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Michael T. Walton. *Anthonius Margaritha and the Jewish Faith: Jewish Life and Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Germany.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012. Illustrations. 264 pp. $44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3800-1.

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A "difficult earthly life": Anthonius Margaritha and Jewish Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Germany

Anthonius Margaritha, born into an important and respected rabbinical family sometime in the late fifteenth century, is best known for his book *Der Gantz Jüdisch Glaub* (The whole Jewish belief, published for the first time in 1530). It was the first major work of a distinctive early modern and mostly German polemical genre, "Christian ethnographies" of Jews and Judaism, written by former Jews and Christian Hebraists and employing a distinctive "ethnographic gaze" in their descriptions of contemporary Jewish life, rituals, customs, and prayers. The book was known to Martin Luther, which enhanced Margaritha's reputation as a sincere convert and reliable informant on Judaism. While the importance of Margaritha and his work have been acknowledged for a long time, only a small number of books have examined his work in any great detail. Josef Mieses's 1916 study, the first to discuss Margaritha in a separate work and still a point of reference for much more recent scholarship, focused on the first translation of the Jewish prayer book into German that Margaritha had included in his work. Mieses offered a very negative assessment of Margaritha as convert and traitor and dismissed his knowledge of Hebrew.[1] My 1999 University of Vienna doctoral dissertation, influenced by time spent at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a self-confident Jewish historiography encountered there, examined Margaritha and his work in the context of his contribution to "Christian ethnographies" and contrasted it with the earlier convert Victor von Carben.[2] German theologian Peter von der Osten-Sacken published in 2002 a study of Luther's attitudes toward Jews and Judaism with particular consideration of Margaritha's influence on Luther.[3]

Michael T. Walton has chosen a biographical approach, with the explicit aim to "yield an understanding of [Margaritha] as an individual rather than as a type" and to allow for the complexity of the convert although he admits at the outset that "sources are limited" (p. xv). As he points out (with reference to works by Stephen Burnett, Yaacov Deutsch, and me), he is not the first to steer away from the negative tone adopted by Mieses and others, but he offers the most sympathetic reading so far.

We know very little about Margaritha's life before his conversion, although some of his ancestors, including Rabbi Jacob Margoles, his grandfather, and Rabbi Samuel Margoles, his father, are well known. In the first chapter, Walton reconstructs Margaritha's ancestry and family background, with a focus on Jacob Margoles's writings, and against the backdrop of the historical and social realities of the increasingly beleaguered Jewish community of Regensburg. A quote on the blurb of the book cover mentions "the burden of a rabbinic family" as one of Margaritha's struggles, but Walton makes it quite clear that Margaritha benefited from this illustrious, learned, and probably quite well-off family.

Chapter 2 is largely descriptive and perhaps the least convincing part of the book. Walton argues that the rituals and customs that Margaritha described in his work are those that he knew intimately from his personal observances, and he tries to construct a sense of how Margaritha lived as a Jew from these descriptions. Little sense of Margaritha as an individual comes across in this chapter, however. Walton suggests that "his attitude towards Jewish life after his conversion reveals how observance weighed on him" and that his analysis of Jewish rituals demonstrates the transition he made from Judaism to Christianity (p. 33). He also notes the criticism of rabbinic Judaism in the late sixteenth-century anonymous work "Kol Sakhol" (voice of a fool, attributed to Leon da Modena), suggesting that Margaritha's discontent with the yoke of the Oral Law was not unique but did not necessarily have to lead to conversion.

The next chapter discusses Margaritha's understanding of the Messiah which Walton sees as the main rea-

son for his conversion, having lived in a "hypermessianic world." Of particular interest is Walton's discussion of Margaritha's knowledge of Kabbalah. "Defending" the convert against Mieses's disparaging remarks that Margaritha had no understanding of (Lurianic) Kabbalah, Walton demonstrates, with reference to Moshe Idel's work on theurgical performances of mitzvoth, that Margaritha discussed a Kabbalah of prayer, which he presented as a "contemplative, interpretive method with magical overtones" (p. 54). Walton establishes a convincing link to Rabbi Naftali Hirtz Treeves's kabbalistic prayer commentary and Treeves's connection with Nuremberg when Margaritha's grandfather served as a rabbi there. Walton also offers an insightful reading of Margaritha's translation of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew (1533), a work that has so far not been properly analyzed. Another interesting observation is on Margaritha's Jewish reading of Jes 53 which was criticized by the Catholic theologian Johannes Eck who regarded Margaritha as unlearned and ignorant. However, as Walton demonstrates, thanks to his background, Margaritha had a much better understanding of the Hebrew text and its Masoretic markings than the learned professor, even if this placed him "on the side of Jewish tradition and in opposition to Catholic dogma" (p. 59).

Chapter 4 examines Margaritha's life after his conversion. Walton makes extensive use of my reconstruction of Margaritha's later life, particularly his years at the University of Vienna, and adds useful details to his various itinerant teaching commitments in the years after his conversion. He demonstrates welcome sensitivity on gender differences among converts by referring repeatedly to the plight of Margaritha's wife but frustratingly only very little is known about her. Other important observations include the somewhat surprising fact that Margaritha completely ignored in his writing the biggest change in Christianity happening in his lifetime, the Reformation, and also failed to make a reference to the disappointment in the failed Messiah Shlomo Molkho, which, as Walton observes, would have strengthened his messianic points. The first part of the book ends with Margaritha's death in Vienna in 1542. Walton's appraisal is somewhat surprising: by framing it with the midrashic story of the deathbed repentance of Elisha ben Abuyah (Midrash Rabbah Ruth, VI:4), he seems to suggest that Margaritha struggled with an ambivalence between the two faiths and that returning to Judaism is something that Margaritha might have considered too, for which I see no evidence.

I am not entirely convinced that the biographical approach is the best way to approach Margaritha because of the lack of material to merit a book-length study of his life. Some of the most interesting and original observations are in the parts that do not refer directly to Margaritha's biography. It also means that the book has the somewhat unusual arrangement of four appendices that discuss important aspects of Margaritha's works and make up 50 percent of the book. Appendix A analyzes and translates Margaritha's *Refutation of the Jewish Faith*. Walton suggests reading it in the context of traditional polemical discourse between Jews and Christians on biblical interpretation and Messianism. The translation of the often awkward sixteenth-century German is very fluent and manages to be accessible and to convey a sense of Margaritha's style. It also includes a full reproduction of this section from the Frankfurt 1544 printing. Appendix B returns to Margaritha's understanding of contemporary Kabbalah and provides translations of the relevant passages. As Walton has noted earlier, these offer interesting material for a better understanding of Jewish prayer in the early sixteenth century. Appendix C examines the afterlife of *Der Gantz Jüdisch Glaub* following its first publication in 1530 and its second edition in 1531. This is an interesting analysis of printing history that includes a discussion of the woodcuts in Margaritha's work. Appendix D is a commentary and a translation of selected passages from Margaritha's prayer book. Walton suggests that each of Margaritha's explanations of the prayers and the rituals surrounding them "reveals something of [his] discomfort with Judaism and reason for converting" (p. 180).

This is an enjoyable book that analyzes the complex circumstances of an influential early modern convert, introduces scholarship that was published in German to an English-reading audience, and provides welcome new perspectives. I would have liked to see the findings embedded in a more ambitious methodological framework and in a larger narrative of early modern conversions from Judaism to one of the Christian churches, taking into account the wealth of particular German scholarship in the past fifteen years or so. Having said that, this beautifully presented and well-written book adds to our understanding of the Jewish conversion experience in the early sixteenth century and again stresses the importance of convert writings for Jewish historiography.

Notes

[1]. Josef Mieses, *Die älteste gedruckte deutsche Uebersetzung des jüdischen Gebetbuches a.d. Jahre 1530* (Vienna: R. Löwit, 1916).

[2]. Maria Diemling, "Christliche Ethnographien über Juden und Judentum in der Frühen Neuzeit: Die

Konvertiten Victor von Carben und Anthonius Margaritha und ihre Darstellung jüdischen Lebens und jüdischer Religion" (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 1999).

[3]. Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Martin Luther und die Juden. Neu untersucht anhand von Anton Margarithas "Der gantz Jüdisch glaub" (1530/1531)* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002).

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