

The Sacred in the Profane: Sinai Thinking in German Jewish Literature

Heiliges im Profanen: Sinaitisches Denken in der deutschsprachigen jüdischen Literatur

Rapport de l'examineur externe (évaluation détaillée)

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The doctoral thesis *Heiliges im Profanen: Sinaitisches Denken in der deutschsprachigen jüdischen Literatur* tries to combine two different intentions:

1. to question conventional habits of dealing with the complex topic 'Jewish literature' in traditional and current literary studies
2. to outline a new, all-embracing hermeneutic method applicable to the topic, based on its deep-rooted determinations in Jewish or, as the author calls it, Sinai thought.

The double approach gives this thesis a special significance as a text constructing and analyzing in one. To keep balance between these two different kinds of appropriating literary texts, the author needs to develop a strong hypothesis helpful to find his way in the sheer endless abundance of material possibly to include.

It was prudent to limit the study on Jewish literature in one language, German, although the author is capable to read and consider Jewish writing in the Ancient Jewish languages Aramaic and Hebrew as well as in modern European ones as English or French. His knowledge in Jewish philosophy of all times as well as in modern European literature connected with the topic is amazing. His erudition enables him to approach his subject from two different positions very seldom united in one person: Torah Judaism and modern Western literature.

The limitation on German-Jewish literature is thus a deliberate one and does never narrow down his concept. The author's knowledge of other languages' Jewish literature of all times and places helps him to consider his German examples in comparison with parallel or contemporary or traditionally connected writings in other languages he knows. He can thus confidently follow his inspiration to connect the dots, crossing borders between languages, times and other seemingly correct assignments.

German, the language chosen, serves the purpose of this study best: Jews have settled in Germany (or in German *Sprachraum* in general) at least from the third century C.E. and live there, despite of all persecutions, up to

this day. They often became assimilated and culturally interwoven with the peoples they lived with up to a degree near self-denial, and contributed to German-written literature in all genres of literature and all positions towards Judaism from orthodox Rabbinical commentary or Zionist nationalism to disturbing examples of Jewish self-hatred and self-destruction.

The extremely wide range of German-Jewish literature lasted throughout the centuries. In recent history we find Herzl's *Judenstaat* or Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch's religious works leading to the foundation of a Zionist Neo-Orthodoxy written in German as well as texts of extreme Jewish self-denial or – often connected – extreme German nationalism as Lissauer's *Hassgesang gegen England*. In the second half of the 20th century there was the special phenomenon of an anti-Jewish “socialist literature” produced by Jews (since the “internationalist” concept of Marxism excluded any continuation of a ‘Jewish people’), from which group the author picked out the shady party-poet Stephan Hermlin as worth taking a closer look at.

As the author states, all these writings – whatever their attitude towards Judaism, the Jewish people, its history, the Sinai law etc.– can be legitimately included in the topic *Deutsch-Jüdische Literatur*. Their extreme diversity seems to belong to the phenomenon itself: the Diasporah existence of the Jews over two thousand years – a uniquely successful existence after all, for the Jews as a people have survived – must necessarily create the broadest variety of literary expression imaginable. On the other hand, just this variety makes the idea plausible to investigate what distinguishes all these extremely different writings as Jewish.

Already with the two subsequently introducing questions of his Abstract the author gives to understand what he is willing to venture: “How can readers identify a text as being ‘Jewish’ if there is no Jewish language? How can they explain the term ‘Jewish literature’, if there is no Jewish nation and if an author can declare himself Jewish while denying any relationship to Judaism?” (p.ix)

But after Jewish writing – under which circumstances, of what form and genre ever – has proved to be a *motus continuus* throughout human history, the author feels legitimized to suppose “a Jewish intellectual structure” (p.ix) at the bottom of the perpetual phenomenon, assuming that this structure is also “the base of contemporary Jewish identity”. Once assuming the structure, he also “seeks to clarify” it and, more in detail, to discern “mental structures of Sinai thinking in literary texts” (p.x). For Sinai thinking, as he states hypothetically, is the “direction”, the overt or hidden alignment of all literature written by Jews whether they ever become aware of it or not. What we call ‘Jewish literature’ is always and generally “in the tradition of thinking towards Torah” – in this edifice of ideas and methodology we find, considered the impossibility to fix the term by the usual, widely held means of literary history, the only reliable method to distinguish our phenomenon.

The author does not expect, however, to find that way a new definition of Jewish literature. *“Die Dissertation soll daher den Versuch darstellen, eine Funktionsweise jüdischen Schreibens zu demonstrieren. Es soll also weder eine neue Definition gegeben werden, noch eine neue Variante der Behauptung, dass sich das Judentum nicht definieren liesse.”* (p.47) What he hopes to find is a new method, an equipment of tools to „investigate in depth“ every text in question (p.iv): *„Diese Methode erlaubt uns, jüdische Identität als eine an Denkkategorien gemessene Textidentität vorzustellen. Die Frage der Zugehörigkeit eines Textes zur jüdischen Literatur beantwortet sich folglich durch textimmanente, am sinaitischen Denken geschulte Interpretationen.“*

To establish a text’s identity by means of categories of Sinai thinking, is a method that will probably cause opposition. First, its application requires a deep knowledge of Judaism, Jewish history, Sinai law, Biblical and Talmudic literature that is not only unusual among contemporary literary critics, but was neglected, even despised by European scholars throughout the Christian dominated era. As the author states, the problem starts with the question whether the *conditio iudaica* is considered an independent “universal concept” (*“ein eigenständiges universelles Prinzip”*, p.26) or belittled as a particularistic, retarded, reactionary thinking, bound to the Ghetto, doomed to disappear in the overwhelming absolute truth of – respectively – Christian theology, Greek-Roman philosophy or modern rationalism.

The first merit of this study is its clear, convincing position towards this fundamental question. Western societies have deprived themselves of one of the most brilliant, universal concepts of thinking for centuries. For the sake of intellectual progress it is the obligation of the “initiates” to open the long blocked gates and let Jewish wisdom flow. The author is a learned Jewish thinker himself, well acquainted with Biblical and Talmudic literature, Jewish history and all aspects of Judaism. He knows how much traditional Western thinking was tended (and still is) to undervalue Jewish thought and its contribution to European intellectual history and the “moral code” of modern Western society. The majority of literary critics has little knowledge of Jewish thinking and its importance in the history of ideas and is consequently endangered to misinterpret Jewish writing, be it historical or modern.

Second, the situation becomes complicated by the reluctance of many Jewish writers to admit any connection with Jewish thinking, the more Sinai thinking, discernible from their texts. Several of the writers in question may not accept the pioneering hypothesis of this study: *“Auch die jüdische Moderne reflektiert sinaitisches Denken.”* (p.21) The hypothesis, however, is well-founded and backed by numerous case-studies in this and the previous master’s thesis (which I likewise know). The case-studies make the hypothesis the more convincing the more the writers in question try to escape their relationship with Judaism. Even radical anti-Jewish positions of Jewish writers help to confirm it, since

radical opposition, refusal of all intellectual inheritance, denying the own disposition etc. belong traditionally to the arsenal of Jewish thought.

The case-studies are often astonishing and surprising. The writers closely observed are in every respect so different und far from each other that it is difficult to imagine what they might have in common. Many of them have established their own identity very far from Judaism while others feel deeply devoted to it. The feminist Jelinek, the communist Hermlin, the individualist Kafka, the psychologist Jokl, the orthodox Jew Agnon – there are barely positions thinkable that seem to be more extreme towards each other, biographical and literary backgrounds standing more disconnectedly. The author of this study does not shrink from that seeming incoherence. On the contrary, he feels attracted, invited, challenged to try his method. He uses his equipment well, offers helpful hermeneutic and epistemological methods out of the treasures of Jewish thinking, he “seeks to clarify” and proves the unbelievable. He manages to demonstrate that writers who seem to have nothing in common with each other are connected just by that: being Jewish, being, whether they know it or not, “in the tradition of thinking towards Torah”.

The hypothesis of this study is revolutionary in its endeavor to overcome the traditional undervaluation of Jewish thinking and its role in human history of ideas, here in special in literary history. Because his hypothesis, as the author states, is a method, not a new definition, he has to demonstrate its applicability to literary texts belonging to the topic and symbolic for its extreme diversity. He is doing this in detail and with the utmost thoroughness, exposing new, sometimes stunning hermeneutic results. For all these reasons I consider this doctoral thesis an excellent example of literary study.

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