**Introduction**

Johann Buxtorf the elder (1564-1629), long-time professor of Hebrew at Basel, ethnographer, lexicographer, and textual critic, belongs to the category of the ‘accepted’ Hebraists and is usually regarded as one of the most distinguished Hebraists of the early modern period. Buxtorf’s description -- or polemical ethnography (in Yaacov Deutsch’s formulation) -- of Jewish life from cradle to grave, the *Synagoga Iudaica: das ist, Juden-Schul...* (1603) should be seen in the context of an emerging systematic empiricism which was led by curiosity, fuelled by the impact of humanism and also, not least, driven by a desire to control another faith. What is particularly striking about Buxtorf’s effort at describing Jewish beliefs and ceremonies is the extent to which his reading of the whole gamut of Jewish literary production is reflected in this work. Buxtorf cast his critical eyes into every nook and cranny of Hebrew literature. Even his retrospective description of his sources for the book (which also gives of an account of how Jews aided him in his investigation by providing him with some of the books) in a letter of 1606 does not adequately convey the scope of his consumption of Jewish books.

This presentation will attempt to analyse how Buxtorf read Jewish books by examining one passage from the *Sefer ha-Hayyim* written by Hayyim ben Bezalel (Cracow, 1593), which Buxtorf chose to integrate into his polemical critique of Jewish allegiance to the Talmud in this opening chapter of the *Juden—Schul*. Hayyim ben Bezalel, fated to remain second fiddle to his brother, the Maharal of Prague, had his own battles to fight against both Jews and Christians. In the selected passage, Hayyim ben Bezalel defends the Talmud as a unique possession of the Jews and suggests a reason for the apparently ‘bewildering Aggadot’.

By close scrutiny of both texts we consider how and why Hayyim ben Bezalel’s plea for the Talmud engaged Buxtorf’s attention and influenced the development of his argument?
Bibliography


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Chapter 1 of Johan Buxtorf’s Judenschul

Translated by Joanna Weinberg, Oxford University

These rules which Christ himself reported, and others to which he referred are still in use and observed among the Jews and described in the Canon Law and Ordinances concerning spiritual matters and the religious life, and I shall devote a good part of this book to them. I will make clear how the Jews came to observe such commands of men rather than the commands of God right up to the present day, and have thereby abolished God’s commands through their rules and thus fallen into this terrible state of disbelief and misunderstanding of God’s word. The learned Mossche mikkotzi wrote a book explaining the six hundred and thirteen commandments which among the Jews is called Sepher Mitzvos gadol, the Great book of Commandments. He taught in the Jewish academy of Toledo, Spain, in 1236 A.D. where about twelve thousand Jews were living, as he himself writes in connection with the hundred and twelfth negative commandment. In his preface he writes as follows....

“And who can tell all the blemishes that render food forbidden, the difference between cooking milk and meat, the defilement caused by the dead, lepers, the rules about animals that died a natural death and [unclean] insects? What about the nature and characteristics of the Masorah, the vowel points and accents, the letters, some of which are suspended, some elevated above the word, some upside down etc. Who will tell us the correct interpretation of all these matters: it therefore follows indubitably that one has to have another explanation of the Written Law from where all this can be learned.”

So far we have followed the Rabbi.

This is exactly the way that the devil first seduced the Jews away from the true word of God and brought them- - in his usual masterly fashion-- to man’s commandment. So securely did he attach them that neither Isaiah nor Christ nor anyone else has been able to drag them away until this very day. Then
where shall we find the true interpretation of the written law? The answer is surely not Wecker’s *De secretis* or Smokehole’s/Reuchlin’s *De arte cabalistica*, much less in Marcolfus. We shall find it in the **holy Talmud** [my emphasis].
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Real or Virtual Contact? Johannes Buxtorf's Reading of Jewish Literature, Joanna Weinberg, Oxford University

From chapter 1 of Johan Buxtorf’s Judenschul

Dieweil dann solche Auffsetze / die Christus daselbst vermeldet / und andere / darauf er gedeutet / noch heutiges tages bey den Juden breuchlich sind und gehalten werden / und in ihrem Jure Canonicu und Ordnanzen / von Geistlichen sachen / und Frommen Leben / beschrieben seind / deren ich ein guten theil in diesem Bűch zu entdecken fürhabens bin / will ich weiter allhie anzeigen / auß was grund und ursachen sie darauff gerahnten / daß sie auff solche Menschen-gebott mehr / dann auff Gottes Gebott gehalten haben / und noch heutiges tages halten / und also Gottes Gebott durch ihre Auffseße auffgeheb haben / und dadurch in gegenwärtigen greulichen Unglauben und mißverstand Göttliches worts gerahnten sind?


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Joanna Weinberg, Oxford University

From part 1, ch 2 of Sefer ha-Hayyim (Cracow, 1593, 5a-b)

...The Talmud is shown respect only by Israel and likewise, Israel is shown respect by the Blessed God only on account of the Oral Torah which is the most conspicuous and prominent sign that distinguishes Israel from the peoples...That is why we are accustomed to conclude each tractate with the words ‘our honour is upon you and your honour is upon us’ [play on hadran alakh vehadrakh alan] Indeed, there is nobody who turns his mind to the Oral Torah – may it not be forgotten, God forbid -- apart from us, and that is why ‘we are mindful of You’ (da’atan alakh). Similarly, the Oral Torah is that which protects Israel and that is why it is called ‘Gemara’ which is shorthand for Gabriel, Michael, Raphael and Uriel. In other words, a divine angel is stationed in protective stance around the one who studies Gemara: Mishael on the right, Gabriel, on the left, Uriel in front and Raphael behind him and over his head the Shekhinah of God which which is crowned with the words of the sages- and this is what is meant by ‘You are mindful of us’ (da’atkh alan), i.e. your providential care is extended over us. And since Israel and the Oral Torah are two twin gazelles it is right that they should not be taken away from each other in this world nor in the world to come. And since the Talmud is only sufficiently loved and esteemed by keepers of Torah but not by those who lurk in street corners we acknowledge that our portion is among the keepers of Torah and not among those who lurk in street corners. We see that the first set of tablets which the blessed Lord wrote were broken and that only the other set of tablets which Moses wrote remained- this being an indication that the words of Torah will only come to fruition as a result of being written down by humans- I refer to the writing down of the Oral Torah - and it is only with regard to the second set of tablets that it was said, ‘in order that it should be good for you’ (Deut. 6, 3).
And those who scorn find an opportunity to place their scorn on ‘this holy book’ on account of the esoteric aggadot that it contains - apparently it would appear that they are not only not beneficial, but that are actually harmful. However, our rabbis of blessed memory already made an analogy in connection with this issue in chapter ‘bameh madlikin’ (Shabb. 31a). They compared it to a person who ordered his servant to bring a kor of wheat to the upper chamber which he duly did. He then told him to put a kav of humtin inside it which he refused to do. He said to him: ‘Then it would have been better had you not brought the wheat.’ For *humtin* is fine sand which does not cause plants to grow and yet, the fine sand is the only means by which the wheat is preserved. So, too, the produce of Torah is only only preserved by means of the bewildering aggadot which tensures that their wisdom is concealed; for otherwise, the enemy would have already set his hand and tongue against the sages of blessed memory and turn their words into heresy – this was what was done with the written Torah-- with the consequence that nothing would be left which could distinguish us from all the nations; but now by means of the bewildering aggadot this holy book is despised in their eyes and they will therefore not transpose its words into their words. Consequently, these words are left in our hands in their integrity for the dogs cannot touch them, and through them it is shown that we alone are the people of the Lord and his flock.
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From part 1, ch 2 of Sefer ha-Hayyim (Cracow, 1593, 5a-b)