The Old Testament scholar W. M. L. de Wette established a view of Jewish history that would gain enormous influence. Referred to by Julius Wellhausen as an “epoch-making founder of Old Testament Criticism”, he is said to have “laid the foundation and much of the superstructure”, upon which later scholars would build. de Wette was also a New Testament exegete—a division between the two exegeses would not become commonplace until long afterwards. He therefore wrote books on both the New and the Old Testaments, with works including commentaries on the New Testament as well as scholarly writings on themes ranging from textual criticism to ethics. Apart from his influence during his lifetime, de Wette’s view on Jews and Judaism would continue to exert influence on later research.

De Wette belongs to the so-called Frühromantik (early Romanticism) that was inspired by for example F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854), who developed a theory of nature and aestheticism—a theory that received its specific application in relation to the Jews. Emphasising the continuity of all things, the underlying structure in Schelling’s thinking is a history of the Spirit. The ultimate point of development in this history is the history of humanity, the highest manifestation of which is human expression in the arts. In the theological thought of this period, the two competing perspectives were the ethical and the rational, the latter largely being Kant’s philosophical approach to all sciences, including religion. However, none of the ethical or rational approaches was fully acceptable to de Wette, although Kant’s thinking remained one of his

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1 Pasto, *Who Owns the Jewish Past?*, 149.
2 Ibid., 79.
fundaments. But de Wette found another model in Schelling’s thinking: “Religion was no longer a set of moral precepts; it was the contemplation of the origin of all being, which was manifested in nature, history and art.” Schelling criticised Kant for one-sidedness, making rationality the judge of everything. To de Wette, this was the answer, and in an idealistic fashion, he saw God as the Absolute and human reason as a part of this Absolute. Combining the impulses from Schelling and Kant, de Wette searched for a synthesis of the two, finding it through the philosophy of J. F. Fries, which facilitated a combination of “faith as a supernatural awareness” that was not “troubled by” empirical historical reality. In this way, he harmonised two previously opposing dimensions into a synthesis:

religion consists not primarily of dogma or speculative knowledge about God and eternity, but of virtuous action inspired and warmed by feeling, and informed by self-knowledge of all that is most noble and beautiful.

Fries agrees with Schleiermacher that the basis of religion is feeling, Gefühl, and Fries’s definition of feeling directly influenced de Wette, who uses his three-step analysis in his *Dogmatik*. Feeling is the conduit between the individual and the universe: “Feeling and history teach us that religion consists of *inexpressible feeling* (unaussprechbarem Gefühl); and the latter [history] shows that all peoples have the same feeling but differ from one another in their *expression* (Aussprechen).” The forms of religion are aesthetical, de Wette believes, consisting of speculation, ethics and Gefühl. In a way that is scarcely comprehensible to modern theology, aesthetics take a central place here.

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6 Ibid., 27–32.
7 Ibid., 33.
8 Ibid., 78. Fries’s relationship to Kant, which may be characterised by critical adherence, is treated in his Jakob Friedrich Fries, *Von deutscher Philosophie Art und Kunst. Ein Votum für Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi gegen F. W. J. Schelling* (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1812), 31–37.
9 These suggestions of how de Wette developed his thinking are based on de Wette’s semi-autobiographical novel *Theodor*. Since de Wette uses this piece of fiction to give a detailed account of his pedigree, this seems to be an unusually rich and accurate story for ascertaining how he arrived at his theological and philosophical positions.
12 Ibid., 17.