

H-France Review Vol. 10 (February 2010), No. 30

Jean Thenaud. *Traicté de la Cabale*. Textes de la Renaissance 124. Ian R. Christie-Miller and François Roudaut, eds. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2007. 482 pp. + 1 color and 28 b/w pls. index. illus. gloss. bibl. €88. ISBN: 978-2-7453-1541-0.

Review by Daniel Stein Kokin, Yale University.

Initially the product of a doctoral dissertation, this edition of the French Franciscan Jean Thenaud's *Traicté de la Cabale* is a welcome addition to the growing list of Christian Kabbalist texts available and rendered accessible to the modern scholar or interested reader. Written in French around 1520–1521 at the request of François I, at a time when France lagged behind the Italian and German lands, and Spain in the Christian pursuit of Hebraica, this treatise enables us better to understand the dissemination not only of Kabbalistic studies, but also of neo-Platonic currents of thought (e.g., the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino) in early modern France.^[1] The edition opens with an introduction, the first part of which provides an uneven survey of Christian Hebraist and Kabbalist studies marred by unclear purpose, idiosyncratic bibliography, and occasional errors (for example, what connection did Egidio da Viterbo have to Paul Fagius, p. 9^p). More helpful is the subsequent background on the life and writings of Thenaud himself (though this reader would have welcome a deeper exploration of his intellectual formation), and on the manuscript tradition of his *Traicté*. More could have been said as well concerning the reception of this work (we hear about this only very briefly on p. 29), but the introduction does conclude with the interesting suggestion that the *Traicté* constitutes a “véritable miroir du prince” (p. 49).

Each of the six sub-treatises that comprise this work addresses a particular neo-Platonic or Kabbalistic theme, i.e., the four worlds, the immortality of the soul, the angelic realm, the Kabbalah of the Jews, the Kabbalah of the Christians, and the mutual influence of the three higher worlds and on the fourth, namely man. As is perhaps already clear from the foregoing roster, Thenaud in this work is less concerned to penetrate deeply into the Kabbalah as conceived and practiced by Jews (Johannes Reuchlin is, after all, his primary source on the Kabbalah of the Jews), than to present Kabbalah as the achievement of the unity of thought “...rêvée durant des siècles” (p. 32). As such, this work is a fitting testament to just what happened to this tradition of Jewish thought when it entered the Christian cultural mainstream at this time. Reuchlin, along with Ficino and Pico della Mirandola represent the book's primary sources (the *Traicté* could well be described as a digest of their works for the king), though Thenaud displays in addition an important debt to ancient classical historians, as well as to the forged histories reported in the works of Annius of Viterbo. And Thenaud's use of these sources is, to say the least, liberal—entire passages from them are simply translated and pasted into his work. It is rare, our editor admits, that Thenaud actually “ajoute un élément” (p. 35).^[2] As such, we are faced less with an original treatise, than with an early and substantial vernacular digest of Kabbalist and Neo-Platonic intellectual currents.

The actual body of this edition is supremely well executed and Christie-Miller and his collaborators are to be commended for their painstaking and thorough scholarship. The footnotes delineating the sources for the text are exhaustive (typically including the original Latin counterparts to Thenaud's Old

French) and the editors have spared no effort to assist the reader in making sense of this lengthy (116 folio) and at times dense work. In addition to these notes, a glossary of old French terms, presentation of manuscript variants, and indices of references and names have been furnished.

One noteworthy feature of this edition is the numerous images it features of diagrams and drawings found in manuscripts of Thenaud's *magnum opus*. Christie-Miller has clearly done some important detective work in using digital imaging of a watermark to help date a certain manuscript copy of the text (see pp. 26-7 and Fig. 1). In general, the twenty-eight figures (in addition to other images interspersed throughout the text) go a long way toward enabling the reader to experience the actual manuscript copies of the text. Still, there is often little guidance to help the reader appreciate the true significance of these various visuals, and such guidance as there is, is not always sufficiently helpful (on p. 40, for example, we are referred to the three concentric circles of figure 7, representing how the intelligences rule the celestial world, but no such circles were discernible to this viewer).^[3] Furthermore, the rich visual aspects of the text strike this reviewer as one of this work's more interesting features; for this reason, more substantial discussion of their overall place in the work and significance would have been welcome.

Between its subject matter, length, and dense language, Jean Thenaud's *Traicté de la Cabale* is hardly one of the more accessible works of its time. Yet this fine edition helps the reader immensely in making sense of and contextualizing an important vernacular contribution to the Neo-Platonic and Kabbalistic discourse that became so prevalent in the Renaissance.

NOTES

[1] It is hard to understand on what basis it is alleged on p. 12 that "La France demeure donc, en ce début de siècle, le pays où se développent le plus, après l'Italie, les études hébraïques."

[2] One interesting source, most capably treated in the Introduction (pp. 45-48) is the *Toldot Yeshu*, a Jewish polemical biography of Jesus. Christie-Miller plausibly suggests that Thenaud must have had access to an older and rarer version of this text.

[3] In particular, one would have liked to know why Thenaud modeled certain of his diagrams after those developed by the ninth-century Carolingian theologian Rabanus Maurus.

Daniel Stein Kokin
Yale University
daniel.steinkokin@yale.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172