
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Posset, Franz. Respect for the Jews. Foreword by Yaacov Deutch.

Nathan Ron

Volume 43, numéro 1, hiver 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070210ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34130>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Ron, N. (2020). Compte rendu de [Posset, Franz. Respect for the Jews. Foreword by Yaacov Deutch.] *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(1), 266–269. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34130>

The other important merit of this study is to highlight the stark discrepancy between the public rhetoric employed in contemporary texts discussing the doctrinal validity of Nicodemite behaviour (or lack thereof, as was often the case), and the pragmatic necessity in real life to manage communities in which individuals, belonging to opposing sides of religious or political divides (whether openly or “in their hearts”), simply had to coexist. This, Overell convincingly argues, often demanded compromises and practical *ad hoc* solutions that had to circumvent or just ignore the strictures of doctrine, progressively undermining its influence in everyday decision-making. Together with a diminishing appetite for religious persecution, this pragmatism allowed for a reassessment of Nicodemite practices, which prepared the ground for a significant turn away from rigid condemnation and towards compassion and reconciliation. Thus, rather than the silent and secretive victims of pre-modern culture wars we are used to, Overell’s Nicodemites emerge as unsuspecting catalysts of a more tolerant future and ultimately as the moral winners of the terrible battles that were fought over their consciences.

CLAUDIA ROSSIGNOLI

University of St. Andrews

Posset, Franz.

***Respect for the Jews*. Foreword by Yaacov Deutch.**

Collected Works 4. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019. Pp. 310. ISBN 978-1-5326-7090-9 (paperback) US\$28.80.

Respect for the Jews is a collection of studies originally presented at various conferences or lectures. As Franz Posset explains, his studies, with the exception of chapter 8, “may be considered contributions for evidence of some provocative, early philosemitic elements within a world and a society that was filled with Christian protoantisemitism in the early sixteenth century. [...] My intention here is not to offer a comprehensive investigation into philosemitism (nor into antisemitism) in the sixteenth century, but to highlight some friendliness, or at least some respect, toward the Jews—on a stage that is dominated by the gloomy and terrifying backdrop of hate and persecution” (4).

According to Posset (1), this volume may accompany an earlier book that he wrote as a tribute to a great humanist and Hebraist: *Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522): A Theological Biography* (2015). Indeed, in many ways *Respect for the Jews* may be considered a continuation and elaboration of issues that pertain to Posset’s erudite and detailed biography of Reuchlin (over nine hundred pages). Nevertheless, the volume can stand for itself. A command of Reuchlin’s biography is by no means a prerequisite to reading the present volume. Reuchlin is present throughout the volume. Chapter 2 has a sufficient summary of Reuchlin’s deeds and innovations (37ff.). In chapter 3, Reuchlin is elaborately discussed in the context of his efforts to defend the writings of the Jews, including the Talmud, on the basis of Christ’s command in John 5:39: “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.”

The volume includes, for the first time ever, a translation from Latin into English of Georg Witzel’s speech “In praise of the Hebrew language” (ch. 4, 108–97, Latin and English text). Witzel, a sixteenth-century, prolific author, was ordained as a priest in 1521. He converted to Lutheranism and received a parish north of Wittenberg where he studied Hebrew. According to Posset (102), his teachers were Bernhardus Hebraeus (formerly rabbi Jacob Gipher) and the scholar and former Jew Matthaëus Adrianus. Posset skips the connections Witzel had with the infamous convert Antonius Margaritha, who, most likely, taught Hebrew to Witzel—not according to Posset, but according to a handwritten note in Margaritha’s Hebrew Psalter (Leipzig, 1533) which testifies to it. Witzel changed confessional sides and ended up as a Catholic albeit an enthusiast of ecumenical concord. Witzel had conversations with learned Jews throughout his life: for example, when he was in Prague in 1539/1540 he consulted with Rabbi Abraham (ben Avigdor).

Posset claims that “In praise of the Hebrew language” was overlooked by researchers and as a result became almost unknown. In Witzel’s eulogy, the Hebrew language receives an intriguing piece of laudatory rhetoric. Witzel declares, “Since the Hebrew language is the older one, it must also be the one that is more divine and more august [...] when the name Greece or Latium did not exist yet in this world” (119). Witzel then asserts that “Jesus, the Son of the highest God [...] also wanted to speak in Hebrew to the Hebrews. [...] O what a language which excels all other languages by far, O first language” (121). Since his readers may still have doubts about Christ’s spoken language, Witzel adds,

“You may object that Christ actually had spoken Chaldean [Aramaic. . .] To this I respond that at that time both languages were one and the same to a degree that whatever he may have spoken, he has spoken in Hebrew” (125–26). Toward the antagonists of Hebrew, Witzel is firm and rude: “They themselves are neither Jews nor Christians, nor human persons, but piglets” (143). Witzel praises the study of theology (149), which should go hand in hand with the study of Hebrew, “just as a soldier in battle cannot last long without proper gear” (151). However, the instrumental nature of Witzel’s “philosemitism” is exposed in his own following lines: “Perhaps you have seen once a [Christian] Hebrew expert. He stands firm like an iron wall in any conflict whenever he takes refuge with this language. How could a Christian win victory over a Jew without the help from the holy language?” (159). Studying Hebrew for the purpose of polemically winning over the Jews may well be a convincing argument, but hardly a philosemitic one. Witzel continues with praising certain personae, among them Anthonius Margaritha (193), Luther’s guide and inspiration to hating the Jews. Is it possible that Posset has been somewhat overswept by his own philosemitism?

Luther is another star in Posset’s writings. Thus, Posset’s introduction deals with Luther’s “proto-antisemitism” (10ff), and in chapter 5 Posset elaborates on the adage “The Hebrews drink from the source, the Greeks from the rills [...] and the Latin people from the puddle,” which appears in Luther’s *Tischreden*. Chapter 6 investigates Catholic prayers in Hebrew, focusing on *Our Father*, i.e., Hebrew translations of traditional Christian prayers in Latin that several scholars included in their Hebrew grammar books. In Chapter 7, Posset analyzes Reuchlin’s treatise titled *Johann Reuchlin’s German open letter [discussing] why the Jews have been in “exile” so long* (1505), arguing that Reuchlin felt sincere concern over the continued suffering of the Jews and sought to understand it.

Posset should be credited for his use of illustrations throughout the book. The volume has thirty-one illustrations, of which illustration 1.1, depicting the first full-page miniature with historiated Hebrew initial **ב** (bet) in the Hebrew Bible, is Posset’s important discovery. The reader benefits from these additions, and the reading experience becomes richer and more profound. Moreover, Yaacov Deutsch remarked in his foreword that the illustrations allow Posset to offer new insights concerning the use of Hebrew by Christians and Christian attitudes toward Jews in that period. This is demonstrated very well in chapter 8 where Posset argues that earlier portrayals of the famous convert Johan

Pfefferkorn distorted his image. Posset analyzes Pfefferkorn's writings (texts and illustrations of Pfefferkorn's works of 1507–1508), which aimed at converting the Jews, and argues that the notorious convert was a well-educated and media-savvy, devoted, and knowledgeable Christian who translated Christian prayers into Hebrew and was anything but a “banausic butcher” (255), as Reuchlin defined him. Interestingly, here Posset does not side with Reuchlin.

NATHAN RON

The University of Haifa

Raggio, Osvaldo.

Feuds and State Formation, 1550–1700: The Backcountry of the Republic of Genoa.

Early Modern History: Society and Culture. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Pp. xxv, 316 + 16 ill., 13 tables. ISBN 978-3-319-94642-9 (hardcover) US\$99.99.

Feuds and State Formation, 1550–1700: The Backcountry of the Republic of Genoa by Osvaldo Raggio is part of the series Early Modern History: Society and Culture which explores European topics in the area of social, political, and cultural history from 1400 to 1800. By focusing on the interaction between the Republic of Genoa and a number of local communities in the mountainous backcountry of Eastern Liguria, Raggio offers a different perspective on the role of local agency and relationships between the centre and the periphery. His re-examination provides a new standpoint on the political, social, and cultural history of state formation. Through a micro-historical approach, he re-evaluates the two main elements that Charles Tilly and other scholars have characterized as the foundation for the construction of the modern state: judicial administration and fiscal extraction. Raggio takes apart the notion of measuring state formation by a steady growth of the institutions and functions of central power and by the formation of bureaucracy. He points out that the traditional historiography from an elitist point of view ignores the cultural and economic exchanges between the centre and the localities.

Raggio examines political treatises, memoirs, letters, and other municipal records to demonstrate that the relationship between Genoa and Liguria