PART I

KABBALA SCHOLARSHIP: A REAPPRAISAL
PHILOLOGY AS KABBALAH

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According to the modern understanding, philology has played a major role in the process of secularizing the knowledge of, and about, texts. This has greatly affected the development of religious studies and the humanities as a whole. Philology removes the aura of the sacred from both religious and literary texts. It demystifies holy books and turns them into man-made ones, situating them and their genesis in the historical contexts of culture, knowledge, and biography.

Yet this image of philology as a secularizing and historical discipline has to be put into the context of the history of science itself. It evolved as part of the emergence of historical disciplines in the early nineteenth century, in conjunction with a general theory or “philosophy of philology”, fostered in Germany by figures such as Friedrich August Wolff and August Boeckh. This in turn led not only to national philologists breaking out of the mould of classical philology. It also led to the development of historico-critical theology out of philologia sacra.

Indeed, philology had its greatest impact in secularizing and “demystifying” religious texts. The explosive nature of the philological and historical study of the bible is well illustrated by Spinoza’s banishment after he published his Theological and Political Treatise, even though it was likewise not until the nineteenth century that historico-critical theology was established. In Judaism, this was the result of the Wissenschaft des Judentums (“Academic Study of Judaism”) which transferred religious tradition into the realm of history. Well versed in Boeckh’s and Wolff’s new philological methods, the Wissenschaft des Judentums set its eye on Judaism’s religious literary heritage.

Its take on the kabbalah is symptomatic of this approach. One example is Leopold Zunz’s study of the ‘historical effectiveness’ (‘historische

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1 Bultmann, ‘Neues Testament und Mythologie’ (first published in 1941).
2 Exemplarily with Johann Salomo Semler or Ferdinand Christian Baur.