CHAPTER ELEVEN

“JEWISH LITERATURE” AND “WORLD LITERATURE”: WISSENSCHAFT DES JUDENTUMS AND ITS CONCEPT OF LITERATURE¹

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The idea of “world literature,” which the elderly Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, based on Johann Gottfried Herder, defined between 1828 and 1829 in rudimentary formulations, dispersed in journals, diaries, letters, and conversations, soon turned out to be a far-reaching, most effective concept conceived as the very sum of Weimar classicism’s cosmopolitan humanism. The reception of this concept is well known: histories of world literature soon competed with the dominant genre of the history of national literature and opened perspectives on the interdependence of different literatures. Less known is the significance the concept of world literature gained for the further development of the idea of a “Jewish literature” in the nineteenth century. This can certainly be understood in the context of the Jewish reception of Goethe from Rahel Varnhagen to Ludwig Geiger.² But while reference to Goethe was usually linked to a strong assimilatory inclination ultimately aiming at the abandonment of any particular Jewish perspective in culture and literature, in the nineteenth century, Goethe’s universalistic concept of world literature permitted, paradoxically, as it seems, the substantiation of the new notion of a specifically Jewish literature.

The Wissenschaft des Judentums, a discipline that emerged parallel to Goethe’s concept of a world literature, and, more precisely,
the establishment of Jewish literary studies by Leopold Zunz and Moritz Steinschneider as well as the creation of a Jewish literary history it inspired (from David Cassel to Gustav Karpeles, to name just the most important German examples), demonstrate that the concept of a specifically Jewish literature was forged, above all things, against the background of the model of world literature. It is symptomatic of this process that, just fifteen years after Goethe outlined his concept, the term “world literature” appeared (in 1845, as the first proof of its reception even before the famous passage in the 1848 “Communist Manifesto”) in those important essays in which Zunz substantiated the discipline of Jewish literary studies according to the paradigm of Wissenschaft des Judentums.3

It is this configuration of “Jewish literature” and “world literature” in the nineteenth century that will be explored in the following remarks. In terms of methodology, the representation has to be based on discourse analysis: it aims at discussing the philological as well as speculative patterns of argumentation that the Wissenschaft des Judentums employed when developing a differentiated view of “Jewish literature” or its agenda of “Jewish literary studies.” The first and most general (philosophical and political) element is the dialectics of universality and particularity. This is, as is well known, a theorem of the Haskalah which the Wissenschaft des Judentums transferred to literary studies, thus coming to new insights, as will be shown later on. Second, this general dialectics became more specific on the cultural level of language and literature, since it aimed at a decentralization of Hebrew literature as a strictly “national Jewish” language and literature by opening it toward a transcultural linguistic and literary concept. Third, this concept had historical and social implications that surpassed and transcended world literature in Goethe’s sense: it was accompanied by a diasporic theory that not only explained the transcultural character of Jewish writing by pointing to the Jews’ extraterritorial position, but made literature the medium of Jewish history in general. Literature, in other words, becomes the organ of transcultural communication in an extraterritorial history. As a consequence, Jewish literature, by virtue of its character as diaspora literature, becomes a paradigm of world literature.