

I Introduction

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The reader will find here, in this *Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*, essays by leading Jewish Studies scholars that display the Jewish theological tradition as long, sustained, complex, and deep. This collection aims to cover the full historical span of Judaism from the biblical through to the contemporary periods. Each essay is a gem filled with not only an overview of a topic that employs and reviews the best in contemporary scholarship, but also brings important new insights to it. One thing that will become obvious for the reader is the variety of theological approaches that Jews have taken to presenting and understanding God. For example, on the crucial issue of revelation, Alan Brill presents us with seven models of revelation in modern Jewish theology.

I should also say, from the outset, that Jewish theology encompasses not only the issue of the nature of God but also the dynamic of interrelations between God and humans and God and the world. I have attempted to focus the attention of my authors mainly on God but, quite naturally, a number of authors also discuss the relations between God and humans, God and the world. Here, for example, a figure like Emmanuel Levinas stands out for wanting to focus almost exclusively on ethical relations between humans.

Although this volume intends to give a sense of the long history of Jewish theology, the reader will see an emphasis on modern and more recent times. Thus there are three sections here, one on modern figures, one on contemporary issues such as the Holocaust and feminism, and a final section on analytic philosophy and “positive or constructive” Jewish theology. This is done both because of the background of your editor and because of the recent flourishing of work in Jewish theology, which has been somewhat suppressed until recently. This is true certainly in relation to modern thinkers and issues, but it is also true in relation to ancient materials.

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Thus Marvin Sweeney tells us in “Jewish Biblical Theology” that it is a “relatively new field within the larger context of Jewish thought” (p. 41). This is so because of a number of reasons. First, the field of “Biblical Theology” was originally called “Old Testament Theology,” which “originated within the context of Christian dogmatic theology” (p. 41). This theology included in it many anti-Jewish prejudices about the religious limitations of biblical law and other Israelite religious practices and the superiority of Christian grace and other Christian doctrines. Jewish scholars needed to identify, sort through, and rectify these Christian prejudices and place biblical theology on a new footing. Second, although much of traditional Jewish theology is based on interpreting the Hebrew Bible (Tanak), little of it takes into account the type of historical, philological, archeological, and literary critical insights available to the contemporary Bible scholar. Therefore, the field of Jewish biblical theology is “new” both in its attempt to investigate the Tanak without a Christian interpretive lens and in its utilization of academic methods of biblical scholarship.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Given the long history of the Jewish theological tradition, together with a recent flourishing of new approaches, methods, and questions, it is not easy to put together a one-volume Companion to Jewish Theology. One can imagine different ways to organize such a volume: historically, geographically, thematically, and organizationally based on significant figures, texts, or issues. In this volume, I roughly follow a historical trajectory with an emphasis especially on the modern period and contemporary issues.

The volume begins with a general discussion of “What is Theology?” by David Novak followed by three essays that focus on traditional materials: biblical, rabbinic, and liturgical. We then move to the medieval period with two contributions on Maimonides’ theology and one on Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism. The second part of the volume focuses on the modern period. We begin with essays on Abraham Isaac Kook, Franz Rosenzweig, and Emmanuel Levinas. This is followed by discussions of four issues: Holocaust, feminism, revelation, and Judaism and world religions. The final section engages analytic philosophy with four essays on “constructive” Jewish theology.

Given my charge to attempt to cover the entire theological tradition from the Bible forward, there are obvious holes and extremely important

figures, texts, and movements that I have left out. Any knowledgeable Jewish scholar can see these holes, imagine a different structure, and point to figures omitted or question those included. Here, I can only say that the figures and topics collected here represent one necessarily incomplete collection without any pretense to be exhaustive of the vast field of Jewish theology.

Having very briefly described the structure and nature of the chapters contained herein, I will now attempt to place them within both the larger intellectual contexts of Western thought and within the Jewish tradition. This begins with a defense of Jewish theology as a Jewish religious form together with an engagement with responses to the challenge that the modern Enlightenment posed to theology. I will also discuss the perennial issue of “negative theology” in Judaism, which poses another kind of challenge to Jewish theology. Here, I review some of the discussions in contemporary philosophical movements such as philosophical hermeneutics and analytical philosophy that are providing new ways to respond to negative theology with positive theologies. In what follows, the reader will often find references to the essays in this volume. Although this is not always done sequentially, in the order in which they appear, it is my hope that the reader will receive both one version of what one could call the “story of Jewish theology” and, also, a basic sense of what is contained in this volume.

JEWISH THEOLOGY?

Any book on Jewish theology must, unfortunately, include some discussion of the validity of the enterprise. This is because the assertion that Judaism contains a long and sustained tradition of Jewish theology has been questioned both within and without Judaism. And one way that this book responds to queries about the status of theology in Judaism is simply by displaying the theological riches that exist.

But some further argument must be given, if only because Jews themselves often deny that Judaism has a theology. If some do acknowledge a few theological doctrines and treatises, they often then point to the massive attention in Judaism given to Jewish law, halakhah, as opposed to theology. The study, discussion, systematization, and application of Jewish law certainly takes up more space than theology in the sacred texts and commentaries of Judaism. Furthermore, one can say that the covenant with God is built more on behaviors than beliefs. Certainly, the fact that Christianity focuses so much on theology and much less on law is another

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important factor here, with both Jews and Christians seeking to distinguish themselves from the other by asserting their different religious commitments—one to law and the other to theology. However, even if we take the distinction of law and theology seriously, the reader will see that for Jews there is an intricate connection between law and theology and many Jewish theologians seek to make that connection explicit. In this collection, David Novak argues that Jewish theology must have essentially to do with law, which means it needs to explain the best “grounds for intelligent obedience to the law,” p. 23. Daniel Frank sees the connection between theology and law in the parallel between the creation of the world with its natural laws and the creation of the nation of Israel with its social and religious laws. And Ronit Irshai argues that feminist theology cannot avoid halakhah if it is to be relevant to the larger enterprise of Judaism.

But to continue on the issue of the question of theology, I would note that not only Jewish theology, but Christian theology as well, has received less scholarly attention in the contemporary non-sectarian university.¹ In the university, theology is sometimes seen as antithetical to the value-free standards of scholarly objectivity and an early modern fear of the proselytization of religion has surprising staying power even in the contemporary university.

Certainly, there has been significant attention to Jewish theology especially in the medieval period, but also in modernity. One strategy to make Jewish theology “kosher” for the academy has been to label it “Jewish philosophy” instead of theology. But even with this, the task of the scholar has largely been to trace the path of Jewish theology from Greek, Arabic, and Latin Christian materials to Jewish theological expressions, as well as placing Jewish philosophy and theology in its historical context. In this way, Jewish theology becomes a matter of intellectual history rather than a normative and constructive task of discerning and discussing the truth value of Jewish theological claims.

In reviewing the relation of Jewish theology to the academy, it is instructive to look at the example of the nineteenth-century German case. Jewish scholars who launched the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* or “The Science of Judaism” in Germany clearly wanted to distinguish their study from the ahistorical, reverential, and excessively apologetic

¹ Although it may not be surprising that Jewish theology finds little place in the modern secular university, even in Jewish rabbinical seminaries and Yeshivot (traditional institutions of study), Jewish theology is not well represented.

practices of traditional Jewish education. They sought to employ the most exacting, historical, and documentary methods of the academy to find, translate, and annotate the myriad of Jewish texts, commentaries, and treatises that were largely unknown in the non-Jewish academic world. At the same time, as George Y. Kohler of Bar-Ilan has shown, they saw their work as contributing not only to building the field of academic Jewish studies but also to the construction of a new form of universal and humanistic Judaism for the modern Jew.² Kohler argues that the focus was, precisely, on theology as an alternative to traditional halakhic practice on the one hand and a purely secular Judaism on the other. In addition, Kohler attempts to show that the models for a theological Judaism were not taken from Protestant Christian sources, as many have assumed,³ but instead, from the medieval theological sources that the Wissenschaft scholars had unearthed.⁴

Contemporary Jewish Studies in Europe, America, and Israel has continued the historical, philological, and cataloguing activities of classic German Wissenschaft des Judentums adding to it sociological, ethnographic, and, recently, cultural studies, while largely dropping the theological agenda and normative concerns of the nineteenth-century German Jewish scholars. However, in this volume, a number of thinkers take up the later tasks again.

For an example of a normative presentation of Jewish theology we have a fine statement in the first chapter of this book by one of the leading theologians of our generation, David Novak. In “What is Theology?” Novak argues that the task of the Jewish theologian is to explicate Judaism in a way that “best intends its truth.” p. 20. For Novak, theology as a normative practice involves “doing theology” as “a participant” from the inside (p. 20) of the Jewish community, rather than the study of theology or “talking about” theology from the outside. Still, while attempting to do theology from the inside, Novak’s work

² George Y. Kohler, “Judaism Buried or Revitalised?, Wissenschaft des Judentums in Nineteenth Century Germany – Impact, Actuality, and Applicability Today,” in Daniel Lasker, ed., *Jewish Thought and Jewish Belief*, (Beer Sheva: BGU Press, 2012) 27–63.

³ See Leora Batnitzky for the position that highlights the role Christian thought plays in modern Judaism, *How Judaism Became a Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴ While Maimonides is the usual suspect pointed to for the origins of a modern Jewish theology, Adam Shear attempts to show how central is the figure of Yehudah Halevi, in *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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engages with the “outside” frameworks of classic and modern philosophy and also welcomes the comparative theology project wherein Jewish theology is placed in dialogue with Christian theology. The last section of this book on analytic Jewish theology has additional contributions of the normative type.

JEWISH THEOLOGY AS HERMENEUTICAL

In the later part of the twentieth century, especially in the US, spurred on by the celebrated “turn to language” in philosophy in both Continental and analytic thought, a more profound way to speak of Jewish theology and its difference from Christian theology has been to say that Jews do, after all, have theology, but that Jewish theology is different from Christian theology. Here, the difference is often described in terms of the asymmetrical role that Greek philosophy plays in Christianity and Judaism. Thus, Christian theology embraced Greek philosophy from the outset and Jewish theology, especially in the rabbinic period, eschewed Greek philosophy and embraced narrative strategies, such as those seen in the Bible, and the forms of exegesis and commentary.

Therefore, the argument goes, Jewish theology is more apt to follow narrative forms like parable and allegory than the syllogistic, systematic, and propositional forms of Christian theology. Given the Jewish focus on the Torah as the central expression of God’s word and will and the nexus of the connection between God and Jew, the interpretation of the Torah is the central vehicle of Jewish theology and not philosophy. Thus some have argued that Jewish theology is interpretive or “hermeneutical theology” rather than “philosophical theology.” So where Christian theology takes the form of systematic propositions about God, Jewish theology takes the form of commentary, or in rabbinic terms, “midrash.”

In accordance with the hermeneutic theory of Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur,⁵ hermeneutical theology interprets older texts for the needs of the contemporary situation. Thus, a hermeneutical approach to theology attempts to apply the truths of Torah to contemporary life. In this way, the sacred text remains alive and relevant, and God’s word

⁵ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroads, 1982); Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

becomes a living word that calls out across the generations. In his essay on Franz Rosenzweig, Jules Simon argues that the dynamic quality of Rosenzweig's theology is found precisely in its hermeneutic and "mid-rashic" quality. But we see the hermeneutical method appears in many of the other contributions on contemporary theology in this volume. Alan Brill reviews hermeneutical approaches to theology as his seventh model for revelation (p. 337ff.).

JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

However, the claim that Jewish theology is hermeneutical and not properly philosophical is both too simple and inaccurate. This is because Greek and Western philosophy has played a not insignificant role in Jewish theology. Indeed, beginning with Philo in the first century and then Saadia Gaon in the ninth, through the great period of medieval philosophy, to modern and contemporary eras, Jewish thinkers have developed forms of theology based on propositions, deductive logic, correspondence and coherence theories of truth, and the full panoply of methods and logics found in Western philosophy.

Indeed, it is easy to argue, as many have, that the most sustained, disciplined, complex, and articulate forms of Jewish theology are found in the medieval period where Neoplatonic and Neoplatonist philosophical paradigms were married to Jewish biblical and rabbinic thought in extremely creative ways that resulted in both the system of Maimonides and the Kabbalah. Here, in this collection, I would direct the reader to the essays on Jewish medieval theology by Daniel Frank, Daniel Rynhold, and Kenneth Seeskin, and also to that on the Kabbalah by Adam Afterman.

In the modern period, Enlightenment thinkers, especially Immanuel Kant, had a central role in Jewish theological formulations. And this resulted in an extremely influential form of theology often referred to as "Ethical Monotheism" with leading figures being Abraham Geiger, Hermann Cohen, Leo Baeck, and a significant group in Great Britain as well as in the United States.⁶ Today a relatively new form of Jewish theology is being developed by Jewish theologians trained in

⁶ Here we could include Solomon Schechter, J. H. Hertz, and C. G. Montefiore. Leora Batnitzky has a good discussion of Ethical Monotheism in her *Idolatry and Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), ch. 1.

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contemporary analytic philosophy. Here I would direct the reader to the contributions by Fisher, Fleischacker, and Gellman.

Certainly, not the least of the contributions of analytic philosophy to Jewish theology has been to advance the argument, implicit in the Tanak and rabbinic texts, and explicit in medieval Jewish thought, that Jewish theology deserves to be seen as a form of knowledge and not a matter of subjective opinion, communal myth, or non-rational thinking. Jewish theology has an important epistemological dimension and endeavors to make normative truth claims that deserve to take their place alongside other philosophical and religious epistemologies.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

In some way the recent attempt to argue that theology deserves to be considered a form of knowledge was required by the severe challenge of Enlightenment thinkers to this very claim. In the eighteenth century, Locke, Hume, and Kant argued that philosophy needed to limit itself to what it could know with certitude on the basis of empirical science and a purified reason that was limited to articulating presuppositions of thinking and physical laws on the model of mathematics. In short, the Enlightenment sought to destroy medieval metaphysics with the result that theology of all kinds was presented as without rational warrant or justification. This meant that theological knowledge was false knowledge and it was the duty of the enlightened rational man to deny it. Especially, in Germany, where the most creative modern Jewish philosopher-theologians lived, the legacy of Kant's critique of religion had a very important effect that relegated all theological beliefs to the unknowable realm of the *noumena* and focused philosophy on the phenomenal realm alone.

It is important to say that the Kantian critique did not destroy Jewish theology. Kant left theology enough avenues to survive and play a productive role in Western culture and in the Jewish community, specifically. These avenues were first ethical (and then aesthetic), so that Judaism became, as previously mentioned, "Ethical Monotheism." In the words of one of the greatest representatives of this school, Hermann Cohen, Judaism is the origin of a "religion of reason" and its essence is its practical reason or ethics which makes Judaism best suited to provide not only Jews, but non-Jews as well, with a moral beacon for the modern world.

Following the Enlightenment hope of creating more democratic and culturally varied societies, post-Enlightenment Jewish theologies focused Jewish energies on issues of individual human rights and social justice. Like many Europeans in the early twentieth century, many Jews were attracted to the moral vision of socialism which they saw as a revival of the vision of the Israelite prophets. Both socialism and the vision of the prophets was then very much part of early Zionism. We see the strong emphasis on human rights and social ethics in many of the essays in this volume, but especially in those on Levinas and the feminist theologies covered by Ronit Irshai.

Certainly one of the most revolutionary and significant movements of contemporary Judaism is Jewish Feminism which begins with a critique of Judaism as patriarchal and religiously inhospitable to women, but then moves to develop highly creative new forms of Jewish theology that are both sensitive to the spiritual needs of women and seek continuity with Jewish tradition. The French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva has said that the most compelling issues of culture in the twenty-first century revolve around matters of sexuality and gender. Jews have taken a central role in addressing these issues both in Judaism and the wider culture. Irshai's essay reviews just a few of the important ways in which this is being done in Jewish theology and also in Jewish law.

However, as powerful as the move to ethics in Jewish theology has been, the project to reduce the great textual, interpretive, legal, and ritual aspects of Judaism to ethics alone has its obvious drawbacks. It is spiritually quite thin and dry and it also fails to take into account the significant non-ethical or supra-ethical "holy" aspects of Judaism. This has led Jews, and also Christians, to explore aesthetics, textuality, and the "symbolic" realm along with mysticism as alternative ways to articulate a modern "post-Enlightenment" theology and religion. We can also include the earlier mention of hermeneutical theologies as a contemporary offshoot of the aesthetic strategy. Although there are some Jewish theologians that stay fairly close to ethics as the central vehicle of Jewish expression in the modern period, many have explored both ethical and aesthetic (and hermeneutical) strategies in their theologies. This we see particularly in Martin Buber, Abraham Isaac Kook, and Franz Rosenzweig.

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE JEWISH THEOLOGIES

Another important issue for Jewish theology that is covered in this collection is the issue of "negative theology" and its opposite "positive

theology." For examples of positive theology one need only look to the Hebrew Bible where God is portrayed with positive attributes such as power, knowledge, wisdom, and everlastingness. In the Bible, God is described also as walking, talking, loving, caring, judging, saving. Furthermore, at times, God is described as having arms, fingers, a face, and other body parts. Yehudah Halevi, the great medieval theologian and poet, described this God simply as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

However, the Bible also warns Israel against making images of God and the second commandment against idols inserts a strong aniconic tradition in Judaism. This tradition is developed in the Babylonian Talmud in Tractate Avodah Zarah and other places, but it received its most developed exposition in Maimonides' thought. Here, Maimonides sought to severely limit not only iconic but also conceptual expressions for God. Thus we have Maimonides' "negative theology."

Negative theology, in its first stage, states that one should not speak of God as having positive attributes of power, wisdom, eternity, etc., but one should say God is not powerless, not ignorant, not temporal, or embodied. However, in its full-blown expression, even these negative statements are prohibited because they suggest that God does, indeed, have positive attributes that compare, if only by negation, to human ones. As Daniel Rynhold says in his essay on Maimonides' theology: "It is important . . . to specify the precise nature of the negation to which Maimonides refers, for clearly an ordinary negation would simply lead us back to the positive attribute that we had intended to avoid" (p. 123). Rynhold continues, "when we speak of God therefore, we are to take any attribution of an essential attribute as a negation in this sense. To say that God is not-dead, is not to positively describe Him as having 'life,' but to eliminate him from the category of things that can be living or dead" (p. 123). Finally, Rynhold explains that negative theology is a statement about the limitations of language itself: "When taken to its logical conclusion this means that human language is simply inadequate for representing God" (p. 123).

NEGATIVE THEOLOGY IN EXISTENTIALISM AND LEVINAS

Given the towering position of Maimonides in Jewish thought and theology, the legacy of negative theology extends into the modern period. We clearly see it in the thought of Hermann Cohen who argues