CHAPTER FOUR

THE ROOTS OF RATIONALISATION: ANCIENT JUDAISM

The only consistent and worthy method which philosophical investigation can adopt, is to take up History – where rationality begins to manifest itself in the actual conduct of the World’s affairs (not where it is merely an undeveloped potentiality), – where a condition of things is present in which it realises itself in consciousness, will and action (Hegel 2008, 144).

The work entitled Ancient Judaism [Das antike Judentum], first published under the same title in Volumes XLIV (1917–1918) and XLVI (1918–1919) of the Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, constitutes the third and last part of the Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie. Though Weber published his studies on Judaism at the time of the Balfour Declaration, they contained no overt reference to the political vicissitudes of the times.1 There are, however, various interpretations which seek to reconstruct the historical and theoretical background behind Weber’s examination of ancient Judaism, beginning with the historiographical context in which he was working, which was witnessing a renaissance in Old Testament studies and attempts to reform the methodology and historical reconstruction of the Old Testament research tradition (Guttman 1925; Causse 1937; Liebeschütz 1967; Holstein 1975; Parente 1978; Fahey 1982).2

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1 As Shmueli wrote about Weber, “although admitting the possibility of some Jewish settlers colonizing Palestine, he never envisaged the Zionist program as charting a way for a solution for the external problems of Jewry. As many liberal thinkers before him, both Christians and Jews, he did not regard the Jewish people, after the destruction of its state, as a nation. His teacher, Mommsen, maintained that according to the Roman concepts, the Jews were regarded as a nation or people (ethos or gens) only up to the time of the destruction of Jerusalem” (Shmueli 1968, 210).

2 According to Parente, the leading figures in this endeavour, despite their dissimilar backgrounds, were Welhausen, whose intention was to impose an idealist Hegelian perspective, and Eduard Meyer, who supported a more socio-historical perspective, albeit of a positivist character. In his reconstruction of ancient Judaism, Weber followed the latter’s interpretation, especially with regard to his criticism of Smith’s work (see Fahey 1982, 66). In Parente's opinion, Weber believed that even Meyer's positivist interpretation was inadequate to explain the internal development of the Jewish religion and its subsequent transformation, since “what was to be analysed was not only the relationship with the surrounding world, but also and above all, the reciprocal and continual interaction between the social and religious factor” (Parente 1978, 1370). Weber had established a new
Other scholars point out the manner in which Weber, by conducting a study of the Old Testament not in traditional historiographical terms but from a historical-sociological research perspective, was responding to the hypothesis of an elective affinity between capitalism and the Jewish ethic, which had been put forward by Werner Sombart in his *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (1911). Indeed, *Das Antike Judentum* contains an analysis of the historical and doctrinal elements of Judaism that supposedly “inherently” prevented it from encouraging the professional ethic typical of modern capitalism. However, as Schluchter notes (1989), apart from being “mediated” by the need to arrive, by a positive route, at an explanation for the lack of an elective affinity between Judaism and capitalism, Weber’s study also aimed to reconstruct the origins of Judaism and its ties to Christianity and Western civilisation within a singular process of rationalisation.³ We thus come to what was ostensibly Weber’s main reason for conducting this study. As Weber stated, his decision to include Judaism among the “world religions” worthy of detailed study was determined by the fact that it contains historical preconditions decisive for understanding Christianity and Islamism, and because of its historic and autonomous significance for the development of the modern economic ethic of the Occident – a significance, partly real and partly alleged (Weber 1946, 267).

Indeed, for Weber Judaism did not satisfy the criteria that he had established to define the world religions – that is to say, the knowledge of “how to gather multitudes of confessors around them” (Weber 1946, 267). Rather, its relevance lay in the crucial influence it had exerted upon the world religions. In other words, if one did not consider ancient Judaism, one would not be able to understand Christianity and Islam.

Weber’s interpretation of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity and the importance of the former in the process of Western rationalisation began with the fact that the Jews had been the authors of the Old Testament, preserved by Paul as a holy book of Christianity. Weber placed particular emphasis on Paul’s choice to eliminate “all those aspects of the ethic enjoined by the *Old Testament* which ritually characterize the

³ Weber began his study of Judaism in 1909, for the third version of his *Agrarverhältnisse im Altertum*.