On Naphtali Herz Ulman’s Biography and the Reception of His Works in The Netherlands

In 2001 the library of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam acquired a book that had been known to exist, but which nobody had been able to locate till then. It was a convolute of two compositions written by Naphtali Herz (Hartog) Ulman from Mainz, a teacher of mathematics and philosophy. Both compositions are Dutch translations of originally German texts that have remained in manuscript. They were published in 1769 by the Amsterdam bookseller Arend Diederik Selschap. The first composition is entitled ‘Argument of God’s presence and his qualities’, the other ‘Defence of philosophy, in which the teachings and honour of Hartog Ulman are defended’.¹ The convolute turned up at an auction of the antiquarian bookseller Govert Kool in Ederveen, who operates in the market of old orthodox Protestant literature. Indeed, Ulman’s book was somewhat of a rare bird in Kool’s bookstore, and the work was purchased for a small sum by the university library.² Besides these Dutch translations, only one Hebrew work of Ulman has appeared in print.³ Many other manuscripts of this relatively neglected, early maskilic, author have been preserved.⁴ They lay at the basis of the dissertation (and

¹ Hartog Ulman van Mentz, Betoog van het aanwezen Gods en deszelfs eigenschappen a priori, waarin alles uit de eerste gronden der waarheid in een natuurlijken ’t zamenhang uit elkander afgeleit, en volgens de mathematische leerwijze word voorgesteld, 88 pp., 4o, and Apologia of verdediging der wijsbegeerte, in welke de leer en eer van Hartog Ulman tegen de vijanden der waarheid verdedigt, en de kragteloosheid der godloze laster en beschuldigingen door zijn vervolgers uitgestrooit, op goede gronden aangetoont word, 56 pp., 4o, Amsterdam 1769 [University Library Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, shelf number XP.01408].
² Information provided by Dr. Willem Heijting, librarian manuscripts and early printed books, director of the Study Centre for Protestant Book Culture.
³ H. Ulman, Hokhmat ha-shorashim (Amsterdam 1778) 231 fols [University Library Leiden, shelf number 876 C 3].
⁴ Cf. A. van der Heide, Hebrew manuscripts of Leiden University Library (Leiden 1977) 15 and 67f.
other publications) devoted to Ulman’s thought by the Israeli scholar Alexander Even-Chen.⁵

A recent sketch of Naphtali Herz Ulman’s biography can be found in an article by Zwi Malachi, who extracted his findings from Ulman’s Hebrew writings.⁶ In the present contribution I intend to cast new light upon his life, combining autobiographical details from his apology and from various archival sources. I shall then describe the background of the Dutch translation and its reception in the Netherlands. The final – and indeed somewhat curious – part of this contribution will deal with a contemporary Ashkenazi Jew who experienced a religious crisis after reading Ulman’s work, and whose conversion to Christianity was considered exemplary by the representatives of the eighteenth-century Dutch Enlightenment.⁷

Ulman’s life

Given his age at the time of his death, Naphtali Herz Ulman must have been born around 1731. The son of a rich rabbi in Mainz, he graduated from the yeshivah of rabbi Shmuel Halman in Mannheim. From his early youth he showed a great intellectual drive. Encounters with a mathematician and a mystic from Frankfurt stimulated his growing criticism of traditional Judaism. He read Maimonides and other classical Jewish writers, as well as Spinoza, Voltaire, Baumgarten, Leibniz and Wolff. He also trained himself in the sciences. His study of logic and mathematics in particular prepared his later interpretations of the Holy Writ.

For a while Ulman sojourned in Strasbourg. Upon returning to Mainz, he worked as a teacher and composed a theory of the existence of

⁵ See for a summary and bibliography Even-Chen’s contribution to W. van Bunge, ed., The Dictionary of Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Philosophers 2 vols (Bristol 2003), vol. 2 1003-1006.


⁷ This contribution arose from current research on the conversion of Jews to Christianity in The Netherlands, especially within the Reformed tradition.