
The first surprise amazing the reader of a book about three major figures among the Jewish intellectuals in Weimar Germany—including Gershom Scholem—is the author’s choice of the two other protagonists, Hans Jonas and Leo Strauss. One has become used to expect rather Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig and is therefore grateful for Lazier’s shifting of the focus. The book starts with three mottos by Augustine (his answer to “what is God”), Karl Barth (answering the question “what is the world?”) and Hans Jonas (stating that the world is “an unending revelation of matter”). Certainly Augustine and Barth are not considered to represent Scholem and Strauss (or vice versa), yet apparently both of them, the neo-Platonic genius from the fifth century and the dialectical theologian from the twentieth century, matched in some way the spiritual needs of the period between the World Wars; and indeed, the reader will meet them again throughout the book.

The second, less perplexing surprise follows immediately: the Table of Contents, which lacks any hint of Maimonides (though he is of course present in the book), and guides the reader through the maze of heresies by means of the three markers Gnosticism, Pantheism, and Redemption through Sin, the last one referring to a famous essay published in Hebrew by Scholem in 1937. The author informs us in his preface that he primarily intended to call his own book by this very same title “as homage to Gershom Scholem” (p. XI, sounding nota bene a somewhat ironic statement). Interestingly, any specification of the Jewish context is totally absent in the title eventually given.

The three topics are reconstructed as being essential for understanding the intellectual quest in Weimar Germany in general: Karl Barth (1886–1968), the rising star in the field of Protestant dogmatics, is regarded by the author as the leading scholar attracted by neo-Gnosticism; at the same time, the hype of Pantheism—celebrated in conferences on Spinoza (1632–1677) in 1927 and 1932—reached its peak, and this kind of heresy (already social acceptable within German Bildungsbürgertum) attracted Jewish intellectuals of all stripes; finally, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Hans Jonas’ doctoral adviser, is presented as inspiring Jonas to his
philosophy of life and nature (becoming thus a forerunner of the anti-nuclear movement and successful political party Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen in Germany, which favored Hans Jonas already in the 1970s). Beside Jonas also Leo Strauss and Gershom Scholem grew up in this spiritual climate and found radical answers to the challenge of Gnosticism and Pantheism. Especially Scholem is credited for creating a kind of synthesis between these heresies and Judaism, because “he described every major episode in the history of kabbalah either as a form of Jewish Gnosticism or as a Jewish flirtation with pantheism” (p. 13). However, this presentation of Scholem’s academic work in a nutshell may be a light-hearted roundup, but it hardly does him justice. Some details of Lazier’s brilliant overall picture should be questioned.

To begin with, his suggestion that Gnosticism was revived “in the 1920s and ’30s” (p. 23) is modified by the author’s own notice that important discussions about the Gnostic phenomenon started already in the nineteenth century, most prominently introduced by Ferdinand Christian Baur, who belonged to the Tübinger Schule, and by the famous Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, who titled his dissertation published in 1846 Gnosticismus und Judenthum; even Adolf von Harnack, advocating seriously a Christian bible without the Old Testament in the 1920s, earned his doctorate in Leipzig with a dissertation on Gnosticism as early as 1873 (and one year later in his habilitation treatise De Apellis gnosi monarchica, Leipzig 1874). Only the later debates about Gnosticism rely mainly on the publishing of his book on Marcion in 1921. Now then, to describe Karl Barth’s theology as kind of an existentialist’s pessimistic expression of loneliness as the only gnosis man can be aware of in this world betrays the central point of his argument: in his lecture from 1922, “Das Wort Gottes und die Aufgabe der Theologie,” Barth highlighted “daß es mit unserer Aufgabe so steht, daß von Gott nur Gott selber reden kann (our duty to speak of God is only possible for himself).” I.e. that God himself bestows the believe in revelation on us, by the way an idea which fits well into Paul Tillich’s cognition “impossibile est, sine deo discere deum” (describing the principle of the anti-Gnostic Irenäus in his Berliner Vorlesungen II, 1920–24, p. 448, and similar in “Die Überwindung des Religionsbegriffs in der Religionsphilosophie,” Kant-Studien 27, 1922, p. 469). But it is far from “a recrudescence of gnosticism” (p. 22), even if Hans Jonas perceived Barth as a member of the neo-Gnostic club. However, the