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Immanuel Wolf (1799–1847): Outlining a Program for the Scientific Study of Judaism

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Immanuel Wolf's 1822 article *Über den Begriff einer Wissenschaft des Judenthums* (On the concept of a science of Judaism) is the opening article of the first and only issue of *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums*.¹ Immanuel Wolf (1799–1847) was a founding member of the Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden, which was established in Berlin in 1819 as a scholarly society devoted to the study of Jewish history, literature, philosophy and religion. The Verein was a movement of Jewish scholars who early in the nineteenth century, inspired by contemporary tendencies in primarily German philological and historical scholarship, worked for the establishment of a science of the Jews freed from the domination of Christian theology.²

Wolf's article is an elaborate prolegomenon to the question of what is the study of the Jews and Judaism in the context of the emerging modern humanistic fields of study. It sets the parameters and the vision for the independent, critical, scholarly study of the Jews, and by doing this it both defines a new independent entity or object, the Jews, and it outlines the scholarly practice of studying it. At the same time, the article also describes an audience for this research, namely, a humanity not exclusively defined by Christians. In this way, Wolf's article and the efforts of the Verein mark a significant event in the history of the humanities.

The first section of Immanuel Wolf's article argues for the necessity of such a scholarly project in general, including its benefits for both Jews and non-Jews, while the second section outlines a specific research program for studying Jewish culture, history, literature, and religion. The first section is indebted to strong tendencies in German scholarship and intellectual debates of the day. G. W. F. Hegel's notions of a human spirit and a world-historical progressive motion toward human freedom is

1. Immanuel Wolf, "Über den Begriff einer Wissenschaft des Judenthums," *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* (Berlin: Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden, 1822).

2. Kerstin von der Krone, *Wissenschaft in Öffentlichkeit: Die Wissenschaft des Judenthums und ihre Zeitschriften* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012); David N. Myers, "The Ideology of Wissenschaft des Judenthums," in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1997), 629–41.

clearly reflected by the way Wolf argues for the legitimacy of a science of the Jews. It is, simply, legitimate because of the Jewish contribution to the human spirit reflected by the importance of the Jewish idea of God in the history of the world—an idea of God that the Jews invented, it is claimed.

Wolf argues that Judaism is “an important and influential factor in the development of the human spirit” and that Judaism is founded on the “essence of humanity itself.”³ The article reflects how Wolf and his colleagues in the Verein sought to relocate the Jews from the periphery, or from particularity, to the center of human history and the historical evolution of the human spirit. This reorganization was Hegelian in principle, but it also rebelled against Hegel’s own judgment that Judaism’s contribution to world history had ceased many generations ago and against the fact that most scholarship on the Jews at the time treated Jews and Judaism for “the sake of a historical understanding of Christian theology.”⁴ Judaism’s lasting, even eternal, contribution to the universal history of humankind qualified it for a defining place in modern historical and philological scholarship, in the view of Wolf and his colleagues. Next to Athens and Rome, we should find Jerusalem.⁵

The second section of the article, the guide, sets an order for a scholarly study of Judaism: first the study of Jewish texts on philological principles, then the development of a Jewish history based on the textual sources, and finally a description of Jewish philosophy, its eternal principles. The role of the Jewish philosophy is to define the essence, the inner principle, of Judaism, which in return should be used for evaluating all things Jewish vis-à-vis their distance or proximity to the inner principle. This system and method effectively laid out the guidelines for establishing a new Jewish *Wissenschaft* in its double implication of being both critically scientific and appreciative, constructive, toward its object.⁶

3. Michael A. Meyer, *Ideas of Jewish History* (New York: Wayne State University Press, 1974), 150–51.

4. *Ibid.*, 152.

5. Miriam Leonard, *Socrates and the Jews: Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

6. Dirk Hartwig, “Die ‘Wissenschaft des Judentums’ und die Anfänge der kritischen koranforschung Perspektiven einer modernen Koranhermeneutik,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 61, no. 3 (2009): 234–56; Christian Wiese, *Jüdische Existenz in der Moderne: Abraham Geiger und die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, ed. Walter Homolka and Thomas Brechenmacher (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013); Elizabeth Eva Johnston, “Semitic Philology and the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: Revisiting Leopold Zunz’s *Etwas über die Rabbinische Litteratur* (1818),” *Philological Encounters* 2, no. 3–4 (2017): 296–320; Andreas B Kilcher, “‘Jüdische Literatur’ und ‘Weltliteratur’: Zum Literaturbegriff der Wissenschaft des Judentums,” *Aschkenas* 18, no. 2 (2010): 465–83.

BACKGROUND

It is hardly possible to overstate the importance of *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* (WdJ) for the development of modern humanistic studies of Jews and Judaism. The perspectives that WdJ scholars developed have an impact even today, and the history and impact of WdJ remain important research topics within Jewish studies.⁷ Equally important to the construction of an identifiable field of study in its own right was that WdJ scholars until at least World War II struggled to rewrite, reconfigure, the scholarly and intellectual perspectives on Jews and Judaism that had been developed over centuries by Christian scholars and theologians. Thus, the WdJ represents a very early “postcolonial” effort to counter Christian perceptions of Jews and Judaism, if we consider WdJ’s efforts not only as scholarship but also as a wider struggle for Jewish equality in Europe.⁸

The efforts of WdJ scholars have accordingly had an important impact on the general evolution of a secularized view on Jews and Judaism in the humanities, and several WdJ scholars were central to the wider development of modern, non-confessional Bible studies and modern Islam studies. Wolf’s article and the first generation of WdJ scholars started a long general and internal Jewish struggle for identifying the objects and subjects of Jews and Judaism in the midst of a centuries-long controversy over situating the Jews in the progressive history of civilization. This controversy pertained not only to research questions but also to broad social issues of Jewish equality, civility, nationality, and eventually democracy across Europe. Through modern philological methods and a new humanist ethos, WdJ scholars critically revised Christian scholarship on the Bible and the Jews, and their works were central to the evolution of new conceptions of Jewish cultural, historical, and religious identity.

The first generation of WdJ that Immanuel Wolf belonged to also included important figures such as Leopold Zunz, Heinrich Heine, Eduard Gans, and Moses Moser. All first-generation members were deeply inspired by German thought of the age, particularly Hegel and J. G. Herder, but they were inspired also by *Bildung*,

7. Michael Meyer, “Two Persistent Tensions within Wissenschaft des Judentums,” *Modern Judaism* 24, no. 2 (2004): 105–19; Chanan Gafni, Hanan Harif, and Dorothea M Salzer, *Wissenschaft des Judentums beyond Tradition: Jewish Scholarship on the Sacred Texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

8. Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and “Revolt of the Colonized: Abraham Geiger’s ‘Wissenschaft des Judentums’ as a Challenge to Christian Hegemony in the Academy,” *New German Critique*, no. 77 (1999): 61–85; Dirk Westerkamp, “The Philonic Distinction: German Enlightenment Historiography of Jewish Thought,” *History and Theory* 47, no. 4 (December 2008): 533–59.

seen as a work for restoring and elevating Jewish character. Wolf, Gans, and Heine were influenced by strong criticism in their time of the character of Judaism as a lower, immoral, and despotic religion, and their inspiration for fencing off criticism and rescuing Judaism from its character flaws was German *Bildung*. Tellingly for the dilemmas of early WdJ, both Heine and Gans converted to Christianity in the 1820s. One of the most persistent criticisms of WdJ until today has been that they, the scholars, and WdJ as a perspective were assimilationists, turning Judaism into a set of spiritual ideas with no practical impact or, even harsher, that the WdJ made Judaism resemble a Protestant perspective on religion.⁹

The Verein and the first generation of WdJ were hardly a success in their day. After a few years, the founding members split, and their journal, in which Wolf's article was printed as the opening piece, published just one issue, in 1822. Among the primary goals set by the first generation were the inclusion of the study of Judaism among the respectable core fields of study at universities and a critical scholarly approach to Jewish sources without regard to either Jewish traditions or Christian religious feelings. Over the nineteenth century, the WdJ outgrew the initial failure immensely. Several significant journals were established later in the century by WdJ scholars such as Abraham Geiger and others. This contributed significantly to the founding of the library of Jewish studies, including several of the first multi-volume *History of . . .* series (those by Heinrich Graetz, for example) that first identified and discussed materials, periods, breaks and continuities, core principles, and contingencies.

OF INTEREST TODAY

It is still striking today how Wolf explicitly declares that "scientific knowledge of Judaism must decide on the merits or demerits of the Jews, their fitness or unfitness to be given the same status and respect as other citizens."¹⁰ It underscores the impact from a historical perspective in which important individuals, groups, or civilizations produce something more than particularities that bears on the history of the human spirit in general. These contributions can be ordered chronologically as part of the construction of the grander architecture and dialectics of human history. In this architecture some bricks are more important than others, and it is obvious from Wolf's article that a study of the Jews must dust off Jewish sources and set them in their rightful central place in the big picture of historical, philological, and religious studies.

9. Meyer, "Two Persistent Tensions within Wissenschaft des Judentums."

10. Meyer, *Ideas of Jewish History*, 155.

It is not just a matter of historical truth but also a matter of legitimacy and maybe even of survival. In fact, Wolf completely blurs any distinction between civil legitimacy, communal reconstruction, and scientific truth, and thus his article provides us with a view into innate features of identifying and evaluating contributions to human culture and history in the humanities. In science, Wolf finds the same light that once shone upon creation before man's ceremonies, traditions, and superstitions polluted clarity and truth. From Wolf's and WdJ's minority perspective, science became a powerful weapon against Christian hegemony and prejudice both *de jure* and in the civil sphere, but it also became a tool for the construction of secularized boundaries of Jewish culture and history.

It is also noticeable how Wolf's article indicates a modern notion of a Jewish peoplehood. In Wolf's outline, scholarship about the Jews searches for the inner principle of Judaism. Jewish history and Jewish texts are materializations of this principle, some closer to the center than others. This history and these texts were seen by Wolf as produced by Jewish people, and their inner principle was not based on divine revelation but rather on a natural religion from which truth would shine in a clear light when weeds of tradition had been cleared. Despite the fact that the Jews had been considered a separate people for centuries, Wolf's article and the WdJ nevertheless point toward new emerging notions of peoplehood. The idea of an inner principle of Judaism was used for evaluation and periodization of Jewish identified acts, texts, and people, and in the process the inner principle was used for drawing the precarious and unstable boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish. This means that non-Jewish Jews, converted Jews, secular Jews, Marranos, and Spinoza, as the icon of non-Jewish Jewishness, are included in a Jewish peoplehood reflecting a history and a principle more than religious doctrines and traditions—in other words, a Jewish people with a particular living spirit of its own. The concepts of Jewish literature, history, and religion that WdJ introduced were in this sense historicist and humanist. In the perspective outlined by Wolf, it is something in Judaism's ideas, texts, and traditions that also unconsciously influences ex-Jews such as Spinoza so that they remain within the boundaries of Jewish history despite their heresies and secularity. *On the Concept of a Science of Judaism* marks the beginning of the construction of a field of scholarly practice, and it is still fascinating today for its transparency on the elements of such a process.

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