REVIEW

Christian Wiese

Challenging Colonial Discourse: Jewish Studies and Protestant Theology in Wilhelmine Germany

Translated by Barbara Harshav and Christian Wiese (Brill, 2005), 577 pp.

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"In these epoch-making times," wrote Hermann Cohen in 1915, "so fateful for all nations, we as Jews are proud to be Germans. And we are aware of our task to convince our co-religionists the world over of the religious import of the German ethos and of its influence as well as its claim on the Jews of all nations…" Looking back in 1976, Gershom Scholem wrote, "I deny that there has ever been such a German-Jewish dialogue in any genuine sense whatsoever … This dialogue died at its very start and never took place." The attempt, and the ultimate failure of this dialogue, mostly one-sided, and stretching roughly from the time of Abraham Geiger through World War I is described in fascinating detail by Christian Wiese.

The title alludes to the scholarly category developed by Edward Said. "Colonial discourse analysis" refers to the fact that earlier accounts of colonialism tended to be written from the point of view of the colonizer (though always with a claim of objectivity). In her book on Geiger (a volume that had a deep impact on Wiese), Susannah Heschel refers to Manet's painting "Olympia" as a revolutionary work in which the model looks straight at the viewer. This stance of "reversing the gaze" is a characteristic aspect of many movements in modern and post-modern scholarship (Marxism, Feminism, Post-Colonialism, Liberation Theology), in which the group previously studied as object finds its own voice(s) (though often in the language and discursive style of the majority or colonial culture) and speaks back as active subject rather than passive object.

This is the hermeneutical key (made more explicit in the English version than in the German original) to Wiese's scholarly *tour-de-force*. German Jews were not colonial subjects in the strict sense. But they were an identifiable minority within a society becoming in some ways more liberal, and seeking the cultural commonalities that would enable it to articulate a national identity. In nineteenth-century Germany, Jewish scholars began to speak the language of the modern academy. As they found their voices, they increasingly felt the need to oppose the simplistic (and polemical) picture of Second-Temple Judaism promulgated by Protestant scholars (who generally referred to it as "Late" Judaism, as if Judaism had come to an end with Jesus). Jewish scholars, from Zunz and Geiger on, took on the project of reversing the gaze. While some "liberal" Germans insisted that Jews must ultimately accept baptism in order fully to assimilate to German culture, some Jews replied with the argument that, if their Protestant counterparts really wanted to connect to the faith of Jesus, they ought to become Jewish. At times the religious polemics became quite intense.

Wiese, a young German scholar, is clearly sympathetic to the *Wissenschaft* project of modern Jewish studies. He processes and organizes a vast amount of material – books, journals, newspapers, letters – to reveal the inner dynamics of a partisan debate that had to do not only with the facts of history, but also with the place of Judaism in modern German society. In retrospect, though the Protestant scholars (Wellhausen, Harnack, and many others) were hardly

advocating extermination, the advocates of Judaism (Geiger, Leo Baeck, and many others) turn out to have been fighting for the lives of their people. But one must not oversimplify, as Susannah Heschel warns in her introductory essay: "[I]t is the historian's responsibility not to reduce Jewish history prior to 1933 to a mere prehistory of the Holocaust, which may give the impression that all developments inexorably lead to the 'Final Solution,' as if there were neither alternatives nor counter-developments." (3)

Tangentially, Wiese also discusses Zionism and neo-Orthodoxy, two other Jewish identity options that developed during the same period. But his main interest is the strained and strenuous effort of the proponents and inheritors of the *Wissenschaft* approach to the study of Judaism. They adopted the language and the historicism of the dominant Protestant university professors, and sought to be accepted in that milieu.

There was crass anti-Semitism that arose in political movements of the late 1870's, and that is certainly part of the background of the academic struggle. But by 1908 or so, Wiese writes, "the 'coarse attacks' of the anti-Semitic parties had diminished." Hence, "Jews now had to turn their attention more strongly to the subtler forms of 'suspicion and disparagement of everything Jewish' which prevailed in 'broad circles of the educated and enlightened,' that is, among the 'men of letters' who shaped public opinion" (103, citing an article by Joseph Eschelbacher). The intellectual battle was waged between liberal Judaism and liberal Protestantism, and in the opening years of the twentieth century what was at stake was nothing less that "the legitimacy of Judaism's continuation." (Chapter 6) In the eyes of some, liberal Judaism and liberal Protestantism seemed very similar. But such similarity only intensified the conflicts, as the proponents of each felt the need to articulate the differences and demonstrate the superiority of one's own camp.

In 1848, Leopold Zunz had formally proposed the establishment of a chair in Jewish history and literature at the University of Berlin. "The failure of this attempt," writes Wiese, "is indicative of the prevailing desire to protect the privileged position of Christianity…" (82). In 1912, responding negatively to a similar petition for the new University of Frankfurt from the sympathetic Christian, Martin Rade, the biblical scholar Hermann Gunkel wrote, "[T]he fact is that Protestantism is still the only denomination in which the academic spirit is truly possible." (402) Wiese's comment: "This was, of course, 'colonial discourse' in its purest form. Gunkel's words express the arrogance of a privileged Protestant university theology…which claimed the scientific monopoly of enlightenment and objectivity…." (403)

Mention should also be made of Max Löhr (d. 1931), a Christian scholar of the Old Testament in Königsberg, where he was a close friend of Rabbi Felix Perles. In 1926, Stephen Wise asked Ismar Elbogen who might be invited to speak at the Jewish Institute of Religion. Elbogen wrote back, "To begin with Löhr, he has the most knowledge of Judaism and the purest love for Judaism" (411). In fact, Löhr, on the day of his death, had attended Yom Kippur services. His efforts to obtain support for a chair of Jewish Studies were unsuccessful, and he himself was suspected by some of being pushed by his Jewish friends. Löhr was one of a small number of exceptions to the nearly united front of German Protestant scholarship against the recognition of the academic legitimacy of Jewish Studies.

The notion of "hybridity," added to post-colonial discourse by Homi Bhabha, points to layered complexity of such understandings. In the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, hybridity takes on a particularly problematic, and sometimes poignant, aspect. Judaism has lived as a distinct minority tradition in the lands of Christendom. Often despised for having been "superseded," there nevertheless remained the dim awareness that Christianity itself had

sprung from Jewish roots. Who then is the "colonizer" and who the "colonized"? Christianity from its beginning spoke a variation of Jewish theological language. In the modern period, Judaism began learning to speak the language of historical criticism, derived from Protestant hermeneutical traditions. Whose language is it? This is an aspect of post-colonial theory that Wiese does not discuss directly, though it seems to this reviewer that it lurks just below the surface of the polemics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

At the very end of his Epilogue, Wiese offers the hope "that, in the future, Jews and Christians could freely and openly meet one another on their respective journeys of discovery, in deference to what is common and what separates them, without feeling forced to apologetics." (444) This is the hope of a post-*Shoah* German scholar, who offers on the altar of such hope a profound work of scholarly reparation.