

Intellectual Relationships of Fifteenth-Century Jewish and Christian Scholars in Light of Contemporary Art *

Fabrizio Lelli

University of Lecce

Since the early Middle Ages, Jews had been viewed by Christians as recipients of profound Biblical knowledge, thus being considered as reliable revealers of a truthful interpretation of the most sacred text. Therefore, notwithstanding the fact that the Church, *verus Israel*, affirmed that only she had authority to interpret Scripture, all throughout the Middle Ages Christian clerics questioned Jewish scholars about interpreting the Bible. Christians wanted to base their interpretive methods also on the authority of the Rabbinic literature, in order to show that the Bible could be read in a far more complex way than that suggested by the Church Fathers, as well as by other traditional Christian Medieval exegetes.¹

Such an attempt to discover new inner meanings in the Biblical text gave rise to a long-lasting series of Jewish-Christian intellectual encounters all over Europe. In Italy the first Christian Biblical scholars who wanted to study the Scripture also on the basis of Jewish exegesis are first documented at the court of the enlightened monarch Frederick II in Naples (first half of the thirteenth century), where scholars of both faiths had joint discussions of their different hermeneutic approaches to the Bible.²

* I wish to thank Prof. Brian Copenhaver and James Nelson Novoa for their precious help in the editing of my English text.

¹ See, e.g., G. DAHAN, *Les intellectuels chrétiens et les juifs au moyen âge*, Paris, 1986.

² See C. SIRAT, "Les traducteurs juifs à la cour des rois de Sicile et de Naples", in *Traductions et traducteurs au moyen âge*, Paris, 1989, 169-191; R. BONFIL, "La cultura ebraica e Federico II", in *Federico II e le nuove culture. Atti del XXXI Convegno storico internazionale del Centro Italiano di Studi sul Basso Medioevo – Accademia Tudertina & Centro di Studi sulla Spiritualità Medievale dell'Università degli Studi di Perugia*, Spoleto, 1995, 153-171.

However, a more evident interest in the study of the Hebrew Bible seems to appear in Florence, two centuries later. The rather common attempt by fifteenth-century Christian scholars to seek the truth of the Scripture in its original Hebrew text – the so-called search for the *Hebraica Veritas* (Hebrew truth) – was probably due also to the fact that most of those scholars did not belong to the clergy. It is true that the Council of Vienna (1311) had pronounced that chairs of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic were to be established in every major European University, but the actual clerical attitude towards the teaching of Oriental languages tended to prevent secular scholars from studying them. In contrast, during the fifteenth century many Christian scholars of the Hebrew language were secular. Although they claimed to explain their interest in Judaism as a way to emphasize the higher status of Christianity over Judaism, secular humanists were generally animated by the simple desire to stress the true religious meaning of Scripture, on philological rather than theological grounds.³

In order to attain an all-comprehensive knowledge both of the Hebrew language and of the multiple levels of Jewish traditional interpretation of the Bible, humanists addressed to contemporaneous Jewish scholars who helped them read, interpret and translate the Hebrew Scriptures, making it possible to eventually substitute even St. Jerome's text. The cultural relationship between the Jewish kabbalist, philosopher, and physician Yohanan Alemanno (1435-1506 ca.) and “the Phoenix of the wits”, as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) was designated by his contemporaries, should be viewed against this intellectual background. It was a brief relationship, which extended roughly from 1488 to 1491,⁴ although

³ See S. GAROFALO, “Gli umanisti italiani del secolo XV e la Bibbia”, *Biblica*, 27 (1946), 338-375; C. DRÖGE, *Giannozzo Manetti als Denker und Hebraist* (“Judentum und Umwelt”, 20), Frankfurt am M., Bonn, New York, Paris, 1987.

⁴ See M. LUZZATI, “Documenti inediti su Yohanan Alemanno a Firenze (1481 e 1492-1493)”, in *La cultura ebraica all'epoca di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, eds. D. Liscia Bemporad and I. Zatelli, Florence, 1997, 71-84.

it was destined to produce durable effects on later developments of Jewish and Christian thought.⁵

The usual account of such a partnership assumes that the two scholars carried out a common research program or at least cooperated within a similar intellectual environment. This assumption needs careful methodological discussion, since, as formulated here, may be clearly reminiscent of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* historical approach to the Italian Humanism. This approach is based largely on the assessment that the Renaissance “marks a momentous transformation in European civilization in general and in Italian culture in particular”.⁶ According to this scholarly trend, which flourished between the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, a Christian majority culture achieved deep symbiosis with the intellectual life of a Jewish minority. More recent scholarship has undertaken a heated debate on this theory, trying to investigate the effective extent of the Jewish participation in non-Jewish culture. Different and often diverging positions have been the result of this scholarly debate: some researchers even question the actual exis-

⁵ On Alemanno's relationship with Pico della Mirandola see: A. LESLEY, *The 'Song of Solomon's Ascents'. Love and Human Perfection according to a Jewish Associate of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Berkeley, Ca., 1976; B. C. NOVAK, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 44 (1982), 125-147; G. SERMONETA, “L'incontro culturale tra Ebrei e Cristiani nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento”, in *Atti del VI Congresso internazionale dell'AIISG*, Rome, 1988, 183-207; F. LELLI, “Un collaboratore ebreo di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Yohanan Alemanno”, in *Teologia a Firenze nell'età di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (a cura di G. Aranci, P. De Marco, T. Verdon), *Vivens Homo*, 5,2 (1994), 401-430; Id., “Yohanan Alemanno, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e la cultura ebraica italiana del XV secolo”, in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494-1994)*, ed. G.C. Garfagnini, Florence, 1997, I, 303-325; Id., “Umanesimo laurenziano nell'opera di Yohanan Alemanno”, in *La cultura ebraica all'epoca di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, eds. D. Liscia Bemporad and I. Zatelli, Florence, 1997, 49-67.

⁶ D. RUDERMAN, ‘The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought’, in A. RABIL, JR., *Renaissance Humanism. Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, I, Philadelphia, 1988, 382-433: 382.

tence of a Renaissance Jewish culture; at least according to the general perception of historians of Western thought.⁷

For this reason, in order to interpret the relationship between Pico and Alemanno more objectively in the context of late fifteenth-century Italian culture, we should probably de-emphasize the fascination with the Renaissance age and try to answer a fundamental question: should we consider this scholarly relationship a normal connection between two members of different faiths in a late Medieval or humanist environment?

First of all we should try to understand the relative positions of Jewish and Christian scholars in such relationships. Was the Christian dominant? Was the Jew still considered an equal counterpart to the Christian, as in Italian scholarly debates of previous centuries? Should we instead assert that the social changes in Jewish Italian society, mostly due to the ongoing arrival of refugees from different European regions in the course of the fifteenth century,⁸ gave rise to a new image of the Jew in contemporary Christian society?

A superficial answer might be that most relationships between Christian and Jewish scholars in fifteenth-century Italy originated from the Christian interest in Hebrew language and in Kabbalah. From this perspective it would appear that the search for the *Hebraica Veritas* would have been almost uniquely responsible for the intellectual encounter of Christians and Jews. Instead of as counterparts in the cultural debate or in religious disputations, as in previous centuries, Jews would have been envisaged mostly as teachers

⁷ See D. B. RUDERMAN, "Introduction", in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. D.B. Ruderman, New York - London, 1992, 1-39; A. M. LESLEY, "Jewish Adaptation of Humanistic Concepts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Italy", in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture*, 45-62; R. BONFIL, "How Golden Was the Age of the Renaissance in Jewish Historiography?", in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture*, 219-250; P. O. KRISTELLER, "Jewish Contribution to Italian Renaissance Culture", *Italia*, 4 (1985), 7-20; Y. ALEMANNO, *Hay ha'olimim (L'Immortale), Parte I: la Retorica*, ed. F. Lelli, Florence, 1995, 57-60.

⁸ See R. BONFIL, *Gli ebrei in Italia nell'epoca del Rinascimento*, Florence, 1991, 23-25.

of Hebrew. Incidentally, this new task would have originated not from the acknowledgement of the actual historical role of Jewish language and culture, but from the interpretation of the Jewish wisdom as a hidden and mysterious lore, which was turning the Jewish scholar into a somewhat exotic figure.⁹ It is probably this Christian identification of the Jew with the exotic or the extraneous, that would have opened a wide gap between the two faiths, instead of fostering a real dialogue.

It is remarkable that this change of perception appears also in contemporary Italian art. Following earlier patterns, representations of the Jews abound, in fifteenth-century Christian religious paintings, especially as the tendency grew to make depiction of Gospel stories more realistic. In most cases it would be difficult to find any distinction of note between the clothes worn by the Jews and those worn by contemporary Christians.¹⁰

For instance, Beato Angelico's representation of *Christ among the Doctors* in the mid-fifteenth-century Silver Treasury panel for the SS. Annunziata Church in Florence¹¹ (Fig. 1) for instance should be considered as a faithful reproduction of a contemporary synagogue. Jews are shown wearing typical Italian fifteenth-century clothes, their long beards being the most significant element for their identification as Jews.¹² Similar patterns of fashion appear in con-

⁹ See G. SERMONETA, "L'incontro culturale tra ebrei e cristiani nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento", in *Ebrei e Cristiani nell'Italia medievale e moderna: conversioni, scambi, contrasti*, eds. M. Luzzati, M. Olivari, A. Veronese. Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of the Italian Association for the Study of Judaism (AISG), Rome, 1988, 183-207.

¹⁰ TH. & M. METZGER, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages. Illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts of the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries*, Freiburg am B., 1982, 144-145.

¹¹ Angelico's masterwork is presently kept in Florence, Museo di San Marco.

¹² METZGER, *Jewish Life*, 147: "As a general rule, Jews are often depicted in Christian iconography with beards, at least from the thirteenth century onwards. However, this is not an absolute proof that Jews in general wore beards. At periods when beards were rarely worn, it is not surprising that Christians would distinguish Jews in their pictures by this attribute, especially as it is certain that the most pious - and therefore in Christian eyes the most typical - Jews tended to wear beards, even if they trimmed them."

temporary illuminations commissioned from Christian artists by wealthy Jewish families: among the many examples, we may mention the scene of a Jewish marriage depicted in Ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Can. Or. 79 (f. 2v), where "men and boys wear flowing fur-lined robes with bag-shaped sleeves [...] women's hair is covered by a fine veil or the then fashionable *balzo*".¹³ Likewise, in the 1435 Vatican Ms., Rossian 555, we see, on f. 292bis *verso*, the representation of a Jewish tribunal, where magistrates wear "robes, cloaks and *chaperons*, all lined with fur", whereas "the litigants are in robes and short cloaks or in the *giornea* with short sleeves or long sleeves that are slit [...]".¹⁴

This "Jewish style", which followed contemporary or slightly earlier fashion¹⁵ and derived from non-Jewish society, became more and more "oriental" during the fifteenth century, probably also as a consequence of the arrival of Jewish refugees from Spain. Moreover, the establishment of new relationships between Western merchants and the Ottoman Empire introduced Eastern fashion to Europe, which was very soon linked to the concept of the "science coming from the Orient".¹⁶ What in the days of the Eastern Roman Empire had been the Byzantine fashion now became the Ottoman style. That is a reason why the exotic reshaping of the Jews in late fifteenth-century Christian imagination could take on a "Turkish" appearance.

The search for the *prisca theologia*, that is the primordial truth of mankind, which could be found in religiously inspired philosophical

¹³ METZGER, *Jewish Life*, 132. This codex was written and decorated in 1438.

¹⁴ See METZGER, *Jewish Life*, 132. Further details on the costumes of Italian Jews in the Renaissance age can be found *ibidem*, on pp. 124-142.

¹⁵ METZGER, *Jewish Life*, 132.

¹⁶ On this intellectual trend see F. LELLI, "Prisca Philosophia and Docta Religio. The Boundaries of Rational Knowledge in Jewish and Christian Humanist Thought", *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 91 (2000), 53-100. On artistic representations of *prisci philosophi* in fifteenth- and early-sixteenth century Italian art and contemporary Jewish and Christian thought see F. LELLI, "Jews, Humanists, and the Reappraisal of Pagan Wisdom Associated with the Ideal of the *Dignitas Homini*", in *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, eds. A.P. Coudert and J.S. Shoulson, Philadelphia, 2004, 49-70.

works from the East, and was much appreciated in Florence, could be best expressed in pictorial representations by scenes of the *Adoration of the Magi*. This subject was very common in Florentine fifteenth-century art, especially in the Medici environment,¹⁷ since it allowed the painter to represent the concept of the pristine truth that had been revealed in the East and had gradually moved Westward, in order to announce the time of the Messiah's coming. People from all the human race, including Asians, Africans and Europeans, all participate in the scene of the story converging towards the new-born Christ.

In this scene Jews, usually depicted as ancient sages, may appear wearing Oriental garments. Beato Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli painted in Cosimo de' Medici's private cell in the Dominican Convent of San Marco in Florence in 1446, painted Zoroaster surrounded by two Jewish sages in Cosimo de' Medici's private cell in the Dominican Convent of San Marco in 1446 (Fig. 2).¹⁸

In Domenico Ghirlandaio's 1488 painting for the Florentine Church of the Spedale degli Innocenti (now in the Museo degli Innocenti) (Fig. 3) the Jewish figure (portrayed as a praying Christian) wears a turban that distinguishes him from the other people. By portraying the ideal Jewish sage, the expert on occult doctrines, in such an exotic way, Christian painters seem to transfer the Jewish scholars to a somehow distant realm of universal knowledge. As a consequence of this seeming remoteness, Christians would have believed that wise Jews were not concerned with humanist intellectual achievements.

In the foreground of Ghirlandaio's painting, to the right, the

¹⁷ See A. CHASTEL, *Arte e umanesimo a Firenze al tempo di Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Italian translation from French), Turin, 1964, 245-252.

¹⁸ The revival of writings allegedly attributed to the Persian sage Zoroaster took place in Cosimo de' Medici's environment and was accepted also by fifteenth-century Jewish intellectuals, who were active in Florence: see ELIYAH HAYYIM DA GENAZZANO, *La lettera preziosa (Iggeret bamudot)*, ed. F. Lelli, Florence 2002, 74; 152. It is interesting to observe that both Jews and Christians were seeking the date of the messianic end of time in Oriental sources.

wealthy Florentine Giovanni di Francesco Tesori, who had commissioned the *Adoration*, is portrayed. Likewise, Benozzo Gozzoli's 1459/60 *Journey of the Magi* in the private Medici chapel of the Florentine Palazzo Medici is an evidence of the fifteenth-century trend to depict members of the family that commissioned the painting, along with other familiar figures who were deemed worthy of appearing in such a religious context.

Although in the above mentioned paintings Jewish figures are shown with the long beards generally attributed to them,¹⁹ the realism permeating Benozzo Gozzoli's *Journey* was possibly responsible for a very interesting detail, almost hidden in the incredibly rich mass of people portrayed in the pageant accompanying the young Magus and representing the household of the Medici family. In the middle of the Eastern wall of the chapel (Fig. 4), the small figure of a man riding a horse appears in the midst of a rocky landscape. He has a trimmed white beard and wears a cloak and a *tallit*, the ritual Jewish shawl, wrapped around his head. In manuscript decorations this garment, which should be only donned for prayer, belongs only to officiants or individual members of the congregation reading from the Scripture or praying in the synagogue worship. From this viewpoint, the figure in Gozzoli's fresco is unusual. The painter seems to have painted a portrait of a person, someone he had seen in real life, since the physical traits not at all seem to be conventional. As for all other participants in the pageant, hats identify the origin and religion of those who wear them: this is the reason that may have led Gozzoli to represent a Jewish man, who was known in the Medicean milieu, wearing a *tallit*. Its colour and fabric, as well as the way of donning it are reminiscent of a 1471 illumination in Ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. 776 (f. 20v), where a German Jew is depicted wearing the ritual shawl while praying with his congregation or a later painting by the venetian Giovanni Mansueti, representing *Christ among the Doctors* (Fig. 5), now at the Uffizi

¹⁹ See above.

Gallery in Florence. This large canvas, which was executed around 1510, shows a Venetian-shaped Temple of Jerusalem populated by Jews who could be seen in Renaissance Venice: most of them wear the *tallit* according to the Ashkenazi habit. It is likely then to assume that the figure represented by Gozzoli was an Ashkenazi Jew, possibly one of those Hebrew teachers who came to Italy in order to work as a tutor with wealthy banking families, both Jewish and Christian.²⁰ A spurious tradition of the nineteenth century identified this figure with Elijah Delmedigo, a scholar who translated Averroistic treatises from Hebrew into Latin at Giovanni Pico's request.²¹ Gozzoli's fresco dates to 1459-1460, however, and Delmedigo was born in Crete around 1460.

This ambiguity in the pictorial representation of fifteenth-century Jews appear also in works of art commissioned by Jews. Thus, for instance, in the so-called *Rothschild Mahzor*, written in Florence in 1492 by Elijah ben Joab of Vigevano for Abraham Judah ben Jehiel of Camerino, the scene on f. 139r (the opening of the Mishnaic treatise *Pirke Avot* [Chapters of the Fathers]) features Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai (Fig. 6).²² The redeemer of Israel from Egypt is represented wearing oriental-style clothes and a turban, whereas, on the same *folio*, Jewish people attending the sacred event wear contemporary fifteenth-century garments. According to the Rabbinic tradition, the souls of all the Jews to-come were already standing on Mount Sinai, witnessing the giving of the Law: this explains why fifteenth-century Italian Jews could be portrayed in this Florentine *Mahzor* along with an exotic

²⁰ BONFIL, *Gli ebrei in Italia*, 111-113.

²¹ On ELIJAH DEL MEDIGO see A. L. MOTZKIN, "Elijah del Medigo, Averroes, and Averroism", *Italia*, 6 (1987), 7-19; F. LELLI, "Pico tra filosofia ebraica e «qabbala»", in *Pico, Poliziano e l'Umanesimo di fine Quattrocento*, ed. P. Viti, Florence, 1994, 193-223: 193-203; H. HAMES, "Elijah del Medigo: An Archetype of halakhic Man?", in *Cultural Intermediaries. Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy*, eds. D.B. Ruderman and G. Veltri, Philadelphia, 2004, 39-53.

²² F. 139r. See E. COHEN, *The Rothschild Mahzor*, New York, 1990, p. 41.

Moses, a venerable sage, that is a *priscus philosophus*, according to humanist historical categories. Moreover, as said before, from the late fifteenth century on, Jews started to appear in pictorial representations wearing ottoman-fashioned clothes and turbans, as can be seen in a detail of the already mentioned painting *Christ among the Doctors* by Giovanni Mansueti, where some Jews wearing western-style gartments appear as well.

This "double" representation of the Jew – on one hand a prophet of ancient times and on the other hand a contemporary – was not new. As said, it was inherited from the tradition deeply rooted in the Christian church, which aimed to distinguish ancient Israel – now integrated within the Christian faith – from contemporary Jews who were no longer part of the *verus Israel*, i. e. of the Christian congregation that had replaced the ancient alliance of the Jews with God. What was new in this iconography was that Italian Jews adopted the same artistic patterns that were common among Christians and which conveyed the distinction between the pattern of the contemporary Jewish merchant and that of the Oriental sage.

As a matter of fact, the two identities could belong to the same figure, since most Italian Jewish scholars were also bankers and merchants, particularly in the fifteenth century. For instance, the well-known humanist Giannozzo Manetti turned to the cultured Immanuel of San Miniato, a rich Florentine banker, to deepen his knowledge of Hebrew. Now, while Manetti was writing his *Adversus Iudaeos et Gentes* (Against Jews and Pagans), an anti-Jewish treatise in the medieval fashion,²³ and while was convincing his humanist associates that his concerns with Hebrew were aimed only at converting the Jews, his teacher Immanuel, along with his Hebrew production, composed a Latin version of the Hebrew *Psalms*. This work shows real interest in contemporary philological debates.²⁴ If

²³ See G. FIORAVANTI, "L'apologetica anti-giudaica di Giannozzo Manetti", *Rinascimento*, 23 (n.s.), 1983, 3-33; Dröge, *Giannozzo Manetti als Denker und Hebraist*.

²⁴ See U. CASSUTO, *Gli ebrei a Firenze nell'età del Rinascimento*, Florence, 1918, 222; C. DRÖGE, "*Quia Morem Hieronymi in Transferendo Cognovi...* Les Débuts des Etudes Hébraï

the Jewish banker could represent an enemy of the Christian community, the Jewish intellectual certainly was helpful in revealing the secrets of Hebrew wisdom. After composing Hebrew poems based on Stilnovo stylistic features, after debating with Franciscan friars following the standard model of medieval religious disputations, Elijah Hayyim of Genazzano, who meant in his treatise *Iggereth bamudoth* (Epistle of Delight) to oppose any influence deriving from the Christian culture, quoted Pythagoras as an ancient theologian, Numenius on Plato as an Attic Moses and Pico della Mirandola.²⁵ Although biographical data on Genazzano is scant, we know that one brother of his was involved in the powerful banking network of the Tuscan Da Pisa family: we may thus assume that he belonged to a wealthy family, what could have made him aware of contemporary intellectual debates carried out within the non-Jewish society.²⁶

However, the case of Yohanan Alemanno and his involvement in the contemporary trends of thought is somewhat different and may allow us to better understand the ambiguous interpretations of the Jews which we have witnessed in Christian art. Alemanno was not a banker, though he spent a long time in Tuscany in the household of the Da Pisas. He seems not only more concerned with humanist subjects of speculation and with humanist literary trends than his contemporary coreligionists; he also appears to be proud of his non-Jewish acquaintances. Most scholars who have studied his relationship to Giovanni Pico have stressed the latter's role. Actually, the origins of their connection are probably to be found in Pico's longing for universal knowledge. However, placing such an

ques chez les Humanistes Italiens", in *L'Hébreu au temps de la Renaissance*, ed. I. Zinguer, Leiden, 1992, 65-88: 72-73.

²⁵ See GENAZZANO, *La lettera preziosa*, 152-153.

²⁶ See M. LUZZATI, "Matrimoni e apostasia di Clemenza di Vitale da Pisa", in Id., *La casa dell'ebreo*, Pisa, 1985, 59-106: 69; F. LELLI, "Social and Intellectual Changes in Italian Jewish Communities at the End of the Fifteenth Century, As Perceived Through Elijah Hayyim of Genazzano's *Iggereth Hamudoth* (Epistle of Delight)", unpublished paper presented at the Renaissance Society of America 50th Annual Conference, New York City, 2004.

emphasis on the christian humanist may distort our perspective on relationship founded more on mutual exchange of information than on unidirectional teaching. Alemanno met Pico because Pico wanted to deepen his knowledge of Jewish exegesis, philosophy, and Kabbalah. However, the Jewish scholar was eager to learn the recent results of various methods of current humanist research from Pico. That is the reason why it is hard to maintain that the relationship between Alemanno and Pico depended mostly on the latter's wish to learn Hebrew. Such an understanding of Alemanno's role underestimates the value to Pico of his research, which was carried out throughout his life and had begun several years before his encounter with the Christian intellectual.

Given our previous assessments, in Pico's eyes this Ashkenazi scholar, much older than him, could have been the paradigm of the "Oriental sage", according to the humanist understanding of the Jews that we have seen in contemporary painting.

We may conclude that, although there was no unique model of cultural connection between intellectuals of the two faiths, in fifteenth-century Italy the Christian interest in Jewish culture largely depended on the tendency to identify Jewish scholars with revealers of the profound secrets of sacred lore that had been hidden since antiquity. We can consider this attitude as a mythical understanding of Jewish wisdom. We have just observed that Alemanno shows a greater concern than his coreligionist with humanist trends. A proof of this can be found in the adoption of a mythical interpretation of Pico as the Christian sage *par excellence*.

In the introduction to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (entitled *Hesheq Shelomoh, Solomon's Desire*), which is known also by the separate title *Shir ha-ma`aloth li-Shelomoh* (*Song of Solomon's Virtues*), Alemanno, after praising Lorenzo de` Medici and the citizens of Florence in a sort of humanistic *laudatio*, describes Pico della Mirandola in terms of reverential awe:

And so the writing inspired by the allegorical meaning of the Song of Songs remained sealed in my mind until I came in the year 5248 to [Florence]

[...] Because of all these [virtues of Florence], all my thoughts led me to come to that lord, master of many sciences that are sublime beyond the eyes of erudite and famous men of all lands and nations. Finite time and the divine spirit have not endowed his nation and generation with another like him. God lovingly gave him three precious parts superior to all the people of his country: his spirit, his body and the glorious seat of his understanding. I thought that perhaps my spirit and soul might be favored by his abundant splendor.

When I came to take shelter in the shadow of this cherub, crowned with divine lights, a prince perfect in knowledge, the Lord, who shields him and his intelligence day and night and is never separated from him, stirred his mouth and tongue to ask me if, in my vain life, I had seen any brilliant light among the commentators on the Song that is Solomon's that would distinguish between the various things that are so confusingly mixed in it.

I said, "Ah, my lord, the wisest of the wise have commented upon it, but not many of them have understood or explained it profoundly. Yet from God come solution, new and old; He graced me with a few of them twenty years ago, and they are at my home".

He said, "Please let me also hear, for I have labored over all the commentators who have written in Greek and Latin, but I am not satisfied about the order of progression rightly to be found in it".

So I, as a servant before his master, read out its arrangement which I had established among its symbols and, praise to the living God! He thought of me as of someone who has found a great treasure [...]

This is my lord, called Count Giovanni della Mirandola and I am Yohanan, son of Isaac of Paris, called Ashkenazi, in Hebrew, and Aleman in the language of the people among whom I live.

He then said, "Gird your loins like a man and write nobly about the allegorical sense that conforms to symbols from every side, letter by letter and word by word, without superfluity or omission; use simple language and do not adorn its beauty, and examine it, pray, from beginning to end according to the perfection of Solomon who produced it, as is found in the Bible, midrash and scientific works attributed to him among those books in our possession, in Hebrew, Latin and Arabic, as you have intended to do for so long".²⁷

Alemanno's praise shows profound admiration of the author for the most common genres of the contemporary humanist pro-

²⁷ LESLEY, *The Song*, cit., pp. 28-29.

duction, especially rhetoric.²⁸ In particular, Alemanno's *Laudatio* of Pico's intellectual skill shows a surprising number of common places of contemporary literature celebrating Pico's intellect. We find the most famous example in *Giovanni Pico's Biography* written by this latter's nephew Giovan Francesco and published in 1498:

O very happy mynde which none aduersyte myght oppresse, which no prosperyte might enhance: not the conninge of all philosophie was able to make him proude, not the knowledge of the hebrewre, chaldey & arabie language besyde greke and laten coulede make him vaynglorious, not his grete substaunce, not his noble bode, coulede blowe up his herte, not ye beauty of his body, not ye grete occasyon of synne were able to pull hym bak in to ye voluptuose brode way yt ledeth to helle: what thyng was ther of so meruaylouse strenght yt might overtorne ye minde of hym: which now (as Seneca sayth) was gotten above fortune as he which as well her favoure and her malice hath set at nought, yt he myght be coupled with a spiritull knot unto Chryste and his hevenly cytezyens.²⁹

If we compare Alemanno's praise and *Pico's Biography* with a contemporary fresco, we may observe some common features. The painter of the fresco, Cosimo Rosselli, mostly famous for his panels in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, in 1486 represented in the Florentine church of St. Ambrogio the miracle of the transubstantiation of the Holy Host which had taken place in that same church, during the celebration of the Mass (Fig. 7). The composition of the painting centers on three main figures, allegedly representing, from left to right, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico and Angelo Poliziano (Fig. 7). The three scholars stand isolated from the rest of the people, Pico in the middle, manifestly playing the allegoric role of mediator between philosophy (represented by Ficino) and philology

²⁸ See F. LELLI (ed.), YOHANAN ALEMANNI, *Hay ba-`olamim (L'Immortale). Prima parte: la Retorica*, Firenze 1995; F. LELLI, *Umanesimo laurenziano*; Id., *Biography and Autobiography in Yohanan Alemanno's Literary Perception*, in *Cultural Intermediaries. Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy*, eds. D.B. Ruderman e G. Veltri, Philadelphia, 2004, 25-38.

²⁹ GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA: *His Life by His Nephew Giovanni Francesco Pico* [...] Translated from the Latin by Sir Thomas More (ed. J.M. Rigg), London, 1890, 18-19.

(represented by Poliziano). The whole scene is fraught with symbolic meanings since the three figures are evidently reminiscent of the mystery of the Trinity, but their distinct attitude also recalls contemporary secular painting: a group of three standing people may recall the three Graces in Botticelli's famous *Spring* in the Uffizi Gallery (1477-1478). And, not surprisingly, the *verso* of a medal portraying Pico della Mirandola on its *recto*, has a similar representation of the Graces.³⁰ In Rosselli's fresco, Pico is portrayed as an angel, his eyes absorbed in silent contemplation. If we compare this portrait to another more realistic one of the humanist,³¹ we notice how idealized this painting is and how legendary the aura permeating all Pico's activities was already in his lifetime. Apart from some common physical features (like the blond long hair), the two portraits are quite distinct. Once again *Pico's biography* comes back to our mind:

He was of fature and shappe femely and beauteous, of stature goodly and hyghe, of fleshe tendre and softe: his vysage lovely and fayre, his colour white entermengled with comely ruddes, his eyen gray and quicke of loke, his teeth white and even, his heere yelow and not to piked.³²

It seems then that Alemanno like Cosimo Rosselli based his praise of Pico³³ on Pico's myth more than on the actual appearance of the humanist, possibly having resort to the contemporary iconography of the young Count della Mirandola.

³⁰ The medal was cast by Niccolò di Forzore Spinelli between 1484 and 1494 and is presently kept at the Museo del Bargello, Florence. According to L. SEBREGONDI ("Fortuna e «sfortuna» dell'iconografia di Pico e Poliziano", in *Pico, Poliziano e l'Umanesimo di fine Quattrocento*, ed. P. Viti, Florence, 1994, 255-271: 263) this is likely to be the most ancient extant portrait of Pico.

³¹ I refer to Cristoforo dell'Altissimo sixteenth-century portrait of Pico at the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

³² *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: His Life*, 8.

³³ One should bear in mind that a recent restoration of Rosselli's fresco has revealed that under the present "portrait of Pico" a totally different face had been painted. It is then possible that the change in the final version of the fresco took place when Pico's myth was already popular.

Let us recall Alemanno's exact words: "[...] When I came to take shelter in the shadow of this cherub, crowned with divine lights, a prince perfect in knowledge, the Lord, who shields him and his intelligence day and night and is never separated from him [...]". Pico is described as a cherub who serves God and whose intellect is eternally *in actu*. Alemanno seems to hint here at Pico's *Oraatio de hominis dignitate* where the humanist, in my opinion on a Kabbalistic basis,³⁴ affirms that "Moses loved God whom he saw, and as judge, he administered to the people what he formerly saw as contemplator on the mountain. Therefore with his own light the cherub in the middle makes us ready for the seraphic fire, and at the same time illuminates us for the judgment of the thrones. He is the bond of the first minds, the order of Pallas, the ruler over contemplative philosophy. We must first rival him and embrace him and lay hold of him. Let us make ourselves one with him and be caught up to the heights of love. And let us descend to the duties of action, well instructed and prepared".³⁵

Pico asserts that the middle cherub has the role of mediator between the intellect of man and God. Very similar is the function of the *Sefirab Tif'eret* (Glory), which according to Alemanno, who bases himself on Menahem Recanati's fourteenth-century *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, is the medium for the encounter of the human intellect with God. In Alemanno's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*,

³⁴ See LELLI, *Yobanan Alemanno, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e la cultura ebraica italiana del XV secolo*, 318-319.

³⁵ "Amavit Moses Deum quem vidit, et administravit iudex in populo quae vidit prius contemplator in monte. Ergo medius Cherub sua luce et saraphico igni nos praeparat et ad Thronorum iudicium pariter illuminat; hic est nodus primarum mentium, ordo palladicus, philosophiae contemplativae praeses; hic nobis et aemulandus primo et ambiendus, atque adeo comprehendendus est, unde et ad amoris rapiamur fastigia et ad munera actionum bene instructi paratique descendamus". G. PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De Ente et Uno e scritti vari*, ed. E. Garin, Florence, 1942, 112; see also PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, *On the Dignity of Man* (translated by Ch. Glenn Wallis), *On Being and the One* (translated by P.J.W. Miller), *Heptaplus* (translated by D. Carmichael), with an introduction of P. J. W. Miller, Indianapolis, New York, Kansas City, 1940, 8.

Solomon, through his intellectual virtues, as well as by his prayers and with the help of God's grace elevates himself to the level of *Tif'eret*. By introducing his commentary with this praise of Pico, Alemanno probably hinted to the similar path of knowledge aiming to God carried out and achieved by the King of Israel and by the contemporary humanist. If we observe again Rosselli's fresco, we notice that the angelic image of Pico plays a central role, as if the whole religious scene takes place around him.

Pico's long Hebrew praise in Alemanno's *Commentary* may then depend on contemporary iconic patterns of the Christian intellectual, as much as the contemporary attitude of humanists towards Jewish scholars is based on the "exotic" understanding of the Jewish sage. Thus, Alemanno's pride in knowing Pico is similar to Pico's pride in knowing Hebrew sources. Both scholars probably magnified the breadth of their knowledge: Pico, in Latin and Italian, to his humanist circle and Alemanno, in Hebrew, to his Jewish audience. In both cases, they seem to refer to "icons" of intellectuals which appear from contemporary paintings.

A further observation may be relevant. In Gozzoli's fresco, the Jewish man takes part in the pageant accompanying the young Magus to worship the new-born Christ. In Rosselli's fresco, behind the three figures in the foreground whom we just mentioned, an old man appears in the middle of the worshippers who pay homage to the miracle of the transubstantiation. This man who shows similar features as one of the Jewish (Fig. 1) men in Beato Angelico's *Christ among the Doctors* has a white long beard and dons a black garment which could be a Jewish prayer shawl. He seems not to be at ease amidst the coloured crowd of joyful people: he is sad, his eyes bent down to the ground, as if he did not want to trust the mystery of the bleeding of the Host. From both paintings we understand that Jews could play a role in fifteenth-century Florence, not only as bankers, but also as guarantors of the supreme value of Christian religion. Likewise, humanists usually resorted to Jewish teachers only in order to demonstrate that Christian truth could be better

demonstrated on the basis of Hebrew sources. From this viewpoint the intellectual relationship between Christians and Jews was still "Medieval" since, beyond the actual interest in the matter under study, proselytism was often concealed, whereas most Jewish scholars who were active in the humanist environment seem to accept some of the achievements of the intellectual research of Christian society in a more objective way, free from secondary purposes.



Fig. 1 – Beato Angelico, Silver Treasury panel (painted around 1450 for the Church of the SS. Annunziata, Florence), Christ among the Doctors. Florence, Museo di San Marco.



Fig. 2 – Beato Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli, Adoration of the Magi (around 1446). Florence, Museo di S. Marco, Cosimo de' Medici's private cell.



Fig. 3 – Domenico Ghirlandaio, Adoration of the Magi (painted in 1488 for the Church of the Spedale degli Innocenti, Florence). Florence, Museo degli Innocenti.



Fig. 4 – Benozzo Gozzoli, Journey of the Magi (1459-60). Florence, Palazzo Medici, Medici Chapel (Eastern Wall).



Fig. 5 – Giovanni Mansueti, Christ among the Doctors (around 1510).
Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi (detail).

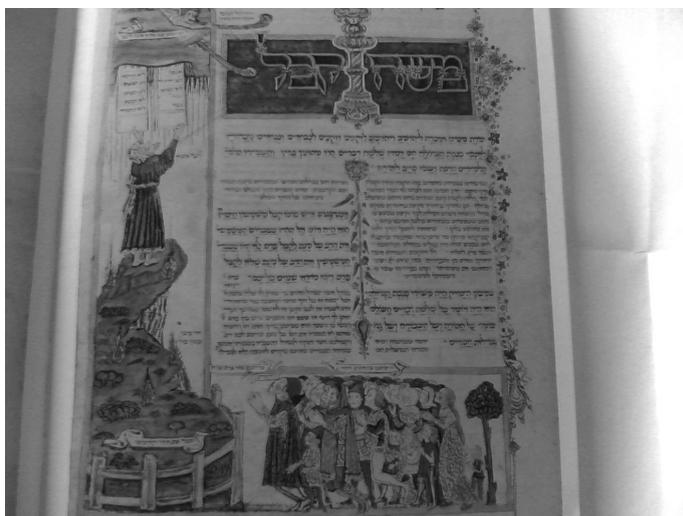


Fig. 6 – Anonymous, Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai
(opening of the Mishnaic treatise Pirke Avot [Chapters of the Fathers]),
Rothschild Mahzor (written in Florence, 1492).
Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Ms. Mic. 8892, f. 139r.



Fig. 7— Miracle of the Transubstantiation of the Host.
Church of Sant'Ambrigio, Florence.