as their 'legalism' and 'literalism'. The term emerged in the early Church and was still in vogue in the sixteenth century. But, as Róbert Dán has emphasised, the term had an undefined semantic content, being used as a polemical device in enormously different historical as well as religious and confessional contexts (Dán 1982: 25). Nonetheless, two elements can be said about judaising. One is that participants in disputes used the term to put their opponents in the uncomfortable position of being Jewish and thereby non-Christian, and perhaps even anti-Christian. Second, as Louis Newman has also pointed out, although a polemical device, it often indicated a real affinity between the persons and/or ideas that were being attacked and criticised and Jewish modes of thought and practices (Newman 1925: especially 1–24).

Accusing others of an inappropriate use of Jewish sources, or simply of Jewishness, was very common in the period following the Protestant Reformation. It seems that any reform movement could be accused of judaising, and that any member of any confession could point the finger at any other confession. As Dán, Jerome Friedman and later Achim Detmers have all shown, there is hardly any logic in the use of the term (Dán 1982: 28–9; Friedman 1983: 182–5; Detmers 2001: 231). Among the many examples of judaising in the historiography of the subject, a few cases of rabbinising are mentioned. The use of the term 'rabbi' in the polemical literature of the period has nevertheless been left unexplored.

I suggest that, although rabbinising in Christian discourse in the sixteenth century could simply be a variation of the practice of judaising, it had the potential to connote other

3 For a good introduction to the nature of early modern polemic, see Suerbaum *et al.* 2015: Introduction.

ideas and suggest other images. Potentially, the label 'rabbi' and its derivatives implied more than Jewishness, possibly something non-Jewish. First, it brought into polemical debates the figure of the Jewish scholar: it suggested a position of intellectual authority. This authority was often deemed misguided, despite which it inserted images of scholarship and knowledge into the discourse. Second, although the label 'rabbi' was usually pejorative – polemicists employed it to criticise Jewish influence – potentially it could amount to praise, and moreover, rather than being positive or negative, the title could be used ironically or satirically. Last, whereas the word 'rabbi' denoted something Jewish, it did not do so exclusively. Although the term had its provenance in post-biblical Jewish society and, in both everyday speech and academic discourse, it denoted a Jewish scholar, the earliest textual record of the word is in the New Testament, where Jesus is addressed as 'rabbi'.

In sixteenth-century Jewish communities, the Hebrew רבי (rabbi, lit. 'my *rav*') was an honorific address to Jewish teachers, a title (or part of a title) of ordained scholars, a prefix regularly added to the name of exegetes, Talmudists and other learned men. More generally, it was a way of marking off the class of Jewish intellectuals. During the second half of the fourteenth century, Ashkenazi scholars started ordaining their students, making rabbinic authority – that is, the authority to teach and to decide in questions concerning Halacha – a formal affair. An ordained rabbi was called *morenu* (our teacher).

At the same time, 'rabbi' was a title of Jesus, one of a few New Testament terms that portrayed Jesus as a teacher. In three of the Gospels, Jesus is addressed as 'rabbi', a term implying at that time a teacher, expert or religious leader, and not an ordained teacher with authority to interpret the law, that is, a

The entry 'rabbi' in a contemporary dictionary Giovanni Balbi, *Catholicon*. Augsburg: Zainer, 1469. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

formal rabbi. Mark, Matthew, and especially John retained the original Aramaic/Hebrew address, transliterated into Greek, and put 'rabbi' or 'rabbouni' (a derivative of 'rabbi') in the mouth of Jesus's interlocutors. The term 'rabbi' was retained in the Vulgate. In his first translation of the New Testament, Martin Luther rendered the term as 'master', but in his later editions he retranslated most of the places that he had initially rendered as 'master' back into 'rabbi' (Hahn 1964: 75ff.; Hengel 1981: 43–4; Vermès 1973: 115ff.; Donaldson 1973; Riesner 1984: 246–76; Hezser 1997: 56–62).

Thus, 'rabbi' was a legitimate attribute of Jesus. Yet, readers of the New Testament also knew a particular biblical reference that shaped their understanding of the term, namely Jesus's admonition to his disciples that they should not be called 'rabbi' (Mt 23:8). Sixteenth-century readers, unaccustomed to biblical criticism and lacking a well-defined and well-trained historical consciousness, might have understood this as a statement not only about the futility of desiring a title, but also about the essence of being a rabbi.

Finally, 'rabbi' had a sort of standard lexical understanding. In some dictionaries and lexicons of the period, it was rendered as 'magister' and 'doctor'. Thus, 'rabbi' belonged to a category of terms in Latin and other languages that denoted a teacher (*Ortus vocabulorum* 1500; *Vocabularius Gemma gemmarum* 1512; Balbi 1520; Münster 1530).

The use of 'rabbi' in polemics between non-Jewish scholars had a semantic potential wider than its connotation of judaising. It could imply many images of the scholar: from Jesus the 'only teacher' (Mt 23:8) through an academic non-confessional doctor to the image of the Jewish scholar, whether historical or contemporary. In the following, I analyse and discuss the different effects and meanings of rabbinising in Christian polemical discourse in the sixteenth century. In other words, I ask what kind of mental space the label 'rabbi' may imply within the context of intra-Christian polemics.

Rabbis and masters

A place to begin exploring the use of the term 'rabbi' in polemics is the satire *Epistolae obscurorum virorum*, a collection of fictive letters addressed to Ortwin Gratius, dean of the Faculty of Theology at Köln, who was one of the chief enablers of Johann Pfefferkorn's campaign against Jewish books and against Johann Reuchlin, the defender of these books. The book was published anonymously in 1515–17 as an attack on the theological establishment (which supported the cause of Pfefferkorn) and in defence of Reuchlin and more generally the cause of humanism. In one of the letters (appearing first in the second edition of Part II), the fictional author stated that 'for every doctor of theology is a rabbi and a light of the world' ('quia omnis magister noster est rabi et lux mundi') (Stokes 1909: 282, 535).

In the letter, the author ridiculed theological 'rabbinism'. The letter reports that the theologians condemned Reuchlin's newly issued work on Kabbalah, *De arte cabalistica*. The book was found to be in contradiction with Thomas Aquinas and the Thomists, especially by claiming that the Son (Jesus) was made of the Father (God), thus confusing *generare* (to beget) with *facere* (to make). Reuchlin, it was said, paid no heed to the arguments, questions and sophisms of the Holy Doctor. The book, the theologians resolved, was therefore to be burned. And here followed the concluding remark: 'for every doctor of theology (*magister noster*) is a rabbi and a light of the world'. Clearly, 'rabbi' here was not meant as a synonym of 'doctor', 'master' or 'teacher', otherwise the sentence would have no meaning. Rather, it suggested the figure of the Jewish rabbi, either the biblical Pharisee, who desired to be called rabbi (Mt 23:7), or the contemporary rabbi, and perhaps a conflation of the two. What made doctors of theology metaphorical rabbis? The context of the letter points to the practice and style of the great scholastics, or more precisely the greatest doctor of the Church, Thomas Aquinas. Argumentation, questions, sophism, hair-splitting semantic distinctions – in their extreme form, these scholastic practices were mocked as rabbinic.

As Reinhard Paul Becker has shown, the theologians, the *viri obscuri*, were caricatured again and again in the *Epistolae* for their sheer ignorance: their scholarly methods were inept, they were lacking in grammatical training, their style of writing was clumsy and in bad taste, and they imposed their ignorance on others (Becker 1981: 109). The mocking of the mediocrity of the theologians is manifold, pinpointing ignorance of the term 'Kabbalah', lack of knowledge of languages, hair-splitting philosophising and much more (pp. 136–7). The *magistri nostri*,

then, were called rabbis and the light of the world because pharisaic/rabbinic authority was perceived as uncompromising even when unfounded – the doctors, indeed, wanted to burn Reuchlin's book, even though they could not understand it.

Seeing the academic theologians, the *magistri nostri*, as a type of rabbi also appealed to Erasmus. In his 'Letter to the Reader' in *Paraphrases on Matthew* (1522), Erasmus called some Christian theologians 'rabinos'. Advocating lay reading, or at least lay knowledge, of Scripture, Erasmus stated: 'I would rather hear some girls speaking about Christ than I would certain teachers [rabinos]'. Although 'rabinos' is rendered as 'teachers' in the modern English translation of the *Paraphrases*, Erasmus intentionally wrote 'rabinos' and not *doctores*, the Latin term for teachers that he used in the following sentence. 'Rabinos' associated the unnamed teachers with the scribes and Pharisees about whom Erasmus was speaking at the beginning of the 'Letter to the Reader'. For Erasmus, to teach as the rabbis taught was to teach without true understanding, to obscure Scripture rather than reveal it. The scribes and Pharisees were allegedly moved by ambition and greed. According to Erasmus, this was also the way of some Christian teachers whom he called rabbis (Erasmus 1706b: 'Letter to the Reader', **2^{v}, 120; Erasmus 2008: 9, 315 n. 14).

More specifically, the scholarship of the scholastics was thought to be rabbinic. In the prefatory letter to *Enchiridion* (the 1518 edition), Erasmus sharply criticised 'magni Rabini' (eminent rabbins) – the theologians – for their futile scholarship. He described the learning of the scholastics as 'thorny and impenetrable thickets of arguments – instances, formalities, quiddities, relativities' (Erasmus 1518: 6–7; Erasmus 1988: 9–10). The failure of academic theology, so to speak, turned it into rabbinic theology, which was false or futile to begin with.

The equation of academic theologians with rabbis seems to have been a commonplace, and Erasmus often used the term 'rabbi' to refer to scholastic theologians (Erasmus 2016: 282, l. 48; Poitiers 1523: AA4^{v}). Opponents of Erasmus read the equating of doctors with rabbis as a concrete criticism of the class of academic theologians and, what is more, as an intended defamation (Beda 1526: CCXXXVI; Erasmus 1531: XXXIIII). Erasmus's reaction to the criticism of the theological establishment was usually polite. He pointed out that he never meant to shame the entire class of doctors, only those particular theologians who deserved the criticism. Yet in one case, Erasmus also intensified his attack on the theologians, and when he did so the term he used consistently was neither 'doctors' nor 'masters', and not even 'magistri nostri', but 'rabbis'. In 1528, in a reply to a list of fallacious articles that had been composed by a convention of monks in Spain, Erasmus wrote:

> It is undeniably true that Christ forbade this [use of titles], and those who love to be called Rabbis are deservedly criticised even today; and what kind of Rabbis, sad to say! who glory and are puffed up with this title more proudly than the scribes and Pharisees of old! What haughty looks, what a chin, what jowls, what affectation we see in some of them! so that you can see the exalted Rabbi from afar off. What does this have to do with pious and honest Scholastic doctors? (Erasmus 1706a: 1090A; Erasmus 2019: 175)

Thus, the term 'doctor' was completely conflated with the term 'rabbi'. It is hard to say whether Erasmus imagined these 'rabbis' as the biblical scribes and Pharisees or

as contemporary rabbis, of whom Erasmus apparently knew very little.

Martin Luther and 'rabbi'

Having in mind Jesus's admonition to his disciples, Martin Luther too drew an analogy between 'rabbi' and theologian when, in his lectures on Psalms 1519–21, he ridiculed 'Magistri nostri Eximii' ('our outstanding teachers') as those who 'are saluted in the market place and are called rabbi' (Luther 1892: 263; Luther 1826: 413). The analogy was clearly a reference to the Pharisees' and theologians' weaknesses for honour and titles, rather than anything particularly Jewish.

Luther was inventive in his use and understanding of the term 'rabbi', which he applied both metaphorically and ironically. In 1521, during an intense controversy over the authority of the pope with the humanist and theologian Hieronymus Emser, Luther, who repeatedly accused his opponent of failing to understand Scripture or in fact of falsifying its meaning, declared:

> Not only are we supposed to allow you to degrade our Lord [by preferring human interpretation to plain Bible texts], but we, together with you and the Jews, should say to him, 'Hail, rabbi of the Jews' and hold this terrible mockery to be the highest honor to God. Woe to you, Antichrist, and to all your apostles and clerics! (Luther 1897: 636; Grimm 1970: 161)

Although the controversy was conducted in German, the words 'rabbi of the Jews' were written in Latin: 'Ave Rabi Judeorum'. In the original publication, no biblical reference was given, but the New Testament setting underlying Luther's hypothetical and ironic address to Jesus is easily grasped. Jesus's degradation and mockery, expressed in his being greeted as 'rabbi of the Jews', is reminiscent of the scene described in Matthew 27:27–9, in which Roman soldiers stripped Jesus of his clothes and dressed him in a scarlet robe. They then put a crown of thorns on his head and, bowing and kneeling, mocked him, saying 'Hail, King of the Jews!' The difference is that in the New Testament narrative, Roman soldiers called Jesus 'rex Judaeorum', while in Luther's polemics, the Jews, together with Emser, called Jesus 'Rabi Judaeorum'.

That the Roman authorities accused Jesus of striving to be king of the Jews is reported by all four Evangelists (Mk 15:26, Lk 23:38, Mt 27:37, Jn 19:19), but nowhere in the New Testament is Christ referred to as 'rabbi of the Jews'. By substituting 'rabbi' for 'rex', Luther transposed the degradation and mockery of Christ from the political context to the religious and scholarly. If the Romans mocked Jesus by treating him as if he were a king – although he had only declared a heavenly kingdom and not an earthly one – in Luther's analogy, the Jews (and Emser) mocked Christ by treating him as if he were their greatest rabbi, although according to Luther (we must assume), Jesus was no rabbi. Or rather, there was no honour in calling Christ 'rabbi', since that would establish his authority as similar to rabbinic authority.

It is not clear how Luther could understand Emser's rather traditional position on the question of the authority of the pope – a position that found support for the authority of the bishop of Rome as a vicar of Christ in tradition and in an allegorical reading of scriptural texts – as equivalent to viewing Jesus as a type of rabbi. It seems that, for Luther, the fact that Emser endorsed custom (the pope as vicar of Christ) when it directly contradicted the plain text of Scripture was reminiscent of the Jewish rabbis' reading of Scripture, which established custom and practice while evidently contradicting (from a

Christian perspective) the literal meaning of the Bible. Since in Luther's view Emser interpreted Scripture arbitrarily, Emser's authority as interpreter, and thus the authority of the pope, which Emser was trying to defend, and hence the authority of Christ, for whom the pope was a vicar on earth, all seemed somehow rabbinic, that is, based on human hermeneutics and not on God's Word.

'Rabbi' seems to summarise a fundamental misconception of the actual nature of Jesus, who was an authority in his own right, not merely a new rabbi; the Word made flesh, not the interpreter of the Word. In a way, Luther was adopting the narrative voice of the evangelist Matthew, who – intentionally, it seems – reserved 'rabbi' to address Jesus only when narrating one particular person's speech, namely Judas's, who alone called Jesus 'rabbi' (26:25, 49). Others called Jesus 'master' or 'lord'. True, in his 1522 New Testament, Luther translated Judas's address, 'rabbi', as 'master'; consequently, the nuances of voice in addressing Jesus vanished.[4] However, Luther must have known what the Glossa Ordinaria on Matthew 26:25 emphasised: they (the true disciples) called him 'Lord'; he (Judas) called him 'rabbi'. In Luther's arguments, rabbinising Jesus was a great misconception, a rejection of Jesus's self-generated authority. It was typified by Judas's dishonest approach to Jesus, as well as by Emser's misreading of Scripture.

In later years, Luther refined his understanding and employment of the word 'rabbi'. In 1538, in a long deliberation on the term 'rabbi' in a sermon on Matthew 23, Luther suggested that 'rabbi' meant 'a bishop, pastor. Rabbis [*Rabini*] were such preachers, as the Jews called their theologians [*theologos*] rabbis [*rabinos*], doctors, teachers' (Luther 1912: 448). Rather than defining or delimiting the meaning of the word, Luther listed its possible synonyms. For the actual meaning of the injunction 'you shall not be called rabbi' (Mt 23:8), Luther's argument was that plurality in interpreting and communicating the Gospel was an infringement on the prerogative of Christ. All Christian preachers should speak the same language; they should speak for the only rabbi, Christ. There should be, Luther stated further, one Word, one Christ, one baptism, and one God, yet 'die Rabinischen' did not follow this precept. The 'Rabinischen' were not identical with the rabbis, neither biblical nor contemporary, but were rather a type of preachers who followed their own authority. They were exemplified in the figure of the Dominican and Franciscan friars, and in actuality in the reformers Thomas Müntzer and Andreas Karlstadt, who put themselves above Scripture, 'for they wanted to be rabbis' (Luther 1912: 450). In *Table Talks* from the same year, Luther also called the Nürnberg reformer Andreas Osiander and Luther's former associate from Wittenberg, Johann Agricola, rabbis, and complained that nowadays no scholars would listen to, respect or follow other scholars. Everyone wanted to be a rabbi (Luther 1914: 694).

Christians, Hebrew and the title 'rabbi'

In 1522, the Hebraist Kasper Amman composed a reply (unpublished) to the Franciscan Humanist Thomas Murner's attack (*Von dem babstenthum*, 1520) on Martin Luther's criticism of the authority of the pope. Murner based his defence of the pope's supreme position within the Church on a reading of Jesus's promise to Peter (Mt 16:18): 'thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church'

4 In later editions of the New Testament, Luther rendered Judas's address to Jesus as 'rabbi'. See variations in Luther's translation in Luther 1929. On Luther and 'rabbi', see Shamir (forthcoming) 2022.

('tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram ædificabo Ecclesiam meam'). Whatever Amman thought about the authority of the pope, he showed little appreciation of Murner's reading of Scripture. Murner read the verse in Matthew as if Christ spoke Latin, which was a grave mistake, since naturally, according to Amman, Christ spoke Hebrew, a fact that rendered Murner's interpretation invalid. Amman criticised Murner's understanding of Hebrew, calling him 'most learned rabbi of the sacred language' ('sanctae linguae rabi doctissimum') (Clemens 1907: 170). Clearly not meant as praise, in depicting Murner as a rabbi Amman was ridiculing him. However, Murner's failure was not that he was a rabbi – on the contrary, Murner's infelicitous interpretation was a result of his not being a true rabbi: his command of Hebrew was simply not good enough (Liebenau 1913: 74–8). In other words, Amman was being ironic. When Amman depicted Murner as a most learned rabbi of Hebrew, he did not mean that his scholarly standards were as low as a rabbi's, but rather that Murner assumed he was a true learned rabbi, even though he was not.

Amman was also aware of the 'appropriate' use of 'rabbi', at least in his private correspondence. In 1520, at the end of a letter in Hebrew, Amman addressed the famous Hebraist Johann Reuchlin as כמ"ר ואב לי יוחנן רוחלין (KMR ve'av li Yohanan Rohlin; the honourable, my teacher, rabbi, like a father to me, Johann Reuchlin) (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. hebr. 426, 203^{v}; Dall'Asta and Dörner 2013: 354; Dunkelgrün 2016: 225). A few years earlier, in 1515, Amman had attached a short note to some manuscripts that he sent to Reuchlin, and by the end of the note he was addressing Reuchlin as רב הגדול (rav ha'gadol), that is, the great rabbi (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. hebr. 426, 202^{v}; Zimmer 1982: 385–6; Dall'Asta 2006: 354). This particular address was usually reserved for the foremost Jewish rabbinic authorities. For Amman, then, Reuchlin might indeed have been a kind of great rabbi. As one enjoying the reputation of being the founder of Hebrew studies in Germany, Reuchlin was indeed the great dean of (Christian) Hebrew studies, and, in terms of his knowledge of Hebrew, he enjoyed an authority similar to that of a great rabbi. The timing of the letter probably had something to do with the unusual title. Amman mentioned in the letter the controversy between the humanists and the Dominicans (the famous Reuchlin affair), which originated in an attempt to confiscate the Jews' post-biblical books. Reuchlin played a role in the defence of the books – according to his own account, he saved them from being burned – and gained a name for himself as a defender of Jewish books. In the context of the assault on Jewish literature, and in light of Reuchlin's positive utterances about Jewish literature (and the Jews!), he might have been regarded metaphorically as a great Jewish rabbi (Shamir 2011; Price 2011: Ch. 6; Posset 2015: Ch. 7).

Addressing each other by Jewish scholarly titles in Hebrew was a convention among the Christian Hebraists of the time, who aspired to master the art of letter-writing in Hebrew (examples in Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. hebr. 426, 190ff.). For some of these scholars, the rabbi, or what they imagined as the Jewish rabbi, was a model for scholarship, although not for the understanding of true doctrine. For their aspirations to learn Hebrew and learn from the Jews, perhaps even to emulate Jewish scholarly conventions, not a few of them were accused of judaising, and more precisely of rabbinising. That was the case for Johann Böschenstein, who was one of the leading propagators of Hebrew among Christian audiences in the first half of the sixteenth century. In 1523, in an open letter

to his friend Andreas Osiander, Böschenstein complained that a certain clergyman had been saying about him that he was a baptised Jew and that his father was an erudite Jewish rabbi ('ain hochgelerter Raby undern iuden') (Böschenstein 1523: AII^{r}). He therefore stated that he was from Esslingen, that his father was of an ancient lineage from the town of Stayn (Stein am Rhein, Switzerland), and that some members of the Böschenstein family were still living there. His parents and his schoolteachers, he assured the reader, had given him a solid Christian education, and the town councils of Esslingen as well as Stayn would be able to attest to the fact (*ibid.* AII^{r}, AV^{r}).

Böschenstein's invented rabbinic ancestry was more than just the usual accusation of judaising: it rested on a broadly accepted assumption that Böschenstein was of Jewish origins. Rabbinising Böschenstein as having rabbinic ancestry was also related to the fact that Böschenstein's mastery of Hebrew was rather exceptional at that time. Although he was not a great scholar, and although his publications in the field of Hebrew studies were of limited value, he was a leading instructor of Hebrew with many famous students (Bauch 1904; Werner 1954; Frakes 2007: 11–17; Dörner 2008). His mastery of Hebrew, and even more his socialising with Jews, provoked both scorn and hatred. Böschenstein complained that he was hated by both Christians and Jews, the latter for knowing their language, the former for having conversations with Jews (Böschenstein 1514: Prefatory letter). And yet the rumour that he was of a rabbinic family stemmed from a polemic about the use of images by Christians. Böschenstein was accused by his opponent of pursuing a typically Jewish form of argumentation (Böschenstein 1523: AIII^{r}).

Thus, several layers of Jewish influence and Jewish scholarship combined in labelling Böschenstein 'rabbi junior', an accusation that he rejected with dignity. Although he emphatically rebutted the charge that he was of Jewish descent, he did so reluctantly. Even if being a Jew were a matter of greater condemnation before God, he explained, he knew that God did not judge a person by his appearance, but rather that God accepted anyone who feared him and was justified by him, of whatever descent and whatever nation he was. The only reason for Böschenstein to openly reject the accusation that he was a baptised Jew was in order to save his children from suffering the fate – the unjust fate, he emphasised – of the Jews in being hated and expelled everywhere (Böschenstein 1523: AII^{v}).

The timing of the public denunciation of his alleged Jewish descent was probably also influenced by the news that his friend and former student, the Nürnberg reformer Andreas Osiander, was facing the same charges. In early 1523, at the Reichstag in Nürnberg, a papal nuncio accused Osiander of being a baptised Jew, and Osiander had to appear before a committee of the Reichstag, where he was questioned (Müller 1975: 68; Friedman 1983: 209). More interesting in the present context is that Osiander too was labelled 'rabbi'. As mentioned above, Martin Luther offered the observation that Osiander wished to be a rabbi. Wanting to be a rabbi was analogous to wishing 'to be called rabbi' (Mt 23:7), where the import of the insinuation relates to the question of authority rather than Jewish influence. More to the point is the title accorded to Osiander in 1525 by the polemicist Kaspar Schatzgeyer (Schatzger), who called Osiander 'der köstlich habraisch Rabi' (the 'precious' Hebrew rabbi) (Schatzgeyer 1525a: KII^{r}). Being a Hebraist and having good contacts with local Jews (and later becoming renowned and infamous for his rejection of the blood libel),

rabbinising Osiander implied Jewish influence over Osiander's position.

However, following the polemic between Schatzgeyer and Osiander, one finds a more concrete reason for the unusual label 'der köstlich habraisch Rabi.' In late 1524, as part of the on-going reformation of the Church in Nürnberg, the town's provosts issued a defence of the establishment of a reformed mass (*Grundt vnnd vrsach auss der heiligen schrifft*). The publication represented the opinion of the clergy in general, though the core of the defence was authored by Osiander. Soon afterwards, Schatzgeyer published a not overtly polemical tractate concerning the mass, in which he pursued many arguments for considering the mass as a form of sacrifice. In the book, Schatzgeyer drew an analogy between the Old Testament priest Melchizedek and Jesus. Schatzgeyer saw in Melchizedek's act of bringing out bread and wine to his meeting with Abraham (Gen. 14:18) an act of sacrifice and thereby a prefiguration of Christ, who sacrificed himself in the form of bread (body) and wine (blood) (Schatzgeyer 1525b: K^{r}).

Already in the same year, Osiander took up the subject and replied to Schatzgeyer's arguments in a strongly polemical pamphlet. For Osiander, the analogy between Melchizedek and Jesus was incorrect. Schatzgeyer's efforts to identify cases of sacrifice in the Old Testament seemed to him altogether based on a misreading of texts that had been inappropriately translated from Hebrew into Latin. He reproached Schatzgeyer for taking Isaiah 53:7 (earlier in Schatzgeyer's tractate) as indicating sacrifice when in fact no such thing is indicated in the Hebrew original (Osiander 1525: FII^{r}).

Schatzgeyer rapidly replied to these accusations. In a new pamphlet, he embarked on a long discourse about who 'owned' the Bible and insisted on the primacy of the accepted text (Vulgate) over the Hebrew text (Schatzgeyer 1525a: KII^{r} ff; Iserloh and Fabisch 1984: 524–9). At the opening of this discourse, Schatzgeyer called Osiander 'der köstlich habraisch Rabi'. No doubt ironic, this title seems somehow appropriate. First, this was because in the debate about the text of the Bible, Osiander took sides with those who had faith in the Hebrew text even when it contradicted the Church's tradition and conventional exegesis. Indeed, in 1522, Osiander edited a new version of the Latin Bible, where he sought to revise the text of the Vulgate in accordance with the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint. A second reason for the appropriateness of the Schatzgeyer's title was that it contradicted one that Osiander has used in his pamphlet. He called Schatzger one of the 'tewren Ritter vnd kriegssmenner' ('dear/esteemed knights and soldiers'), referring to the 'kriegssmenner' and false prophets who were on the side of Satan (Osiander 1525: AIII^{r}).[5]

Rabbi Luther and Rabbi Münster

As the numerous ways of using 'rabbi' described above demonstrate, 'rabbi' was usually meant pejoratively or was suggestive of doubtful qualities. In one instance, this was not the case. In 1523, Haug Marschalck, a lay pamphleteer, set out to respond to the defamatory associations that Luther's opponents had linked to the name 'Luther' (Russell 1986: 127–47; Chrisman 1992). In his brief pamphlet, *Von dem weyt erschollen Namen Luther* ('On the Widely Resounding Name of Luther'), Marschalck suggested

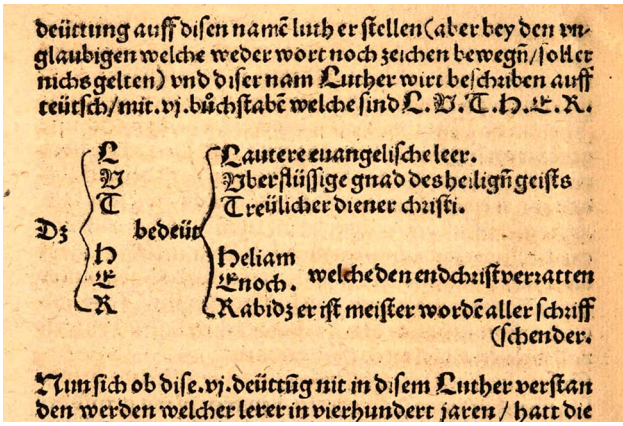
5 Also later in his life Osiander coped with the label 'rabbi': see Wengert 2012: 62, 257, 259, 263, 291, 363. On the controversy with Schatzgeyer, see Seebass 1967: 217–20; Müller 1975: 472–9.

an interpretation of the name Luther as an acronym:

L Lautere evangelische leer (Pure Evangelical teaching)
U Uberflüssige [übermässige] gnad des heiligen geists (Abundant grace of the Holy Spirit)
T Treülicher diener Christi (Loyal servant of Christ)
H Heliam (Elijah)
E Enoch … welche den endchrist [Antichrist] verratten (Enoch, who exposed the Antichrist)
R Rabi, daz er ist meister worden aller [über alle] schrifft schender (Rabbi, for he has become master over all defilers of Scripture)
(Marschalck 1983: 565; Lund 2002: 117; Scribner 1981: 21; Chrisman 1992: 133 n. 16).

Thus, Luther was a proclaimer of the true teaching, a vessel of grace and a true servant of Christ. He was an embodiment of the Old Testament figures, the prophet Elijah and Enoch, who were both taken up into heaven and, it was believed, would reappear one day (Preuss 1933: 49–54). Lastly, and surprisingly and seemingly without precedent, Luther was claimed to be a rabbi.

Although the acronym alludes to Luther's divine, prophetic and apocalyptic nature – the association with Elijah was especially powerful and well attested in the period – Marschalck was more interested in Luther as teacher, that is, with the L and, even more so, with the R, that is, Luther as rabbi. Marschalck reminded his readers that Luther had recently defended his position before princes and lords (in the Diet of Worms in April 1521). Armed with Scripture, as a 'Christian rabbi' ('wie ainem christenlichen rabi'), Luther was not afraid to disclose the


deüttung auff diſen namē luth er ſtellen (aber bey den vnglaubigen welche weder wort noch zeichen bewegē/ſollen nichs gelten) vnd diſer nam Luther wirt beſchriben auff teütſch/mit. vj. büchſtabē welche ſind L. V. T. H. E. R.

Dz L V T H E R bedeüt
Lautere euangeliſche leer.
Vberflüſſige gnad des heiligē geiſts
Treülicher diener chriſti.
Heliam
Enoch. welche den endchriſt verratten
Rabi dz er iſt meiſter wordē aller ſchrifft ſchender.

Nun ſich ob diſe. vj. deüttūg nit in diſem Luther verſtanden werden welcher lerer in vierhundert jaren / hatt die

The acronym LUTHER, where R stands for 'rabbi' Haug Marschalck, *Von dem weyt erschollen Namen Luther*. Strasbourg, 1523. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek.

truth to the powerful. All those who had previously dared challenge the Antichrist were destroyed, and 'only our Luther was made rabbi' ('Allein unser Luther ist rabi worden'). With the Word of God, 'he beat, revealed and killed the Antichrist' (Marschalck 1983: 565). The depiction of Luther as rabbi, armed with Scripture alone, battling pope and emperor (the Antichrist) unaided, was the final and concluding image in this short pamphlet.

The modern editors of the pamphlet note that, in the sentence 'Allein unser Luther ist rabi worden', 'rabbi' meant 'Herr'. Luther was a *Herr* (master) over the Antichrist. This is in accordance with Marschalck's interpretation of 'Luther' as an acronym, wherein Luther as rabbi was 'meister' over all defilers of Scripture. Thus, 'rabbi' was not a special title or a characteristic, but rather an expression of superiority over something or someone else. 'Rabbi' signalled a hierarchical relationship (Marschalck 1983: 565 n. h).

In the pamphlet, the term 'rabbi' is closely linked with marshalling a specific interpretation of a text: Luther was a master over 'desecrators of Scripture'; he argued his cause 'armed with Scripture', and lastly, he

subdued the Antichrist with the Word of God (Marschalck 1983: 565). Luther, then, was a master of text, but not a regular doctor. It was here that the title 'rabbi' became useful, as it assisted Marschalck in a rhetorical move that distanced Luther as a scholar from traditional academic theologians without risking the loss of his authority as a teacher. 'Rabbi', in the discourse of *Von dem weyt erschollen Namen Luther*, conveyed a whole range of qualities that distanced Luther from rival intellectuals and theologians. It made him a preacher, teacher, scholar and master, an associate of Christ, and a bringer of the Gospel. Apparently, no other word was as convenient as 'rabbi' for capturing this range of meanings.[6]

Interestingly, when Marschalck labelled Luther 'rabbi', he did not do it on account of Luther's knowledge of Hebrew. Often, however, as already shown above, 'rabbinising' followed Hebraism. In 1538, the Ingolstadt theologian (and student of Hebrew) Johann Eck, addressing himself to a Jewish readership, designated Sebastian Münster, a leading Hebraist, as a rabbi of the Jews ('your rabbi') (Eck 1538: L 6b; Geiger 1870: 77 n. 1). Although Eck stated that Münster accomplished in the study of Hebrew more than almost anyone in Germany, it is not clear whether the title 'rabbi' was meant simply metaphorically or also ironically, somehow admitting the scholarship of Münster, or rather dismissing him as just another Jewish rabbi with no true understanding of Scripture.

6 In 1528, the humanist and Catholic theologian Johann Fabri called Luther 'Rabi in Israel', a reference to Jesus' calling Nicodemus 'ein meister inn Israel' (Jn 3:10, Luther's Bible), indicating that Luther could not claim he was unknowledgeable. The meaning of 'rabbi' here is evidently not positive, see Fabri 1528: BIIr.

From the other side of the confessional divide, Luther too criticised Münster's Hebraism. In 1540, in a short comment on Münster's Latin translation of the Old Testament (*Hebraica Biblia*, 1534), Luther said that Münster 'rabbinised' greatly. Luther praised Münster's work, but claimed that the latter often 'rabbinised' (*rabinizat*), that is, employed Jewish rather than Christian understanding of Scriptures (Luther 1916: no. 3003, 618). A few years later, Luther wrote in a letter to Duke Johann Friedrich that many Hebraists were more rabbinic (*Rabinisch*) than Christian (Luther 1947: no. 3943, 461). He believed, no doubt, that Münster was one of them.

Others, however, saw in 'Rabbi Münster' a great Hebrew scholar, as shown by a eulogy to Münster given by his student, the Vienna Hebraist Erasmus Oswald Schreckenfuchs, in 1552. After the death of his beloved teacher Münster, Schreckenfuchs gave a funeral oration in Hebrew to an assembly of academic colleagues and students in Freiburg, where Schreckenfuchs had been professor of Hebrew. The following year, the text was published untranslated. In the title of the printed text and throughout the speech, Münster is depicted as רבי (rabbi, 'my *rav*') רבו (rabbo, 'his *rav*') or רבינו (rabbenu, 'our *rav*'), but interestingly, Schreckenfuchs used the term as a noun to signify a teacher, not a title or an address. Münster was Schreckenfuchs's teacher, that is, רבו. The student refers to him as 'my teacher', that is, רבי. Altogether, the words רב and רבי signify a relationship between teacher and students. In fact, Schreckenfuchs did not use 'rabbi' as a title appended to the names of scholars. The only actual rabbi (who was not just a teacher) in the published text is Schreckenfuchs himself, who is presented in the title as ר' אוסוולדוס שריקינבוכס (Rabbi Oswald Schreckenfuchs), a title that was rendered (either by Schreckenfuchs or the

publisher) with an 'M.' for *magister* in the Latin translation of the title (Schreckenfuchs 1553).

Conclusion

The cases discussed above are only a selection, and more examples of rabbinising can be found. I have concentrated on the first half of the century and on the German-speaking lands. Adopting a broader chronological and geographical horizon would have yielded more cases. However, the first half of the century is particularly interesting. The emergence of Christian Hebraica, the new impetus for producing Bibles in a variety of languages and the Reformation made accusations of judaising and the use of the label 'rabbi' a common practice. The cases discussed here nevertheless show that the mental representations of the rabbi and the significant practices undergirding such representations suggested by the use of the word in relation to, or in the context of, Christian scholars do not support any *one* coherent understanding of the phenomenon. Rabbinising was a polemical device whose effect depended on more than understanding the literal semantics of the term 'rabbi'. For one thing is clear: 'rabbi' was not a synonym of 'master', 'doctor' or 'teacher'. Although the lexical meaning of the word was straightforward, its use in intra-Christian polemics was not. In most of these cases, exchanging 'rabbi' for 'doctor' or a similar term entails a change of meaning.

An identification of the rhetorical 'rabbi' with the sixteenth-century Ashkenazi rabbi – the kind of rabbi participants in polemics might have known – is also dubious. The textual context suggests the association of biblical references, exegesis, Hebrew, Christian doctrine, scholarship, authority and the very use of titles. Sometimes, rabbinising implied something Jewish – Jewish ancestry, mastery of Hebrew, Rabbinic sources. At other times, 'rabbi' transferred the discourse back into biblical settings, where a contemporary dispute was temporarily transformed into a dispute between the Scribes and Pharisees, who sought and demanded authority, and Jesus, who *was* authority in himself.

Labelling someone a 'rabbi' was seldom meant as praise. In correspondences in Hebrew between Hebraists and in the idiosyncratic argumentation of the lay pamphleteer Marschalck, 'rabbi' was a sign of great knowledge. Otherwise, its use was pejorative. Nonetheless, I suggest that the term belonged to a class of words – nouns, addresses and titles – that signified the figure of the scholar. What the word 'rabbi' could do was to introduce intellectual authority into a polemical discourse while immediately undermining this very authority. The rabbi was no doubt an authority on Hebrew and Rabbinic sources. To a certain degree, he was also an expert on the Bible. Yet, his expertise was futile. He knew, yet he did not understand. Admitting the rabbi into the discourse was a way of undermining an intellectual authority by posing a model of failed scholarship. Furthermore, 'rabbi' was a sort of a code name for *personal* intellectual authority, an authority based on one individual's learning and understanding, and therefore characterised as vainglory rather than true scholarship based on impersonal absolute truth. To be a rabbi was always self-defeating, since the only true rabbi was Jesus.

Rabbinising Christians did not entail greater understanding of and respect for the Jewish rabbis and their scholarship, let alone sympathy for rabbinic Judaism or the Jewish communities. It does demonstrate, though, an engagement with the figure of the Jewish (Pharisee or modern) scholar as a product of the Christian imagination. Knowledgeable in some forms of Jewish scholarship, yet

ignorant of the concrete scholarly interests and procedures of the rabbis, Christian scholars came closer to the latter while remaining mostly apart. There was no lack of antipathy in the treatment of the figure of the rabbi – indeed some signs of anxiety appear – yet the sixteenth-century polemical debates ironically opened up a road that shortened the distance between the doctor and the rabbi. ■

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