

Maximilian de Molière, Confronting Kabbalah. Studies in the Christian Hebraist Library of Johann Albrecht Widmanstetter, Leiden (Brill Academic Publishers) 2024, XVI–661 p. (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 36), ISBN 978-90-04-68952-7, DOI [10.1163/9789004689527](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004689527), EUR 273,25.

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The study of Christian engagement with Jewish tradition during the early modern period represents a critical chapter in the history of scholarship. Despite the extensive research already conducted on this topic, there remains considerable scope for further integrating the role of Christian Hebraism into the broader narrative of European cultural history. This engagement was of fundamental importance, as evidenced by the thousands of treatises and translations published throughout the period, which laid the foundation for the development of Jewish studies in subsequent centuries. Another crucial dimension of this phenomenon was its role in the formation of Hebrew manuscript collections in major European libraries, which serve as an invaluable yet underexplored resource for understanding Christian fascination with the Hebrew language.

Maximilian de Molière's study of Johann Albrecht Widmanstetter (1506–1557) marks a significant advancement in this field, highlighting the substantial potential of manuscript collection studies not only to reconstruct the intellectual profiles of their owners but also to trace the networks through which interest in Hebrew and other Oriental languages flourished during the early modern period.

De Molière's monograph is structured into two distinct parts. The first section (1–311) is a comprehensive essay that explores the thought and work of the German Hebraist. The second part (313–568) comprises four appendices: Widmanstetter's Hebrew correspondence with his network (313–334), a catalog of Bomberg's editions in his library (335–342), a detailed itinerary of Widmanstetter's travels between 1539 and 1557 (343–346), and a new catalog of his Hebrew and Arabic manuscripts housed in the *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek* in Munich (347–568). This final section goes beyond conventional manuscript descriptions by providing, in addition to content descriptions and bibliographic details, critical information about the copyists, the provenance of the manuscripts, and handwritten annotations by Widmanstetter himself.

The focus on Widmanstetter's library reflects a key interpretative strategy in de Molière's work, as indicated by the book's title. De Molière examines his intellectual interests, particularly his



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engagement with Jewish tradition and Kabbalah, through a meticulous analysis of his books and manuscripts. This approach is particularly apt given that Widmanstetter wrote very little, with much of his intellectual legacy encapsulated in the way he curated his manuscript collection and the marginal notes he added.

The opening chapters of the book (25–192) provide a thorough analysis of the genesis and development of Widmanstetter's library, with a particular emphasis on manuscripts. This section is notably innovative, integrating methodologies from various disciplines – including book studies, paleography, and the material analysis of bindings – alongside an examination of how manuscripts were organized in baskets and barrels. These approaches illuminate Widmanstetter's increasing engagement with Jewish tradition and, specifically, Kabbalah. The analysis carefully highlights Italy's central role in the circulation of Jewish manuscripts, given its status as a refuge for Jews from various diasporas and Widmanstetter's interactions with prominent Italian figures, such as Girolamo Seripando, Giles of Viterbo, and Pier Luigi Farnese, son of Pope Paul III, which facilitated a dense network of relationships and exchanges of manuscripts, ideas, and knowledge. Through a skillful examination of manuscripts, ownership notes, and correspondence, de Molière reconstructs Widmanstetter's connections and his deepening interest in Kabbalah, which culminated in the acquisition of hundreds of manuscripts through various means.

Widmanstetter's interest in the Jewish mystical tradition is a central theme of the book. Gershom Scholem, analyzing some of Widmanstetter's statements published in his commentary on the epitome of the Qur'an, concluded that the German scholar was fundamentally opposed to Kabbalah. However, de Molière, by introducing new sources – particularly marginal notes found in various Kabbalistic manuscripts – offers a revised interpretation, identifying two distinct facets of Widmanstetter's attitude toward Kabbalah. On the one hand, Widmanstetter viewed certain aspects of the Jewish mystical tradition as potentially dangerous to the Church, particularly because they could lead to heresy. These concerns are primarily reflected in his commentary on the epitome of the Qur'an (1543), where he critiques concepts like the transmigration of souls, a notion also prevalent among leading figures in Christian Hebraism, such as Johann Reuchlin (219–254). However, de Molière observes that in Widmanstetter's later work, the Syriac edition of the New Testament (1555), his perspective shifts. Here, the Kabbalistic tradition of the ten sefirot is presented as an essential tool for understanding the inner secrets of Christianity (255–301). This aspect of the analysis is particularly original: incorporating visual representations of Kabbalah, de Molière emphasizes that Widmanstetter was not only interested in the theoretical aspects of the sefirot but also in their graphical representations, such as the sefirotic tree (*ilan*), which he frequently copied by hand in the margins of his manuscripts (286–299).



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This study highlights the complexity of a field that continues to require extensive exploration. De Molière's book underscores the multidisciplinary nature of this research area and illustrates how methodological approaches, including the analysis of manuscript collections, their annotations, and their connection to the intellectual pursuits of their owners, can provide valuable insights into early modern scholars' engagement with Jewish tradition.



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