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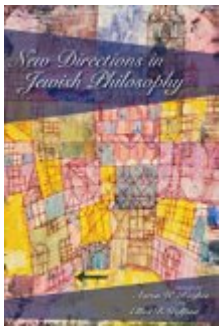

Aaron W. Hughes, Elliot R. Wolfson, eds.. *New Directions in Jewish Philosophy.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. x + 362 pp. $27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-22164-3.

Reviewed by Steven Kepnes

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

The ten essays collected here are a wonderful series of studies in Jewish philosophy focusing on Talmudic, M\medieval, and modern thought. The essays follow out the implications of what has been called "postmodern," or "postfoundational," philosophy on the Continent and in North America, where the import of linguistic, textual, and interpretative strategies has been recognized as central to the philosophical enterprise. The new paradigm in philosophy includes a critique of two of the dominant ways that philosophy, including Jewish philosophy, have been studied. One is the rationalistic "logocentric" focus in philosophy and the other is the historical focus. To the extent that this new direction in philosophy, sometimes called "postmodern philosophy," was initiated by Continental figures like Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and American figures like Charles Peirce and Richard Rorty, this book, despite its title, does not really initiate a new direction. The scholars in Jewish philosophy and Jewish studies whose works are assembled in this collection, aside from Elliot Wolfson, cannot be considered in the group that first adapted the insights of postmodern theory to Jewish thought. Indeed, one only needs to look at the endnotes to the essays to see the names of the pioneers. These are figures like Geoffrey Hartman, Daniel Boyarin, David Stern, Robert Alter, Susan Handelman, Eugene Borowitz, and many others. Conspicuously absent from the introduction to the book that speaks of the "new direction" in the particular area of Jewish philosophy is Peter Ochs, who, together with Robert Gibbs and myself, started the Postmodern Jewish Philosophy group, which changed its name to Textual Reasoning and established an electronic journal of that name two decades ago, in 1991.[1] Although Hughes and Wolfson claim to be making "the first attempt" (p. 5) to overcome the current historical critical bias in the study of Jewish philosophy, the journal and books of Textual Reasoning clearly must be seen as making that first attempt.

Elliot Wolfson was a member of the Textual Reasoning group in its beginnings and certainly has been one of the most creative and productive

scholars. Wolfson has not only delved into the literary and hermeneutical aspects of Kabbalah but has made an extremely important contribution in moving beyond a textual focus alone, to the visual and imagistic fields. I would suggest, then, that the collection of articles we have here represent, not so much a new direction in Jewish philosophy as a kind of tribute to the work of Wolfson, to whom most of the essays refer.

Aaron Hughes begins his essay with reference to a quotation from the literary giant Jorge Luis Borges. In this quotation Borges says that all writers "create their own precursors." What this means is that authors often are addressing a series of predecessors that transcend their own temporal and spatial context. This might involve predecessors who are long dead or dwell in places of the world far from the author's own country. We certainly see this in rabbinic literature where the rabbis address the rabbis of the past "as if" they were living in the present. All literature, whether it be rabbinic, philosophic, or poetic, exists in a long tradition of texts built upon texts that came before, and attempt to make significant textual innovations in that tradition so that texts in the future will refer to them. The literary term for this is "intertextuality," and what this term means is that it is often the textual tradition in which, out of which, and to which the writers write that is more important than the "original historical context" in which the writer lives. The primacy of intertextuality over historical context also means that problems and solutions that are formulated in one historical period by a thinker writing in and for his/her textual tradition, may very well be productive for a thinker writing in a very different historical period. Thus Hughes, in his essay on translating the Bible into the vernacular, finds surprising similarities and philosophically significant differences between the Bible translation of Rosenzweig done in early twentieth-century Germany and the translation of the Bible into Arabic done by Saadya in tenth-century Egypt and Babylonia. What Hughes then proposes to do is to first read Rosenzweig in the light of Saadya and then return to reread Saadya in the light of Rosenzweig. In this way, the twentieth-century German Rosenzweig could become a "predecessor" to the tenth-century Arab philosopher Saadya. Hughes tells us that he learned this trick from Wolfson, since the latter taught him that time, in the system of the kabbalist, is "irreversibly reversible" (p. 53).

In his essay on Levinas, Martin Kavka takes up the theme of predecessors, by trying to recreate precedents in medieval Jewish philosophy that Levinas himself did not appear to create in any elaborate or systematic way. The essay by Dana Hollander starts with establishing the historical context of Hermann Cohen's writings on "the neighbor" but then shows how Cohen contributes beyond his context to the construction of an "ideal of ethical-political universality" (p. 231). In his essay "Sharing Secrets: Inter-Confessional Philosophy as Dialogical Practice," Steven Wasserstrom shows how the innovative use of cross-cultural dialogues with fictive characters like Halevi's Khazar King, allowed Halevi to introduce rabbinically prohibited pagan philosophical themes into Jewish discourse. The essay by Sergey Dolgopolski, one of the best in the collection and titled "What is the Sophist? Who is the Rabbi," explores similar themes of dialogue and the relation of non-Jewish Platonic philosophy to Jewish thought. Dolgopolski seeks to offer a notion of rabbinic character as a "virtual" character that overturns present concerns in much Talmudic scholarship, to identity the actual historical identity and legal or ideational perspective of certain rabbinic figures. Kalman Bland also looks back to Greek thought, to Socrates and Aesop's Fables and to their views of animals, to investigate the "conceptions of spatiality, violence, pleasure, and death as they converge on the social construction of non-human animals" (p. 180) in medieval Hebrew literature. James Diamond's essay on Maimonides considers the ***Guide of the Perplexed*** as a form of "philosophical midrash" in which there is an intricate "interweave between" biblical verses and philosophical

argumentation. Other essays in the collection follow the innovation in Wolfson's work to turn from text to image in Jewish philosophy. This we see in the essay by Wolfson himself on Rosenzweig and the one by Michael Gottleib on Mendelssohn's aesthetics. Almut Bruckstein has a truly creative entry in which she introduces not only visual but performance art to analyze the Talmudic form as a challenge to notions like "The West," "oneness," "male," and "female."

Taken together, this is an excellent collection that displays some of the real fruits for Jewish philosophy that the perspective of postmodern philosophy, with its focus on language, text, interpretation, and image, can bring to the field. The collection is a must for graduate Jewish studies libraries and all serious university libraries.

Note

[1]. For a more systematic and specifically philosophical presentation of the warrants for the postmodern turn in Jewish philosophy, readers might want to consult the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*, accessible at http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/; Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, and Robert Gibbs, *Reasoning After Revelation: Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998); and Nancy Levene and Peter Ochs, *Textual Reasonings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

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