

Franz Posset, *Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522). A Theological Biography* (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 129; Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter 2015). Pp. XXVI + 917. €99,95. \$140. £74. ISBN 978-3-11-041947-4

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A monumental biography of Johann Reuchlin, written by Franz Posset and published by De Gruyter, appeared in 2015. The work was released as the 129th volume in the editorial series entitled: “Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte”.

Johann Reuchlin, a German humanist, theologian, lawyer, Hebraist and a philosopher was a pioneer of the Renaissance Christian studies on biblical languages and Christian Jewish studies. The most popular 16th century grammar textbook of biblical Hebrew came from his pen (*De rudimentis hebraicis libri III*, 1506). He was a pioneer in Christian studies on the Jewish Cabbala (*De verbo mirifico*, Basel 1494; *De arte cabalistica*, Hagenau [Alsace] 1517). In the years of 1510-1520 Reuchlin stood in defense of Jewish books, which were confiscated by the imperial solicitor, Johann Pfefferkorn, who was supported by the Dominicans (it was the so-called battle over Jewish books), which gave an impulse, by the same token, to long drawn-out feuds of European scope between the supporters of scholasticism and humanism. Both the linguistic studies of Reuchlin and his activity played a fundamental role in the formation of modern-day research into the Holy Scripture and the emergence of so-called Christian Hebraism.

Starting with the 19th century, the life and activity of Reuchlin was the object of interest of many researchers, who left articles and monographs behind. One can mention names such as Siegmund Friedrich Gehres, Ernst Theodor Mayerhoff, J. Lamey, Ludwig Geiger, Max Brod, James H. Overfield, Hans-Rudiger Schwab, Hans-Gert Roloff and David H. Price here. Since 1961 the “Pforzheimer Reuchlinschriften” editorial series has been issued, which is devoted to Reuchlin and his epoch. Recently, a critical edition of Reuchlin’s correspondence has been published (*Johannes Reuchlin: Briefwechsel*, ed. M. Dall’Asta, G. Dörner, S. Rhein, vol. 1-4, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt 1999-2013). So, what new information could have been discovered and written about Reuchlin?

Posset’s work appeared in English and became much more widely available than the German books about Reuchlin. It is based on the recently

published critical edition of Reuchlin's correspondence. The other rudimentary set of sources about Reuchlin for Posset constitute his own works (until 2015 three volumes: *Johannes Reuchlin Sämtlich Werke*, ed. W.W. Ehlers, H.G. Roloff, P. Schäfer: vol. 1/1: *De verbo mirifico*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1996; vol. 2/1: *De arte cabalistica*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2010; vol. 4/1: *Reuchlins Schriften [Missiue, Augenspiegel, Defensio]*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1999 appeared). The author also had access to the remaining copies of Reuchlin's own books.

Posset's monograph is "a theological biography". The author concentrates in it not only on the philological achievements of Reuchlin, but first of all, draws our attention to his philosophy and theology, which as a result created a new, previously unknown picture of the famous humanist. This novel image emerges with many aspects. Posset presents Reuchlin as "the Catholic lay theologian par excellence in Germany" (p. 6, 30-31) and "the greatest lay theologian" (p. 48), the creator of a "Catholic Cabala" (p. 4-5), which consists of the uncovering of the hidden Catholic christological, soteriological and trinitarian dogmas in Jewish writings. The words of Jesus in John 5:39 (ἐραυνᾶτε τὰς γραφάς – "search the scriptures") were understood by Reuchlin as an encouragement to study all writings of the Jewish tradition, also those which were beyond the Bible and other non-biblical sources in original ancient languages. Posset claims that Reuchlin "transformed the religious philosophy of the Jews (Cabala) into a theology compatible with the Catholic dogma" (p. 11; p. 872). Reuchlin was not uncritical, though. He was able to separate magical elements and those inconsistent with Christian faith from his "Catholic Cabala".

The Author analysed an immense number of sources. Reuchlin's attitudes emerged from his religious life as a Renaissance humanist, followed by his studies and works including those about and in reference to the Jews. Posset notices several major elements in Reuchlin's spirituality, in particular his catholicity, biblical and Marian piety, a sense of justice (stemming from his study of law), love of a neighbour, and a search for the truth. Such an approach to Reuchlin was not present in previous literature so far.

Since the 19th century Reuchlin was considered one of the fathers of biblical criticism in the contemporary understanding. On the other hand, cabalistic interests of the humanist were taken with the proverbial "pinch of salt". In this context Posset notices that Reuchlin in his exegesis, only to some extent, looked for the historical sense in the Bible, but was mainly interested in the search for the spiritual sense. Reuchlin pursued this on the basis of the original Hebrew as well as the spiritual and allegorical methods of Jewish exegesis. Hence, his interest in Cabala, which in terms

of the method of Bible interpretation is similar to the Church's spiritual interpretations.

Posset disputes the widespread opinion which originated from the speech of Philip Melanchthon made on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the death of the Hebraist that Reuchlin was one of the forefathers of the Reformation, or even an expressed representative of anticlericalism. The Author determines such views as "sheer nonsense", and their dissemination as "misinformation" (p. XII, 1, 10). Melanchthon speech is regarded as biased and incomplete, and the need for its correction is expressed on numerous occasions (e.g. p. 1-2, 10, 15-28). The height of misunderstanding around the role of Reuchlin in the 16th century religious disputes, according to Posset, presents him among the reformers as the "Defender of Christian Liberty", "Patron of Liberty" (p. 793-798, 868) and the predecessor of Luther. The causes of this mistaken perception of Reuchlin lie both on the side of Lutheran propaganda (Melanchthon's speech) and Catholic anti-Lutheranism. In the latter case the conflict of Reuchlin with Pfefferkorn as perceived against the background of reformational movements was associated and compared by Dominican theologians to Luther's conflict with Rome. The Dominicans juxtaposed Luther and Reuchlin very quickly, treating their views as erroneous, which as they put it "must be nipped in the bud" (p. 868). These events caused Rome to change its favourable attitude toward the Hebraist, condemning his ill-fated book *Augenspiegel* in 1520; but as Posset emphasizes not for doctrinal reasons (unlike in the case of Luther), but because of the slander it contained and sheer favouritism of the Jews. Unlike Luther, Reuchlin was never excommunicated. As has been mentioned above, Posset paints a dramatically different portrait of Reuchlin, presenting him as loyal to Rome, an exemplary Catholic, and lay theologian. If there were any relation between Reuchlin and Luther then it would consist in the fact that the Reformer at Wittenberg, similarly to Reuchlin, resorted to the Bible in its original languages in his exegesis and appreciated the study of those languages, and Luther rejecting at the same time any cabalistic studies. "Reuchlin searched for the common grounds of Judaism and Christianity. Luther was interested only in the distinctiveness of the pure Gospel, as he saw it and as he interpreted it, in contrast to the Jews, Turks, and papists" (p. 879). Even more differences appear in the attitudes of the two towards the Jews themselves: Reuchlin treated them with respect and kindness, whereas Luther with contempt and resentment.

Posset introduces the reader also to a different image of Johann Pfefferkorn, who is often depicted as a fanatical ignorant convert from Judaism,

supposedly guided by the Dominicans. While analysing the sources, the Author came to the conclusion that the convert was perceived by other contemporaries as a good Catholic of Jewish origin, a respectable citizen of Köln who conducted missions among the Jews, an expert on Judaism and a contemporaneous ethnographer, who made the knowledge of Jewish traditions available to the Christians of his time. In this perspective the conflict between Pfefferkorn and Reuchlin changed insofar as it appears as filled with misunderstandings, stubbornness and tenacity – and as an inner-eclesial dispute over the proper dealing with the Jews and their books. At the core of the argument, according to Posset, was the lack of consistency in the Church’s law-making in reference to the Jews. Pfefferkorn based his arguments on intolerant attitudes (Gregory IX, Innocent III, Innocent IV), whereas Reuchlin drew from the more tolerant ones (St Gregory the Great, Alexander III, Clement V, the Synod of Vienne (France); and St Thomas Aquinas). The turbulent nature of the dispute was strictly connected with the strong personalities of its participants, who were often fighting for their own reputation in mutually derogatory terms.

According to Posset, the Renaissance Hebraist was a forefather of the Catholic attitude toward the Jews, which after several centuries was finally determined by the declaration of the II Vatican Council *Nostra Aetate* (in 1965). The essence of Reuchlin’s attitude toward the Jews was characterised by a kind, friendly one, full of respect, and far from violence or exerted pressure for conversion and baptism. According to Reuchlin, the knowledge of the Jewish tradition and of their books was very helpful in disputes with the Jews, which in his opinion should be studied instead of being destroyed. The Hebraist from Pforzheim “remained a channel of Hebrew biblical wisdom, including linguistic, allegorical, and cabalistic interpretations of the Sacred Scriptures, all of which he correlated with his Catholic religion in a non-antagonistic way” (p. 879-880). The author changes the view about Reuchlin and his times as related to the phenomenon of antisemitism and with respect to the Catholic-Jewish dialogue. For Posset, Reuchlin represents the model of tolerance and inter-religious dialogue. The Author presents his hero as an advocate of the official teachings of the Church on the subject of the Jews, as our older brothers in faith, which is widely acknowledged today.

Posset applied a method similar to the historical-critical exegesis in his analysis of the source materials. Its first stage was a critical reading of Reuchlin’s texts and those addressed to Reuchlin in the original languages. Then, Posset examined the context of the emerging texts and their unique *Sitz im Leben*.

The preface to the work was written by Matthias Dall'Asta, the co-editor of a four-volume critical edition of Reuchlin's correspondence. Posset compiled the life and activity of Reuchlin in a chronological way. The first chapter ("The unique philosopher and theologian of our times") constitutes an introduction to the research issues by highlighting differing views about the humanist. In the subsequent chapters (there are fifteen of them in total), the Author presents the life story of Reuchlin by emphasizing his education in his early years, his philosophical-theological works, which were mainly centered around a "Catholic Cabala", and his interest in the ancient languages (Latin, Greek and Hebrew). He shows Reuchlin's attitude toward the Jews against the backdrop of their situation in Europe. Starting with Chapter 6 he describes the background and the development of the so-called "battle over Jewish books" between Reuchlin and Pfefferkorn, the involvement of contemporaneous university centers, humanists, the inquisitor and also of Pope Leo X.

Chapter 15 ("Hunted like a hare and celebrated by Christians and Jews for his life-time achievements") tells the story of the bitter final years of the humanist's life, emphasizing the significance of his achievements for the relations of Christians and the Jews. The book is equipped with chronological tables (p. 882-883), a list of select literature (p. 892-894) and two indexes: personal (p. 895-911) and one of biblical quotations (p. 912-917). The opus is illustrated with 31 reproductions (partly in colour) of manuscripts, incunabula, old prints and letters connected with the life and activities of Reuchlin. Some of them belonged to Reuchlin; their inclusion constitutes a priceless supplementation of the source material utilized by Posset. His book is his *Alterswerk* and is dedicated to the retired auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Richard J. Sklba, former chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. The price of the volume is very reasonable at a cost of about 100 Euros. Establishing such an affordable price was possible thanks to the financial support (*Druckkostenzuschuss*) of the city of Pforzheim, the home-town of Johann Reuchlin.

For this book Posset received the 2016 *Harry C. Koenig Prize for Catholic Biography* of the *American Catholic Historical Association*. The date of the publication of the book (2015) is of some significance since important anniversaries will be celebrated in 2017, especially the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and also of the publication of Reuchlin's significant book on the *Art of the Cabala*. (In the years of 1515-1517 the Reuchlinists published the satirical *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum* against which Pope Leo X issued his bulla on 15 March 1517). Posset's work appearing on

the eve of these anniversaries will enable us to form a new view on the beginning of the Reformation and the relation of Johann Reuchlin to that movement, at least in some aspects.

In conclusion, a book like that of Franz Posset does not deserve just a review, it deserves laudation! From my point of view, it is the best and the most reliable biography of the great humanist of Pforzheim. This book will take pride of place in any reputable humanist and theological library.