HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF JUDAISM

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hegel had a lifelong interest in Judaism. He wrote and lectured on the subject repeatedly and on many occasions. The early ‘theological writings’ (as they are called not quite correctly) are undeniably very critical about the Jewish faith. In the 1827 Lectures, some 30 years later, the critique of Judaism is apparently almost muted. As Hodgson writes: “they carry further the favourable reassessment of Judaism begun in 1824. Gone are all earlier references to ‘the fear of the Lord’ that is ‘the beginning of all wisdom’ and to the ‘execrations’ of Leviticus […]”. Careful analysis of the Jewish idea of God takes the place of the earlier critique, as well as a re-evaluation of the great contribution of Israel to the history of religion: the spiritually subjective unity of God. Hodgson: “it [the subjective unity named ‘God’] is in fact the highest philosophical concept; as such, God subsists without sensible shape, only for thought.”

In contrast to this somewhat apologetic reading of Hegel, I would like to insist here on not overestimating the differences in the development of Hegel’s interpretations of the subject. Hodgson is certainly right that Hegel in his 1827 Lectures mentions briefly ‘certain limitations’, only at the end of his overall quite ‘sympathetic phenomenology of the Jewish representation of God’. However, as we shall see, the limitations that he notices in 1827 are broadly the same as the limitations he mentions and describes more extensively and critically in his early theological work. What then is it that indeed makes Hegel’s later treatment of Judaism sound somewhat more sympathetic?

My explanation is quite simple and straightforward: it is mainly the dialectical structure of the Lectures (which purpose is not to criticize but

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strictly to develop logically the concept of religion) that indeed makes all
the difference for the evaluation, not just of the determinate ‘Religion of
Sublimity’ (Judaism), but also for the other religious forms that precede
the Consummate Religion of Christianity. In other words: it is primarily
the progressively systematic and dialectical perspective of the mature
Hegel that accounts for his notably sympathetic evaluation, in contrast
to the relatively non dialectical, ‘typological’ and critical reflections of his
early work on Judaism. It is in comparison to other determinate religions
(especially the Greek Religion, the Religion of Beauty), and in the context
of the logical development Hegel perceives, that the Religion of Sublimity
is shown to be a necessary and rational stage and an indispensable pro-
gression towards Christianity in which (eventually) the concept of religion
becomes objective to itself.

In the following, I will demonstrate this reading by referring to other,
later texts (taken from the Phenomenology en the Philosophy of Right) in
which Judaism or one of its transformations (in Kant for instance, and in
Pietism that share in the Jewish fate of Christianity) is at stake. The impor-
tance of this simple explanation for the present elaboration of Hegel’s
view on Judaism is that it makes us aware of (first) the relatively strong
continuity in his writings on the subject, and (second) of the unmitigated
relevancy of the extensive and very explicit earlier analyses. In fact, they
might show us, not just the ‘limitations’ of Jewish religion in respect to
the Hegelian perspective, but also some of the limitations of Hegel’s own
Philosophy of Religion, and (finally) the inherent danger involved in the
Geist of his Idealism.

This is why I would like to start here by referring to the brilliant essay
‘Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal’ (1799) that Hegel wrote
when he was only twenty-nine years old. According to Wilhelm Dilthey,³
the essay is one of the finest texts Hegel ever wrote in his entire life.
Jacques Derrida has called this essay, quite rightly, la matrice conceptuelle,
‘the conceptual womb’,⁴ of Hegel’s mature system. Hegel’s later dialectic
schema is an abstraction of his contemplation of the nature of love as the
spirit of Christianity, which is why it can serve as a excellent introduction
to his later thoughts.

³ Wilhelm Dilthey, Die Jugendgeschichte Hegels, GS Bd. IV, Stuttgart/Göttingen: Van den
Hoeck & Ruprecht 1974, p. 68.