Robert of Leicester’s Treatise on the Hebrew Calendar (1294)

Franciscan Hebraism and the Challenge of Biblical Chronology

Aided by the newly founded mendicant orders, the thirteenth-century Church developed a policy of proselytization towards the Jews that differed from that of previous centuries both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Instead of complacently awaiting their conversion in the end times, Jews were now increasingly forced to attend Christian sermons or to take part in public disputations, the most famous such incident being the historical confrontation in Barcelona in 1263, which saw the Jewish side represented by Moses ben Nahman (Naḥmanides), the rabbi of Gerona.1 In the aftermath of this disputation, the Catalan Dominican friar Ramón Martí published the Capistrum Iudaeorum (1267) and the Pugio fidei (1278), two massive compendia of religious polemic, which show that their author had acquired an impressive knowledge of Hebrew and even Aramaic in his efforts to draw evidence for the truth of Christianity from Talmudic and Midrashic passages.2 While Dominicans like Martí valued the study of Hebrew primarily for polemical and missionary purposes, others turned to the Jews’ sacred language because they sought to improve their understanding of Scripture. Although Hebraistic knowledge was not completely unheard of in the early Middle Ages, the real foundations for this type of study were

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only during the twelfth century, when an interest in the literal-historical interpretation of the biblical text, spearheaded by the school of the Abbey of St. Victor near Paris, gained new importance. A pioneering role in this respect was played by the famous Victorine exegete Hugh (d. 1141), who repeatedly sought the advice of neighbouring rabbis and incorporated their scriptural interpretations into his own writings. The gravitation towards Jewish biblical scholarship was even stronger in the work of one of Hugh's students, the Englishman Andrew of St. Victor (ca. 1110–1175), whose predilections were also shared by his

