Clio's hoop: de Frans-joodse geschiedschrijving van Théodore Reinach (1860-1928)

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This Ph.D. dissertation systematically analyzes the life and writings of Théodore Reinach (1860-1928) insofar as they relate to issues of Jewish identity and French-Jewish historiography.

As a scholar with a special interest in the history of religions, Reinach, who was of French-Jewish descent, specialized in the study of the ancient world, using philological, epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological research methodologies. At the same time, he was also one of the leading representatives of the French-Jewish community in Paris during the time of the Third Republic. Characterized as “the last man who knew everything” and as the youngest of ‘je sais tous’ (I know everything) Reinach brothers, the polymath Théodore Reinach was for many years also actively engaged in politics as a ‘député’. Not surprisingly, the prolonged proceedings and hardships that accompanied the Dreyfus-affair found Théodore Reinach firmly lodged in the camp of the Dreyfusards. Théodore was at the forefront of a school of thought that scholars nowadays call ‘Franco-Judaism’. Franco-Judaism is used as a term to describe a way of thinking that blossomed amongst highly acculturated Jews in France during the Third Republic, and encompassed unique goals of bringing together French republican ideology and the study of Judaism in France. In the scarce scholarship on Franco-Judaism Reinach has been evaluated as a conformist to French republican ideology and as a ‘assimilationist’ par excellence. Using these terms in a severely negative sense, scholars have argued that Jewish intellectuals like Reinach wanted to efface Judaism and submerge it into ‘Frenchness’. As a result, Reinach has been depicted as one of the ‘Fous de la République’ based on the claim that French Jews were so much taken in by their early emancipation and relative good position in French society, that they were completely uncritical of the
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downside of their assimilation as commanded by the French state. In
addition, Jews said to belong to this category are also severely censured for
having failed to appreciate the dangers anti-Semitism held in store for
them. On the basis of a detailed analysis of Théodore Reinach’s thought on
these and related matters, this dissertation argues at length that value
judgements such as these are entirely misplaced. Not only do they fail to
do justice to the facts. They also reflect a profound misunderstanding of
how Théodore Reinach and his Jewish contemporaries in France viewed
their Jewish identity and of how they responded to the manifold challenges
that arose out of being Jewish in a complex and not always congenial
modern world.

Chapter I sets out to describe and characterize the larger Jewish
and non-Jewish political, cultural, and intellectual world in which
Théodore Reinach lived and worked, with special emphasis on the rise of
the Science du judaïsme (the academic study of Judaism) in France and on
the tense political situation during the Third Republic, especially from the
1880s onwards.

Chapter II is biographical in nature and deals with the Reinach
family. It describes how Théodore’s father, Hermann-Joseph Reinach,
emigrated from Frankfurt to Paris during the Second Empire, where he
made his fortune by investing in the railways. Hermann became a great
fan of France and French culture and instilled his passion for his new
homeland in his three sons, who were destined to honour France in all
their endeavours as French educated intellectuals. His sons would become
quite famous in their day, the eldest, Joseph Reinach, became a noted
politician and publicist. Along with Bernard Lazare he would become the
most famous and ardent defender of Dreyfus during the Dreyfus-affaire.
Hermann-Joseph’s second son, Salomon, became a famous and prolific
scholar of Antiquity and a well-known archaeologist. The youngest son,
Théodore, combined the two areas in which his two elder brothers made
their careers: he became famous for his scholarship on the world of
Classical Antiquity as well as for his ‘engagement’ in the political arena.
Chapter III discusses Théodore Reinach’s views on the history of the Jews from Biblical times up to 1789. It centres around his widely read *Histoire des Israélites*. It was the first extensive modern history of the Jewish people in the French language and it would influence Jewish students and the general public alike during a period of at least thirty years, as evidenced by a continuous stream of reprints appearing between 1884 and 1914. With this book Reinach wanted to provide Jewish students in France with a guide to their Jewish history, but he also targeted the pupils of the many schools of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* that could be found in North Africa, the Near East, and on the Balkans. The book would however also be widely read by a non-Jewish audience, rapidly becoming the standard history of the Jews to be found in the libraries of educated Frenchmen.

Of central concern in the *Histoire* is how, in Reinach’s view, the Jews fulfilled a pivotal contributing role to (non-Jewish) civilization. For example, by arguing that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible were the real inventors of such moral values as equality and justice, Reinach was able to set up an argument according to which the biblical prophets of old were indeed the spiritual fathers of the French Revolution—an event that plays a key role in Reinach’s concept of history as he regards it not only as the beginning of modernity, but as the very basis that both enables and guarantees the existence of modern civilized society. In his *Histoire* Reinach argued that the Jews had succeeded in preserving the unique moral values they had once invented: in his view the fact that the Jews had been forced to live stateless in the Diaspora had played a crucial role in helping to preserve them. It was not until a completely new political landscape materialized in 18th century France as a result of the French Revolution that these Jewish-prophetic values were allowed fully to come out into the open, at which time they could finally begin to serve as guiding principles that would henceforth shape the values of society at large. It was then and there that the two great traditions—the Jewish and
the French Republican—finally came together so as to inform and then, in coalescing, vitally strengthen one another.

Chapter IV deals with Reinach’s views on Jewish history during the period after the French Revolution and up to his own time. This chapter also includes a discussion of Reinach’s many public speeches and lectures as well as his more journalistic publications, whenever they concern themselves with the question of Jewish identity. Of particular importance in this chapter is a discussion of the manner in which Reinach dealt with contemporary issues, such as attacks on French Jewry by Drumont and representatives of the anti-Dreyfusard movement. As a result this chapter serves to help understand how Théodore and his brothers came to play a central role in defending Dreyfus and in informing the Jewish and non-Jewish general public alike how to recognize and combat the incendiary anti-Semitism inherent in the attacks on Dreyfus and on those who stood by his side. Chapter IV also makes clear that, once the Dreyfus-affair had begun to draw to a close, Théodore Reinach’s publications increasingly displayed a more comparative, ‘histoire des religions’-type of approach. In 1903 Théodore Reinach was appointed directeur d’études in the study of the history of religions at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. During this same period, Théodore Reinach also became a driving force in a Jewish liberal reform movement known as the Union Israélite Liberale. His firm and undying belief in the ideals of the French revolution along with his scepticism vis-à-vis Zionism and the notion of the founding of a Jewish state inevitably attracted the ire of such Zionist ideologues as Max Nordau.

Chapter V returns to recent discussions of ‘Franco-Judaism’, in particular the idea that its representatives were in the business of denying and, ultimately, of completely cancelling out their Jewish identity. It argues that this contextualized case study of the life and work of Théodore Reinach contributes importantly to the current shifting views on ‘Franco-Judaism’. In the particular case of Théodore Reinach—one of the intellectuals who helped shape ‘Franco-Judaism’ and whose life and career can be said to embody some of its core principles—one can begin to see
that during the French Third Republic French Jews were neither uncritical followers of Republican ideals nor passive observers en route to complete and utter assimilation: instead, through the study of Jewish history and by isolating the lessons that could be learned from that history, Théodore Reinach not merely sought to incorporate the history of the Jews and inscribe it into French history; he wanted actively to help shape the Republic he cherished and the great ideals it represented.