CHAPTER FOUR
TWO PERSISTENT TENSIONS WITHIN
WISSENSCHAFT DES JUDENTUMS

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Many years ago, when I was a graduate student, one of my professors, a Jew whose field was European history, told me that when he was deciding on a topic for his dissertation he suggested to his adviser that he would like to write on the Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to the United States. His adviser rejected that idea. “As a Jew you will not be able to treat that subject objectively,” he was told. “Why not write about the Irish migration instead?” And so he did.

In the nearly 200-year-long history of Wissenschaft des Judentums—the modern critical study of Jews and Judaism—the relation of scholarly Jews to their texts and traditions, their history and sociology, has indeed been fraught with issues relating to the character of that relationship. Is the insider’s view necessarily different? Should it be different? Does Wissenschaft des Judentums for the Jew transcend the purposes contained within the ethos of Wissenschaft itself? Does the Jew who is committed both to Judaism and to Wissenschaft des Judentums have to deal with two internalized value systems that negate or at least modify one another? Is critical inquiry to serve the Jewish faith and the Jewish people or, rather, to serve only itself? Can a non-Jew be successful at Jewish scholarship? It seems to me that these issues lie at the heart of Wissenschaft des Judentums as it has developed through about half a dozen generations in Europe, in America, and in Israel. I shall deal here with two tensions created by Wissenschaft des Judentums that seem to me the most essential ones: the first is that between religious and secular approaches, and the second is that between efforts directed inward toward Jewish life and outwardly focused goals.

1 A slightly different version of this chapter appeared in Modern Judaism 24 (2004), 105–119.
We have increasingly come to realize that, for all of its novelty and even iconoclasm, Wissenschaft des Judentums for most of its history was to varying degrees in very different ways predominantly a religious enterprise. Not only were nearly all of its leading practitioners in Germany rabbis (the Christian scholars teaching Semitics at universities did not consider themselves to be involved in the same enterprise), but they considered their work to be either in the service of religion or intrinsically a religious task—or both. Its leading scholars were on the faculties of seminaries, where their students were mainly Jews who were preparing to become rabbis.

The close connection between Wissenschaft des Judentums and Jewish faith is to be found most explicitly at the middle-of-the-road Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau. There, unlike among the Orthodox, Wissenschaft des Judentums was affirmed wholeheartedly, even if critical study of the Pentateuch was deemed out of bounds and history was closely linked to theology. Rabbi Zacharias Frankel, the first head of the seminary, set the tone when he wrote as an introduction to the first issue of its scholarly periodical, the *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, that the history of Judaism revealed “a manifestation of the divine, a revelation of religion.” To study Jewish history was to become more aware of God’s plan for Israel, to recognize from the survival of the Jews the efficacy of divine Providence. It is not an exaggeration to say that for Frankel, Jewish history was *Heilsgeschichte*. But not only would readers of the *Monatsschrift* gain a better appreciation of God’s presence in Jewish history; they would also come to realize the “power of the will to believe” among Jews throughout their history. Thus, Wissenschaft des Judentums would inspire Jews to attach themselves more closely to their religious past. Frankel’s position finds its continuation and

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