

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

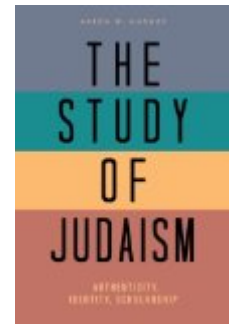


Aaron W. Hughes. *The Study of Judaism: Authenticity, Identity, Scholarship*. Albany: State University of New York Press. ix + 162 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-4861-9; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-4862-6.

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Jewish Studies Today: Not So Good

The Study of Judaism is a slim jeremiad on the state of Jewish studies today. According to Aaron Hughes, the academic field of Jewish studies is in trouble, largely “insular” (p. 31), and tethered to its parochial origins. The vast majority of its practitioners are Jewish and battles rage within academic units of Jewish studies over whether non-Jews should be accepted as full members. The annual conference of its major professional organization, the Association for Jewish Studies, uncomfortably and inappropriately promotes religious practice, breaching the divide between religion and its study. Major university presses publish works of religious practitioners promoting their own, essentialist notions of “Judaism” and thus give to them a veneer of scholarly respectability. The field of Jewish studies, in contrast to the study of other religions in the academy, is populated by more “caretakers” than “critics,” who sacrifice scholarly objectivity for the defense and promotion of their particular religious understanding.

It is not hard, Hughes continues, to see how Jewish studies arrived at this state. Its modern practice, in North America and Israel (although he focuses primarily on North America), arose out of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement in nineteenth-century Germany, whose agenda was patently apologetic. Its practitioners were out to create a “Judaism” that would be comprehensible, rational, and admirable in the eyes of both Jews and others at a time when much was politically at stake. Our scholarly progenitors, Hughes claims, should not be crit-

icized for their sacrifice of scholarly objectivity on the altar of emancipation; they were largely driven to this position by the marginalization of Jewish studies within the German academy by non-Jewish scholars. We, though, in a very different historical context, should know better.

The problem in Jewish studies today, Hughes asserts, is not that there are not models in the academy of sound scholarly work in Jewish studies (by both Jews and non-Jews) but that special interests work to use academic Jewish studies to further their own parochial objectives. Primary among these interest groups are behemoth private foundations that use their money to further their own parochial aspirations. These foundations, the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, the Posen Foundation, and the Tikvah Fund, each with its own competing mission and vision, insidiously use their vast money to seduce academics in Jewish studies to further their agendas. They thus threaten the academic integrity and potential normalization of Jewish studies.

Hughes claims that Jewish studies today stands at a “crossroads” (p. 137). Scholars of Jewish studies can choose to remain insular, seduced by the money and resources of these special interests. Or, we can adopt a non-essentialist approach to the study of Judaism, which is exemplified by such scholars as Jacob Neusner, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Daniel Boyarin. Such an approach is best combined with the relentless interrogation of the terms and concepts commonly used in the field.

Before assessing Hughes's assessment and argument, a terminological clarification is in order. As he acknowledges, Hughes uses the term "Jewish studies" largely to mean the academic study of Judaism within the context of the discipline/field of religious studies. He is certainly aware that historians, literary critics, sociologists, anthropologists, and linguists, among others, use "Jewish data" within their own disciplinary perspectives. While Hughes can sometimes be slippery with this terminology, I will focus on the situation in religious studies in particular.

Hughes highlights some concerning issues. Most professional scholars of Judaism probably do identify as Jews, and I think most of us would desire greater diversity in the field. The Association for Jewish Studies annual meeting does sometimes feel uncomfortably parochial. Academic institutions and units, as always, sometimes need to push back against the desires of large donors. I have myself also argued for a non-essentialist (polythetic) approach to Judaism that sidesteps the pitfalls of essentialism.

Like many jeremiads, though, *The Study of Judaism* sometimes stretches its evidence to make a stronger case than is warranted. Three examples of this selective use of evidence stood out for me: the case at CUNY-Queens as an illustration of Jewish ethnic insularity; the publication of David Gerlanter's *Judaism: A Way of Being* by Yale University Press (2009) as an example of how caretaking passes for critique; and the insidiousness of foundation money.

Hughes cites the controversy around Samuel Heilman's objection to the appointment of Thomas Bird, a non-Jew, to the head of the Jewish studies program at CUNY-Queens as illustrating how Jewish studies polices its ethnic borders. It is true that Heilman raised the issue of whether it is appropriate for an academic unit to be headed by a non-Jew, but this was but one of a series of more serious concerns (e.g., that Bird did not know necessary scholarly languages and did not hold a PhD in the field, which surely would disturb Hughes also). Heilman has published a more nuanced statement of his position, but to my knowledge no academic unit anywhere has publicly supported his position on the role of ethnicity in ethnic studies.[1] This was a rather isolated case, not representative of the field as a whole.

Hughes claims that Yale University Press (YUP) somehow acted inappropriately by publishing Gerlanter's book. Gerlanter's book, I agree, is not an academic work

of Jewish studies. Like other university presses, though, YUP publishes a variety of works on religion (not just Judaism) that take a more engaged and constructive approach than some might feel belongs in the academy. We do and should not expect any university press to stamp disclaimers on its non-scholarly titles.

The real target of the book, though, are the large donors to Jewish studies. The organizations that Hughes singles out do have missions that can theoretically bring them into conflict with the academic and critical goals of the programs and scholars they finance. Does this amount to actual conflict though? That is, have these foundations and their funded programs ever interfered with an academic program's activities or individual scholar's research in order to bring them more into line with their own mission? Perhaps, but the very brief and largely anecdotal evidence Hughes cites does not lead to that conclusion. The very fact that the Tikvah Fund now appears to be reevaluating its commitment to its academic programs at NYU and Princeton might well be the result of the success that these institutions have had in remaining independent of the donor's agenda.

As Hughes correctly points out, Jewish studies must also be seen in light of its place within the academy (as, for example, an "ethnic studies" program; pp. 12, 143n5). I suspect that this is more germane to an accurate assessment of the state of Jewish studies today than is its history in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, and would have liked to have seen more attention to it. Without that larger context, it is hard to properly evaluate whether Jewish studies, or more narrowly the study of Judaism within the context of religious studies, really significantly differs.

Hughes here, and in the summary of his book published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, wants to begin a conversation.[2] Hughes has not fully convinced me that things are as bad as he claims, but we should all welcome and profit from the conversation that he has begun.

Notes

[1]. Samuel C. Heilman, "Who Should Direct Jewish Studies at the University," H-Judaic Discussion Logs, July 21, 1996, available at <http://goo.gl/nz1oVR> (accessed April 30, 2014).

[2]. Aaron W. Hughes, "Jewish Studies is Too Jewish," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 24, 2014, available at <http://goo.gl/w0z8k7> (accessed April 30, 2014).

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