

Introduction II: Viewing Rosenzweig from a Jewish Perspective. A Master of Return

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In many respects Franz Rosenzweig is the antithesis of Baruch Spinoza. First, these two philosophers live at different ends of the so-called “modern” age of Jewish philosophy. Spinoza, trained in pre-modern Jewish texts, advocates all of the major values of enlightenment Humanism. The key topics of Jewish belief are reconstructed in the light of Cartesian values in sharp criticism of his inherited Maimonidean interpretations of rabbinic philosophy. Spinoza is in every sense of the phrase the first Jewish modern philosophy. His very heterodoxy is inherently modern. In contrast, Rosenzweig, trained as a modern German intellectual in the most modern and German of philosophers, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, turns against that tradition to devote his life to recapturing traditional Jewish values. He does so both in his writings, especially in his magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*, a word painting of all of human history which functions for him as a prolegomena for the direction of his life, viz. to being a teacher of Jewish adults in a school (the Lehrhaus) whose most fundamental commitment was to bring back Jews from the “enlightenment” (Aufklärung) of the newly emerged German civilization of a post-enlightenment, rooted-in-rabbinic-tradition

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Jewish civilization. As Emil Fackenheim said¹, the new modern world gave Jews, at least intellectually, the option of living as a modern or as a Jew. Spinoza showed these Jews how they could become human, while Rosenzweig showed these humans how they could become once again Jews. Together, Spinoza and Rosenzweig, mark the bookends of modern Jewish civilization, from the Jews who learn to be modern to the moderns who learn how to be Jewish.²

Second, the directions of their intellectual and spiritual lives are opposed. Spinoza begins his youthful education at home in his synagogue in Amsterdam as a spiritually committed Jew, who learns the Hebrew Scriptures as well as rabbinics, medieval Jewish philosophy, and Kabbalah.³ But he also begins to learn modern Western European philosophy and science, not least of all Descartes and Hobbes. In the course of these studies Spinoza is transformed spiritually. It is not that he ever chooses to become “spiritual.” Rather what changes is the direction that the spirituality takes, as he grows from a quiet youth absorbed with his community and teachers in rabbinic texts that claim to express the will of God into a quiet adult, absorbed with his friends in the new sciences (especially optics) and their related works in modern philosophy.

Rosenzweig moves in the opposite direction. His light is at first the light of Hegelian reason, but with time, thought, and conversations with his circle of extended family friends, he moves into a new spiritual light of revelation. His magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*, is literally a vision of everything, and as such it appears to be an excessively objective, universalistic, picture. But his universe is a universe that is constantly in motion, and that motion – from its beginning to its end – maps out his own personal religious-philosophical movement from the history of German philosophy (from Plato through Aristotle, the scholastics, to Hegel and beyond to at least Nietzsche) into a recovery of rabbinic faith (from the Hebrew Scriptures through at least Moses Maimonides, Judah Halevi, and, most importantly, Hermann Cohen).

¹ In Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought*. Part II, *The Problematics of Contemporary Jewish Thought: From Spinoza Beyond Rosenzweig*, New York 1982, 31–101.

² See Norbert Samuelson, *Jewish Philosophy: An Historical Introduction*, London and New York 2003; *Revelation and the God of Israel*, Cambridge 2002; *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, Albany 1989.

³ Little research has been done on what the youthful Spinoza read and studied as a Jew. The best work remains Harry A. Wolfson’s *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA, 1934). Wolfson constructs a hypothesis of what Spinoza would have needed to know in Jewish philosophy at least to believe what he wrote he believed. Whatever Wolfson says, it has to at least be modified by what Yermiyahu Yovel, in *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Princeton, 1989), has shown about the heretical nature of Spinoza’s Jewish education, for he learned his rabbinic philosophical wisdom through the lenses of his Spanish born, “converso” teachers whose ideas of what Jewish tradition taught was anything but what any Ashkenazi (European) rabbinic philosophers would call “orthodox”.