Boundary as Barrier, Boundary as Bridge

Jewish and Christian Historiography on Religious Origins in Nineteenth-Century Germany

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The Leo Baeck Institute was founded in 1955 by émigré Jewish intellectuals who resolved to document the vibrant German-speaking Jewish culture that had been nearly extinguished in the Holocaust. It was named in honor of Rabbi Leo Baeck, the last leader of Germany’s Jewish community under the Nazis, who survived Theresienstadt and became the Institute’s first international president. Since Baeck’s passing in 1956, the LBI has invited a leading scholar or thinker to give a lecture in his memory.

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About the Author

Susannah Heschel is the Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College. Her scholarship focuses on Jewish-Christian relations in Germany during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the history of biblical scholarship, and the history of antisemitism. Her numerous publications include Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus (University of Chicago Press, 1998), which won a National Jewish Book Award, and The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany (Princeton University Press, 2010). She has also taught at Southern Methodist University and Case Western Reserve University.

The author of over one hundred articles, she has also edited several books, including Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel (1997); Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust (with Robert P. Ericksen, 1999); Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism (with David Biale and Michael Galchinsky, 1998). She serves on the academic advisory council of the Center for Jewish Studies in Berlin and on the Board of Trustees of Trinity College.

On Sunday, September 25, 2016 at the Center for Jewish History in New York, Susannah Heschel accepted the Moses Mendelssohn Award for her scholarly contributions to the understanding of German-Jewish history. Following the presentation of the medal by Ronald B. Sobel, President of the Leo Baeck Institute – New York | Berlin, Heschel delivered the 59th Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, which is printed in the following pages in edited form.
I am honored to have been invited to deliver the Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, one of the most distinguished lectureships in the field of Jewish Studies, and held in honor of the great Rabbi Leo Baeck, whom I did not know personally, but whose friendship with my father, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ran very deep. My father told me that it was Rabbi Baeck who encouraged him to come to study in Berlin, where he arrived in 1927 after a year of Gymnasium study in Vilna. My father was then a twenty-year-old student who had already received rabbinical ordination in Warsaw, where he was born and raised in a distinguished Hasidic family of rebbes. Once in Berlin, he decided to study not only at the University, where he studied Semitics, Philosophy, and Art History, but also at the two nearby rabbinical seminaries, Orthodox and Liberal, just to understand their very different approaches. Rabbi Baeck was one of his teachers at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums.

My father was among the Polish Jews deported to Poland by the Nazis in October 1938, but he managed to escape Warsaw a few weeks
before the onset of the war, thanks to the intervention of Dr. Julian Morgenstern, president of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, where my father taught for five years. A few years after the war, my father met Rabbi Baeck again in New York City, a meeting that was a very profound and moving experience for my father, who spoke to me of it quite often. What should he say to Rabbi Baeck, who had chosen to remain in Berlin and who had survived the brutal conditions of Theresienstadt, my father told me he asked himself. Indeed, I would like to offer, as an appendix to this lecture, a short letter that Rabbi Baeck sent to my father in 1949, after their meeting, with beautiful words that stand as tribute to the refined, noble person Rabbi Baeck was, and to the close and kind friendship he felt toward my father.

My own engagement with the history of German Jews began with a study of Rabbi Baeck’s writings on the Pharisees and on Christian origins. With this work, Rabbi Baeck participated in an important and ongoing effort within the Wissenschaft des Judentums to reconfigure the monotheistic triangle by making Judaism, particularly rabbinic sources, the key to understanding the origins of both Christianity and Islam. After studying Rabbi Baeck’s writings, I went back a generation to examine the work of Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), who initiated the effort at reconfiguration with his 1833 book demonstrating parallels between rabbinic literature and the Qur’an.

Scholarship on the Wissenschaft des Judentums has tended to treat that field as an intra-Jewish intellectual movement. Similarly, historians of nineteenth-century New Testament scholarship examine that field within the context of Protestant theology and generally ignore the contemporary contributions of Jewish scholars and the debates that unfolded during the course of the nineteenth century over the relevance of rabbinic sources and arguments over
Jesus’s relationship to Judaism. Studies of the history of European scholarship on Islam also tend to ignore the other two fields, placing Islamic Studies within the framework of European imperialism or within Oriental Studies, and also ignoring the presence of Muslim and Christian scholars who came to Europe from the Mashriq. Arab scholars, like Jewish scholars, formulated critical analyses of European scholarship, such as ʿAbd al-Shidyāq (Lebanon, 1804–1886), Rifāʿa Rāfiʿ al-Ṭahṭāwī (Egypt, 1801–1873), Francis b. Fatḥ Allāh Marrāsh (Syrien, 1836–1886), and Muḥammad ʿAbduh (Egypt, 1849–1905).

The isolation of the three fields by contemporary historians is an unfair representation of the reality of the nineteenth century, when the three fields were influenced by one another’s findings. Indeed, quite a few scholars were active in all three fields. For example, Geiger honed his philological skills with his first book, a study of the Qur’an, and subsequently brought the methods of the Tübingen School of New Testament scholarship to his analysis of Judaism in antiquity. Subsequently, Ignaz Goldziher brought those Tübingen School methods, which he came to understand by reading Geiger’s scholarship, to bear on his studies of the Hadith.

Furthermore, during the German nineteenth century, philological methods and historical narratives did not operate in an academic vacuum, but were shaped by theological and political currents of the day. Debates between Jews and Christians over the interpretation of texts—rabbinic, New Testament, Qur’anic—reflected the ongoing struggle of Jewish scholars for recognition in an academic world dominated by Christians. Both politically and theologically, Jews were not simply assimilating into German society, but revolting against their colonized status under Christian hegemony in Europe and against
Christian supersessionist theology by insisting that Christianity was an unoriginal offshoot of Judaism. In the structure of their historical argumentation that placed Judaism as the religion that gave birth to both Christianity and Islam, Jewish historians went further, not simply revolting against their colonialized status, but attempting to supplant Christian theological imperialism with Judaism through philological means. There is, in other words, an imperialist element to the nature of the theological arguments.

Liberal Protestant theology defined itself by the mid-nineteenth century as the historical investigation of Christian origins, and its cultural impact was strong: during the first decades of the century, half of all students enrolled at German universities were in the theological faculties. Scholarship on the New Testament and early church was dominated by the Tübingen School, a group of scholars whose commitment to historicism was at times viewed as radical, and who created a paradigm of Jewish Christianity versus Gentile Christianity that dominated the field well into the late twentieth century.

Tübingen School scholarship centered on establishing boundaries: when did Judaism end and when had Christianity begun? The Tübingen School placed this moment at the end of the second century; Christianity could only emerge once the boundary between the two religions had become a barrier, ensuring Christianity’s autonomy and theological integrity. By contrast, Jewish scholars viewed historiographical boundaries as imaginary temporal spheres to be transgressed; they saw Judaism as flowing into what came to be called “Christianity” and “Islam,” religions derived from Judaism. Both the Gospels and the Qur’an were receptacles of Jewish ideas, they argued. For them, boundaries were bridges, demonstrating the extraordinary influence and universal significance of Judaism.
II. Colonialism and Historiography

The attention of Protestant theologians to the boundaries of Christianity reflected the larger political discourse concerned with shaping a distinct German national identity in the era of German expansion and colonialism. Most historians of Germany conventionally claim that German imperialism only began in the latter nineteenth century, with arms sales to the Ottoman Empire, investment in the Baghdad Railways, construction of roads, hospitals, and factories in Palestine, and the acquisition of lands in Africa, culminating in the Berlin conference convened by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1884–85 to regulate European colonization in Africa. Yet Germany’s initial experience of colonial power had already begun in the late eighteenth century with its acquisition of large numbers of Polish Catholics and Jews by Protestant Prussia during the partitions of Poland.

Historians of Poland refer to Prussia’s acquisitions of Polish territory and populations during the three partitions as “colonization.”4 Efforts to “Germanize” the new Polish Catholic population within Prussia were undertaken, and yet even in the mid-nineteenth century the Prussian government was still worrying that the Poles had a “longing to break away... [and] cannot be won by any concessions.”5 Even after the unification of Germany, the once-Polish territory was not yet viewed as reliably Germanized. Bismarck and the chancellors that followed him undertook the typical measures of colonizing powers in the realms of education, language, religion, culture, and so forth, all with the aim, as Polonsky writes, “at encouraging German colonization” despite “bitter opposition from the Poles.”6 Regulating Prussian Poland meant
a project of Germanizing the Poles without permitting them to Polonize the Germans; Polish assimilation into Germany had to occur without altering the nature of the majority culture. As boundaries opened, barriers were erected; this was an internal colonization that further stimulated concern over establishing cultural, religious, and ethnic boundaries.

Robert Liberles has noted that precisely when Prussia began to gain a population of Catholic and Jewish Poles in the 1770s, debates were kindled over the so-called “Jewish Question.” 7 Christian Dohm published Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden in 1781, and ten years later similar language was invoked on behalf of women’s rights by Theodor von Hippel in his pamphlet, Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber (1792). Those debates over Jews continued unabated, as did broader discussions over women’s equality and over the absorption of minorities, as Aamir Mufti has noted.8

What occurred in the political realm in the late eighteenth century in Prussia continued during the course of the nineteenth century, with periodic outbursts of concern over Catholics and Jews, their membership in the German nation, loyalties to the German state, and potential “contamination” of German society. Once a piece of Poland was acquired by Prussia, political anxieties over boundaries were expressed, as Kristin Kopp has demonstrated, in the German literary texts of the era.9 How were those concerns with boundaries reflected in the theological writings in Germany? Since both Protestants and Jews were engaged in a redefinition of the origins, essences, and historical fates of their respective religions, their theological models may have produced the cultural tools necessary for political conquest and control. They certainly made an impact on the self-understanding of Jews and Christians over the significance and historical influence
of their respective religions. Yet each side viewed the boundaries differently. Christian scholars built barriers by limiting the degree of Jewish influence they were willing to acknowledge in both early Christianity and early Islam, whereas Jewish scholars sought to create bridges, emphasizing the extent to which Judaism infiltrated the New Testament and the Qur’an.

III. A Maternity Crisis

Religions are born, not revealed by God and not invented by humans, according to the imagination of the nineteenth century, and being born raises the question of maternity: just what religious beliefs and cultural traditions gave birth to these various religions? That Judaism is the mother religion, while Christianity and Islam are its daughters emerged as a cliché of Jewish scholarship during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; as recently as 1995 the medieval historian Anna Sapir Abulafia wrote with confidence: “Any consideration about relations between Judaism and Christianity must begin with an obvious point. Christianity is a daughter religion of Judaism and as such it draws much of its validity from the very sources that Jews have always claimed as their own.”

Until very recently, Christian theologians objected to the metaphor. The German Protestant theologian Gustav Volkmar, whose work was part of the Tübingen School, wrote in 1857 that “The Judaism that formed the religious background to Jesus and Christianity was not the Pharisaic Judaism dominant during the Second Temple era, but “the ‘virgin womb of the God of Judaism.” God’s virginity, unlike Mary’s, means that Christianity has no older sibling; it is God’s only child—God
did not give birth to Judaism. He may be the God worshiped by Judaism, but He is not the creator of Judaism. Historicism be damned: Christianity was born of God, and whatever may have been derived from Judaism (which was not the offspring of God) was superseded. Christianity is the first-born son of the virgin; Christianity, in this view, is Christ himself.

The anxiety of origins reflected in the metaphor of God’s virgin womb carried both theological and political implications. Theologians of Christianity wanted to demonstrate its distinctiveness and originality, and stressed the boundaries between the religions, which Jewish scholars denied, striving instead to prove Judaism’s centrality to Western civilization by insisting on the derivative nature of Christianity and Islam, erasing boundaries but also establishing a unidirectional flow of influence. A greater problem, as the historian Israel Yuval has pointed out, is that the favored Jewish metaphor of mother-daughter erases the possibility of Christian influence on Judaism; more properly, he writes, historians should recognize that “both are daughter religions of biblical Judaism.”

IV. Wissenschaft des Judentums

The Wissenschaft des Judentums is recognized, in the words of Nils Römer, as “one of the major spiritual and intellectual responses to the crisis of modernity and as an instrument in the struggle for emancipation.” In its effort to uncover documents about Jewish life and write narratives about the long span of Jewish history, the Wissenschaft des Judentums provided an important source of Jewish identity. Writing about Leopold Zunz’s important essay of 1818, *Etwas*
über die rabbinische Literatur, considered a founding document of the Wissenschaft des Judentums, Amos Bitzan writes that its agenda is more philosophical than historical, oriented to an “ideal of character formation.” While it produced narratives about Jewish experience, the Wissenschaft des Judentums was also an effort to reconceive the role of Jews and Judaism in Western civilization. Indeed, the end of Jewish political autonomy and the resulting Jewish diaspora signaled not an end to Jewish history, but, in the words of Isaac Markus Jost (1793–1860), author of one of the first multi-volume narratives of Jewish history, the “dawn-glow of the Jewish religion,” the “heralds of a new creation” and “blessings [...] soon received by all receptive peoples.”

The study of history was also transformative for the historian; in 1833, a young Geiger wrote to another pioneering Jewish scholar, Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), that in becoming scholars “we became men and wanted manly fare, we wanted Wissenschaft.”

Noted nineteenth-century German historians such as Leopold von Ranke and Heinrich von Treitschke described past German conquests of lands and peoples to indicate and celebrate the scope of German imperial power. The Wissenschaft des Judentums began by painting a broad scope of Jewish intellectual power: Zunz’s essay, Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur, presents the wide range of Jewish literature, extending far beyond religious texts and codes of law to include all sorts of Jewish expression over the centuries. Ultimately, the goal was not simply the reconstruction of the Jewish past, for Zunz, but the reorientation of historical scholarship to recognize the extent of Jewish influence on Western history; he wrote: “The extraordinary influence which the religious knowledge of the Hebrew exercised on the nations of Christianity and Islam lent their national literature a universal significance [...] This literature supersedes that of any other pre-Christian nation, and
thus constitutes for the history of mankind and its spiritual development noteworthy monuments and reliable sources.”

Geiger’s own discovery of Wissenschaft’s manliness came with his study of the Qur’an and his demonstration of the extent to which rabbinic ideas, practices, and texts had penetrated Muhammad’s beliefs, the text of the Qur’an, and early Islamic religious practices. For example, Geiger recognized Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, that saving one life is equivalent to saving the whole world, within into Qur’an Sura 5:32. The mockery of Noah’s ark, in Sura 11:40, corresponds to Midrash Tanhuma, and the Qur’an’s assertion that “the waters of the flood were hot” (Sura 11:42, TB Zevachim 113b, TB Sanhedrin 108a). Noah, Geiger writes, appears in the Qur’an as a figure who admonishes sinners, following similar representations in rabbinic literature, “and serves Muhammad’s ends perfectly, as Noah in this way is a type of himself.” Geiger also suggests that Muhammad rejected a Talmudic statement (Sanhedrin 104) that the son cleanses the father, but the father does not cleanse the son. Instead, Muhammad, according to Geiger, reinterpreted the statement in the Qur’an, so that ancestors grant merit to their descendants, “zehut avot,” implying that Muhammad constructed Abraham as a prototype of himself: a public preacher who won converts, was a model of piety, established a monotheistic religion, believed he was given messages from God, and so forth. Muhammad knew and made extensive use of rabbinic literature, but he shaped it for his own political purposes.

Two decades after his study of the Qur’an, Geiger turned to the New Testament, arguing that Jesus’s teachings were neither a break with Judaism nor anything new; Jesus was one of the liberal, progressive Pharisees of his era who sought to democratize Jewish religious practice and detach it from priestly control. However, Paul betrayed Jesus’s message by mixing it with pagan philosophy. The outcome was
Christianity, a religion about Jesus, rather than the faith of Jesus, which was Judaism. By contrast, Geiger viewed Islam more favorably, as the religion that insisted on strict monotheism, rejected anthropomorphism, upheld religious tolerance, and maintained an ethical religious law. While Christianity was carried in the womb of Judaism, Islam was not only born of Judaism, but also suckled and nurtured by it, Geiger claimed. In his view, Christianity was the daughter who strayed, whereas Islam was the daughter who adhered to the mother. Most important: neither Christianity nor Islam, Geiger insisted, was a new religion; both were simply a “manifestation of Judaism.”

Geiger’s contemporary the historian Heinrich Graetz disagreed; Christianity was born, in his presentation, from marginalized groups of ignorant Galilean Jews who were easily duped into apocalyptic fantasies brought to them by Jesus, whom Graetz identified not as a Pharisee, but as one of the Essenes, a marginal group at best. By contrast, Islam, Graetz wrote, was “nursed at its [Judaism’s] breast. It was aroused by Judaism to bring into the world a new form of religion with political foundations… and it exerted an enormous influence on the shape and development of Jewish history.”

V. Christian Scholarship: Boundary as Barrier

Some of the finest German scholars of early Christianity were faculty members or students of the Tübingen School, which flourished from the 1830s to the 1860s. Its guiding figure was Ferdinand Christian Baur, professor of theology at the University of Tübingen, a towering intellect whose analysis of the first two centuries of Christianity became wildly influential well into the twenty-first century, and who
was also a significant interpreter of Hegel and Schelling. Perhaps the best-known and most radical of his students was David Friedrich Strauss, whose 1835 *Life of Jesus* brought Tübingen School methods to a devastating analysis of the Gospels and New Testament scholarship, causing a scandal throughout Europe and bringing an end to Strauss’s academic career. Nonetheless, the philological methods and modes of historicist analysis developed by the Tübingen School were profoundly influential within Protestant theology, and were also adapted by scholars in other fields.24

Baur developed an architectonic of early Christianity that spoke of a tension within the first two centuries between what he termed Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity. The term “Jewish Christianity” was a modern invention, developed as a category for the many diverse groups labeled as “heretical” by the Church Fathers who claimed to find some sort of Jewish practices or ideas or ethnicity in each group; these heretical groups are known from pseudepigraphical or heresiological texts. The term “Jewish Christianity” does not appear in ancient texts, but became prominent in German theological discourse with the Tübingen School; Baur made the term central to the historiography of Christian origins. He and his colleagues used the term to identify pseudonymous texts of antiquity that seemed to them neither obviously Christian nor Jewish, such as the Pseudo-Clementines. More important, Baur and his followers claimed that individual New Testament passages reflected either Jewish Christianity or Gentile Christianity, two opposing tendencies that sparked conflicting religious and political tendencies until their resolution at the end of the second century with the emergence of the Church.

Defining the “Jewish Christians” of antiquity was hotly debated during the nineteenth century: were they ethnic Jews who had joined
the Jesus movement? Christians who practiced circumcision? People with a “Jewish” legalistic way of thinking? Most important, the term functioned as a border crossing, indicating when and in what ways Jews turned into Christians and what elements of Judaism they brought with them. Who were Jewish Christians? For Baur, the term signified those who believed Jesus was the messiah but who retained aspects of Jewish law (particularly circumcision) and were opposed to Pauline theology. A more Lutheran definition comes from Albert Schwegler, another member of the Tübingen School, who argued that Jewish Christianity failed to recognize “the basic difference between Christianity and Judaism, between law and gospel.”

But what marked the “Jewishness” of Jewish Christianity? While German Jewish thinkers were identifying lofty theological ideas of ethics and monotheism as Jewish, Protestants defined Jewishness in ethnic and cultural terms, or in religious terms opposite to Christianity (law, not gospel), and sought to minimize Judaism’s influence on the church and to distinguish between Old Testament teachings and Jewish Christian beliefs. Karl Reinhard Köstlin distinguished between Jewish Christianity and Ebionitism: the former recognized the originality of Jesus’ religious consciousness, even trying to harmonize it with some minimal observance of Jewish law, whereas the Ebionites failed to recognize that a new element had appeared with Jesus, seeing his teachings solely within the framework of Judaism. Apparently he believed that the more committed one was to Judaism, the less able one was to recognize the novelty of Jesus. Adolph Schliemann defined Jewish Christians as Christians who had once been Jews and retained a Jewish perspective, while Albrecht Ritschl distinguished between Old Testament influences that were Christianity’s legitimate inheritance and Jewish Christian sects whose views ultimately exerted
no significant influence on the emerging church. By the turn of the century, as James Paget writes, the great historian and liberal Protestant theologian Adolf von Harnack concluded that “Christianity’s claim to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises did not in any sense align it with Judaism and thus with Jewish Christianity.”

The debate over Jewish Christianity spilled into the scholarly analyses of Islamic origins, bringing some of the Christian and Jewish theological commitments to bear on early Islam. Jewish scholars, starting with Geiger in 1833, were actively demonstrating the parallels between the Qur’an and rabbinic literature, arguing for a Jewish context of Islamic origins. Harnack, however, suggested that Islam, in accepting prophecy but rejecting Trinitarianism, must have developed out of a gnostic Jewish Christianity that he considered superior to the abstruse Trinitarianism of medieval Christianity and closer to Protestantism, but not to Judaism. “Islam is a transformation on Arab soil of a Jewish religion which itself had been transformed by gnostic Jewish Christianity.”

Harnack saw the influence on Islam transmitted via the Jewish Christians of southern Mesopotamia, Elkasites. The Qur’an mentions “Jews, Sabians and Christians,” leading some scholars to argue that Sabians were Jewish Christians. Daniel Chwolson identified the Sabians with both Elkasites and Mandaeans, Arabian offshoots of the Jewish Christian Ebionites. Thus, while Jewish influences within earliest Christianity were said to have been purged by the end of the second century, they reappeared as major influences on early Islam. The argument functions to deny Jewish influence on Christianity and sees Islam arising within a Christian heretical group that was never fully eradicated. Claiming Islam’s emergence from Christian heretics is a medieval Christian argument clothed in modern scholarly apparatus.
that has had a long life. Hans-Joachim Schoeps, in a widely read study of Jewish Christians originally published in 1949, argued that although Jewish Christianity disappeared within Christianity by the third or fourth century, it was preserved in Islam to this day. More recently, Francis de Blois has suggested that there may have been an outpost in Mecca of Nazoraean Jewish Christians who conveyed Pauline teachings to Muhammad—or that Muhammad may have learned those teachings in Syria from contact with Melkite or Jacobite Christians.

The rabbinic texts and contexts outlined by Jewish scholars are displaced by Jewish Christianity, a phenomenon known only through the textual sources of its enemies, the Church Fathers. Zunz once remarked that German scholars were more adept at Mongolian than Hebrew. Judaism’s motherhood had been simply eradicated.

Jewish scholars participated in those debates, but analyzed the Jewish Christian “heretical” groups not in terms of their orientation to Jesus and early Christianity, but toward early Judaism. Thus, Geiger adapted Baur’s architectonic for his study of ancient Judaism, arguing that it was dominated by the conflicting tendencies of liberal Pharisees and conservative Sadducees. Countering the Tübingen School’s understanding of Jewish Christianity, Geiger claimed that the milieu of an ancient text can “first be able to be determined when the Jewish Christian sects are considered more carefully according to the perspectives outlined above, in so far, namely, as their adherents come more from Sadducean or from Pharisaic circles.” Ebionites, he argued, maintained closer connections to the Pharisees and were not antagonistic toward the rabbis. If the text is to be called Jewish Christian, its position reflects not an opposition to Judaism, but a Sadducean dissension from Pharisaic Jewish beliefs and commitments.
Historians are never unaffected by the politics of their day, though the particulars may not be apparent until much later. The idea that Jewish Christians in antiquity infiltrated and distorted early Christianity and may have created Islam reflected contemporary German concerns regarding the influences and impurities that might be entering Prussia, whether from Poles or Jews, and the need to preserve a pure Christianity or a pure Germany. The historiographical arguments of the Tübingen School mirrored the anxieties of colonialism: how to rule over another people, viewed as inferior, without being affected by them. In the writings of the Protestant historians, the second century became an allegory for the nineteenth century: boundaries had to be fixed, and whatever managed to get through would have to be quickly transformed, with Jewish Christians turned into (real) Christians by purifying them of their Jewishness, a task that was not entirely successful, they argued. Hence all the more reason that the Catholic Church, which had been infiltrated by Jewish elements in the second century, had to be “purified” by the Protestant Reformation. Judaism was historical detritus that Christianity had to expel in order to flourish. The political parallels are obvious: charges that Jews were contaminating Germany were rife, and Christian concerns to protect against Judaism ranged from Harnack’s call for eliminating the Old Testament to dejudaization of the New Testament and hymnal carried out during the Third Reich.36

Jewish scholars who sought to demonstrate the crucial need for historians to gain knowledge of Judaism and Hebrew sources were not simply revolting against Christian hegemony; they were also attempting to supplant it. Protestant scholars presented early Christianity as a movement of reform, purging itself of Jewish accretions, and Geiger defined Pharisaism in similar language, as a movement of reform
promoting a democratic, progressive, and liberal version of Judaism. Indeed, Geiger used the very language of the Protestant Reformation, writing that the Pharisees were calling for the “priesthood of all believers.” He wrote, “To all is given the inheritance, the kingdom, the priesthood and its power of sanctification [Allen ist gegeben das Erbe, das Königreich, das Priestertum und die Heiligung].”

**VI. Purifying Religion**

The Jewish effort to claim itself as progenitor of Islam and Christianity continued during the course of the nineteenth century. Geiger’s comparison of the Qur’an with rabbinic texts launched a long tradition of German Jewish scholarship that explored those parallels, by figures such as Hartwig Hirschfeld, Israel Schapiro, Eugen Mittwoch, Isaac Gastfreund, and Heinrich Speyer, among others. In 1840, Ludwig Ullmann, who had studied at the same time as Geiger at the University of Bonn, translated the Qur’an into German, while Albin de Biberstein translated the Qur’an into French. In 1857 the first Hebrew translation appeared, rendered by Hermann Reckendorff. Rabbinical students at the seminars in Berlin, Breslau, and Budapest, as well as at the yeshiva in Würzburg, studied Arabic. The myth of the “Golden Age” of Muslim Spain was developed, along with the claim that Islam was the religion of tolerance, in contrast to Christianity. The image of a tolerant Islam, in contrast to an intolerant Christianity, was popular at the time; Heinrich Heine’s 1823 play, *Almansor*, was among several literary works of the era depicting a romantic, welcoming Muslim Spanish culture that serves as a model for an enlightened religion necessary to the modern world. Moreover, one of the most
prominent German-Jewish scholars of Islam, Gustav Weil, viewed Islam as the Enlightenment religion par excellence: “A Judaism without the many ritual and ceremonial laws, which, according to Mohammed’s declaration, even Christ had been called to abolish, or a Christianity without the Trinity, crucifixion, and salvation connected therewith—this was the creed which, in the early period of his mission, Mohammed preached with unfeigned enthusiasm.”

Not all Jewish thinkers agreed, of course. Ludwig Philippson, Heinrich Graetz, and Franz Rosenzweig are three German Jewish thinkers whose view of Islam was less than enthusiastic, but who were also not scholars of Arabic. While continuing to demonstrate the influence of Judaism on Islam, Graetz used that influence as proof of Islam’s lack of originality. Thus, Graetz wrote in his eleven-volume *Geschichte der Juden*, published between 1853 and 1878, that “the best that the Qur’an contains, is borrowed from the Bible or the Talmud.“ [„Das Beste, was der Koran enthält, ist der Bibel oder dem Talmud entlehnt.”] Graetz, who for so long was antagonistic to Geiger (though reconciled in later years, as Michael Meyer has demonstrated), pointed to parallels between Islam and Judaism, but drew very different conclusions. The Islamic declaration that “there is no God but Allah” was taken from Judaism, Graetz wrote, and Muhammad’s subsequent addition, “and Muhammad is his prophet” was simply a reflection of his “arrogance.”

While Geiger understood Muhammad as a genuine religious believer, Graetz wrote that Muhammad “first conceived [his religious teachings] when suffering from epilepsy, and he communicated them to his friends, pretending they were revealed to him by the angel Gabriel.”

What did Islam ultimately offer to Jews? Graetz at times contradicts himself. He wrote of the glorious era of Muslim Spain that led to a flourishing of Jewish culture, but he also wrote that Islam became
Judaism’s “second enemy.” Muhammad himself, Graetz writes, “hated the Jews in his innermost heart” and “exchanged the attitude of a humble prophet for that of a fanatical tyrant.” Ultimately, Graetz writes, “fanaticism, together with the love of war and conquest, had already taken possession of the Arabians, and they accepted the Qur’an as a whole, alike its revolting features and the truths borrowed from Judaism, as the unquestionable word of God. Judaism had reared a second unnatural child.”

Graetz held even more cantankerous views of Christianity, claiming it was the first and most dangerous enemy of the Jews. Nearly every section of the *History of the Jews* opens with an account of Jewish persecutions and suffering at the hands, primarily, of Christians. That lachrymose account of Jewish history makes Graetz’s depiction of Christian origins a kind of historiographical theodicy.

In Graetz’s depiction, Jesus was an earnest, gentle, moral figure who emerged within the Essene community, which had attempted to hasten the messianic era through an ascetic lifestyle. The fervor of Jesus’ preaching, he argues, was attractive primarily to Galilean Jews, who were ignorant, superstitious, primitive simpletons susceptible to apocalyptic fantasies, charlatans, and false messiahs. Jesus called himself the “Son of God” and the “Son of Man,” terms Graetz claims were derived from the Essenes, and Jesus claimed to have power over demons and Satan. Graetz’s Jesus encouraged moral righteousness, and he did not attempt to reform Judaism, nor did he object to the sacrificial system, but he was of little interest to the well-educated Jews of Judea, who were immersed in scholarly study of Torah. For Graetz, as for Geiger, Christianity began with Paul, who synthesized Jewish monotheism with paganism, producing a religion attractive to Greek and Roman pagans as well as Hellenized Jews.
Geiger’s scholarship portrayed large historical expanses that included Christianity and Islam, at least in their earliest, formative periods, within the rubrics of Judaism. His argument erases religious boundaries and implies an imperialist nature to Judaism, on the theological level. Both Jesus and Muhammad are educated, cultivated, genuinely religious figures who exemplify the best of Judaism’s liberal teachings and demonstrate what Jews have to offer to society, including contemporary Germany. Graetz, by contrast, depicts Jesus as a marginal figure, appealing to the ignorant masses that are easily swayed by apocalyptic and mystical enthusiasms, while Muhammad is a crafty politician who used religion to further his own interests. For Graetz, both Jesus and Muhammad, and the Galilean Jews in general, may represent the pious, poor, uneducated Poles who lack German language, Bildung, and Kultur; Evan Goldstein points to the parallel drawn by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Antichrist*, written in 1888, between the early Christians of the New Testament and Polish Jews: “Neither has a pleasant smell.”49

Theological boundaries are ultimately mirrors reflecting religious wishes and fantasies, the “objet petit a,” the unattainable object of desire, to use the language of Jacques Lacan. Boundaries may serve polemical interests by tossing what is undesirable in one’s own religion onto another, as the Tübingen School invented “Jewish Christianity” for its construction of Christian origins, making Jewish Christianity the receptacle of all that nineteenth-century liberal Protestants disliked about Christianity. At other times, the Lacanian mirror is used to project the hope of what one’s own religion might become—for instance, Islam as a model of the liberalism and enlightenment that Judaism ought to achieve, as expressed by Gustav Weil. In another distinction based on Lacan, we can understand the historiography of
Zunz and Graetz, among others, as creating a topography of Jewish history and even of Western history, a map of where Jews lived, flourished, or were persecuted. By contrast, the historiography of Geiger and Baeck is closer to Lacan’s understanding of topology. Their focus is less on drawing a map than it is on depicting relationships and influences. Geiger's historiography is a philological version of the classic topologic image of the Möbius Strip. Geiger does not only argue that Jesus was nothing more than one of the many liberal Pharisees of his day; he constructs those liberal Pharisees after the model of the liberal Protestant version of Jesus that was prevalent in his day. Who is borrowing from whom? Like the Möbius Strip, his argument yokes exteriority to interiority, placing Christianity and Judaism in an inextricable linkage.

VII. Conclusion

Movements of religious reform share similar motifs of wanting to cleanse, purify, liberalize, and return to a pristine point of origin. While such a return to origins often calls forth a longing for an imaginary moment of Christian onset, the rise of liberal theology and historicism complicated the theological wish. By the mid-nineteenth century, Protestants scholars defined the project of theology as the historical reconstruction of Christian origins, but that reconstruction involved recognition that Christianity emerged not ex nihilo, as a singular, pristine religion, but within Judaism. From its moment of onset, Christianity had to undertake an effort at self-definition, cleaning itself of whatever Jewish accretions it wanted to reject, in order to emerge through a process of purification.
Scholars of the Wissenschaft des Judentums were similarly concerned with purging Judaism and Jewish identity—Wissenschaft was to replace Wissen, as Zunz put it—and were also searching for a guiding Leitmotif, whether a unified course of Jewish history, such as Graetz produced, or an undercurrent of liberalism as Geiger claimed for Pharisaism, or an identification of a presumed “essence” of Judaism with Enlightenment religion, as claimed by Weil, Cohen, Bauckh, and many others. Yet for the Jews, the point of origin of Judaism was not enmeshed in a different religion. Studies of the ancient Near East did not begin until late in the nineteenth century, and the Babel-Bibel controversy was larded with anti-Jewish, if not antisemitic motifs. For Jews, insisting on the authochthony of Judaism was essential and served as a Jewish counterpart to Christian theological supersessionism. Comparisons of biblical religion with Babylonian or Egyptian religious ideas or practices were dismissed by Jewish theologians as superficial or used as opportunities to insist that biblical religion had rebelled against the paganism, idolatry, and immorality of the surrounding environment. “Paganism” was an artificial construct that became a crucial rhetorical device in defending Jewish autochthony and uniqueness.

The “philological uncanny” that Geiger, Weil, Graetz, and so many other Jewish scholars experienced when discovering Jewish phrases, ideas, and practices within the Qur’an and the New Testament brought them pleasure, satisfaction, and even a kind of compensation for their loss of Orthodox religious faith. Having departed from the absolutism of Jewish Orthodoxy and rejected divine dictation of the words of Torah, they could instead experience satisfaction by demonstrating the historical impact of Judaism on other religions, garnering for Judaism the title of mother religion. The politics of the era of Jewish
emancipation thus became, textually conceived, not simply an emancipation from Judaism, nor an emancipation from the restrictions of the European nation-states, but rather an imagined transformation of Western history into a theological empire of Judaism and its influences. A certain solace for the loss of religious belief could be established, but the danger became a new kind of imperialist historicism that, at times, failed to recognize the distinctive agency and subjectivity of Islam as well as of Christianity. Glimmers of a shift might be found in some of the concluding moments of that great German-Jewish Wissenschaft. At the turn of the century, Israel Friedlaender broke the confines of Islam as a rational religion and began studying Shiism and even arguing for its influence on false messianic movements within Judaism. 50 Josef Horovitz, writing in the early years of the twentieth century, and Heinrich Speyer, writing in the 1930s, hint in their work at an understanding of the Qur’an not simply as a receptacle of Jewish ideas, but as an interpreter of the Bible and Midrash, a point that the Qur’an scholar Angelika Neuwirth has recently revived in her intertextual studies of the Qur’an.51

On the Christian side, Jewish interventions did not spark greater Christian sympathy for Judaism. The effort to construct boundaries aroused an anxiety in Protestant theology over the historicist claim that, contextualized within first-century Judaism, Jesus said nothing new or original. The rebuttal came not in historicist form, but by evoking racial theory, which arose to academic respectability during the course of the nineteenth century. Jesus may have repeated Jewish teachings, but spiritually he was unique—so claimed Theodor Keim, Daniel Schenkel, Karl von Hase, in the 1860s and 70s, among others. Finally, at the turn of the century, his uniqueness was allegedly rooted in his racial distinction: he was an Aryan. The appalling antisemitic
activities of the so-called “Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben,” founded in 1939, should be neither ignored nor dismissed as a marginal phenomenon because it fulfilled a long unspoken Christian wish: to rid itself of the shame at having originated from Judaism.52

Within Christianity, there is some victory. Geiger’s understanding of Jesus as a Pharisee is by now standard in New Testament textbooks, and he continues to be credited by scholars of Islam as having founded their field. The end of the empires and the difficult processes of decolonization left religious thought with new challenges, from fundamentalists, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, wanting a return to origins and turning a blind eye to everything in between, and from liberals who seem at times to have forgotten the distinctive message of their religion, making the sermons of rabbis and pastors sound nearly identical, as Uriel Tal pointed out.53 Most important, if colonialism was now to be repudiated, so was supersessionism. In 1965, the Roman Catholic Church’s declaration, Nostra Aetate, rejected supersessionism, and in 1980 the Church of the Rhineland declared it would no longer missionize Jews.

The situation today is all the more remarkable for some of its differences. Moshe Rosman questions whether Jewish history can be written without geographic boundaries; the study of Jews and colonialism has emerged as a key project; Jewish history today is increasingly written in a less explicitly lachrymose tone.54 The “Third Quest” of the historical Jesus that has emerged in recent decades includes a more historical-critical approach to the rabbinic sources and greater attention to other Jewish material from the late Second Temple period (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus and Philo, the Pseudepigrapha, archaeological remains). In an echo of Geiger’s
arguments, Daniel Boyarin, in *The Jewish Gospels* (2012), portrays both Jesus and the Gospel authors as Jews engaged in intra-Pharisaic debate, but Boyarin goes further, arguing that Jesus fulfilled Jewish messianic expectations, which he claims included anticipation of a suffering messiah, and that Trinitarian doctrines find their impetus in an ancient Jewish belief in a duality of divinity. Scholarship on Islam is gradually coming to recognize that by focusing on the earliest Islamic texts, and defining Sharia as the central principle of Islam, Orientalism created a narrow definition of an “authentic” Islam, so that subsequent, broader cultural and theological developments within Islam came to be described as deviant or marginal. Because Orientalists were governed by the principle that “the original is the authentic,” Robert Wisnovsky argues that they reified Islam based on texts of the so-called “classical period” of 700–1050. That narrow set of texts created a distorted historical paradigm, and in his recent book Shahab Ahmed urges scholars to “conceptualize Islam in expansive, capacious, and contradictory terms.”

Jewish thinkers, such as my father, could now speak in positive terms of both Christianity and Islam without disparaging their unique message, or discrediting them because of their negative views of Judaism. Anxieties remain, but boundaries are no longer sites of contention. Islamic Studies has moved beyond the classical period, and now the influences of Christianity and Islam on Judaism are being investigated by Gideon Libson and Israel Yuval, among many others. The foundation came out of the great German-Jewish scholarly tradition, and I would like to end by paying tribute to the pioneering work of the Wissenschaft des Judentums, among so many others, whom I discussed today. To them we owe our gratitude and admiration.
Letter from Leo Baeck to Abraham Joshua Heschel

Lieber Professor Heschel,


Mögen gute Tage, glückliche erfüllte Jahre bei Ihren einkehren, bei Ihnen beiden!

Ich weiss, dass Sie oft einmal an mich denken, doch ich würde mich freuen, wenn auch ein Brief von Ihnen käme.

Grüssen Sie alle Ihre Kollegen vom Seminary herzlich von mir und sagen Sie ihnen, dass das Zusammensein mit ihnen mir unvergessen ist.

Herzlichste Grüsse an Sie und Ihre Frau

Ihr

L. Baeck
Dear Professor Heschel,

How often I thought of sending warm wishes to you and your wife before actually setting pen to paper. Sometimes that’s just the way it is: one writes so little because one thinks so much—perhaps sometimes it is the other way around as well.

I’ve thought of you so often. Among the good things I encountered when the world outside was new for me, one of the best was learning that you had found your way and your place in the world. And when I saw you again a year ago, as I had wished to see you: I don’t know if there are trees that bear blossoms and fruit at the same time, but I know that a teacher can only also be an author when his days bear fruit and beside each fruit, a blossom. When we were reunited, I was filled with such a tremendous joy. But as in true joy, when it is genuine and true, next to the fruit—the fulfilled—there grows the blossom—the new wish. So, my first wish fulfilled upon seeing you again, I wished at that time that Abraham Heschel would soon find the right woman to be his wife. Now that wish is fulfilled as well.

May you enjoy good days and many happy and fulfilled years, both of you!

I know that you think of me often, but I would be so happy to receive a letter from you as well.

Please extend my warm greetings to all your colleagues at the seminary and tell them that I will never forget the time we spent together.

Warmest greetings to you and your wife.

Yours,

L. Baeck
Endnotes

5. Ibid, 147.
6. Ibid, 150.


26. Paget, 32.
29. Paget, 36.
38. Isaac Gastfreund, Mohammed nach Talmud und Midrasch, 1875, and Hartwig Hirschfeld, Jüdische Elemente im Koran, 1878, Israel Schapiro,

39. See, for example, the study by Jonathan Skolnik, Jewish Pasts, German Fictions: History, Memory, and Minority Culture in Germany, 1824–1955 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).


44. Graetz, Geschichte der Juden, 101.

45. Ibid, 71.

46. Ibid, 118.

47. Ibid, 76.

48. Ibid, 84.


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