Introduction

Among the many groundbreaking publications in Hebrew type that left Basel’s printing presses during the sixteenth century was a small volume entitled *Kalendarium Hebraicum* (1527), which had been put together by the Hebraist and cosmographer Sebastian Münster (1488–1552), a man influential enough in his fields to later have the epithet “Ezra and Strabo of the Germans” engraved on his tombstone. On roughly 200 pages, the *Kalendarium Hebraicum* offered a colourful potpourri of Jewish texts on time reckoning, which, to quote the blurb on the title page, had been “newly brought to light from the inner sanctuaries of the Hebrews” with the intention of serving “not so much students of the Hebrew language as historiographers and those experienced in astronomy.”¹ In a dedicatory epistle addressed to Bernardo Clesio, the bishop of Trent (dated 20 September 1526), Münster indicated that his project had initially developed out of his own puzzlement over the fact that the Jews counted their years from the creation of the world, using an era that started in 3761/60 BCE and thus ca. 1500 years later than many Latin chronicles, despite the fact that Jews and Christians both claimed to base themselves on the same Old Testament chronology.² Eager to find out the reasons for this startling discrepancy, Münster decided to embark on a study of Hebrew chronicles, two of which—the *Seder olam zutta* and Abraham Ibn Daud’s *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*—he presented with a parallel Latin translation at the beginning of his book. To these, he attached a whole series of further texts and treatises dealing with the complicated rules of the Jewish calendar, its astronomical foundations, and its

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² See the preface in Münster, *Kalendarium*, sigs. a2r–a4r.
feast-day cycle, which were in turn supplemented by Münster’s own Latin disquisitions on these subjects as well as by various charts and tables, including astronomical diagrams of eclipses. In an age when Hebrew printing was still in its infancy and Western European Jews were used to read about their calendar in the form of handwritten *sifrei evronot*, Münster’s book, although intended for a Christian audience, thus effectively became the very first example of an *ibbur* or Hebrew calendrical compendium to make the transition from manuscript to print.3

In his decision to amass and publish a whole range of source material relevant to the time-reckoning system of an often-reviled group of religious ‘others’, Sebastian Münster gave powerful expression to the significance that calendars in general possessed for the lives of early-sixteenth-century scholars and their audiences. Conditioned by the liturgical year of the Roman Church, with its exuberant cycle of feast days and observances, many among his contemporaries would have been acutely aware of the calendar’s role as a societal pacemaker and marker of cultural identity, which went far beyond its ordinary function as a scheme of counting days. Unlike any other device known to man, calendars had the capacity of merging personal with communal, sacred with profane time, in ways that connected these various human measures to the motions of the celestial bodies and thus to the unchanging laws of the cosmos, which were presumed to be divine.4 After centuries of living side by side with Jews, who represented the only significant religious minority in pre-Reformation Europe, Christians were also able to appreciate the calendar as one of the elements that most visibly separated Jews from the surrounding Christian society, as both groups were regularly called to work, rest, feast, fast,

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