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George Y. Kohler. *Kabbalah Research in the Wissenschaft des Judentums (1820-1880): The Foundation of an Academic Discipline.* Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019. 282 pp. $114.99, cloth, ISBN 978-3-11-062037-5.

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"It is very meritorious to provide information about the essence and substance of such a profound intellectual endeavor, especially if its creations are only accessible to such a small number of scholars, and have up to now so often been misunderstood." This observation was made by a towering figure of nineteenth-century Wissenschaft des Judentums, the historian Isaac Marcus Jost. The endeavor to which Jost referred was kabbalah and its literary productions, one of many research objects of the then emerging field of Jewish studies in Germany. Yet, within this endorsement of research on Jewish mysticism, made on the occasion of reviewing a monograph on the history of kabbalah by his colleague Adolf Jellinek, Jost also confessed he viewed kabbalah as nothing short of "aberrances of the human intellect" (p. 124). An aberrancy, then, that nevertheless must be thoroughly studied and explained.

In contrast to nineteenth-century Germany, in today's arguably post-secular age, Jewish mysticism often counts among the most studied and in a certain way also most accessible elements of Judaism, both in the academy and in popular culture. With some historical irony, however, the observation by Jost quoted above captures the present-day status of research on the kabbalah conducted by him and his colleagues: this too was a serious intellectual endeavor that is little studied today, possibly misunderstood, and practically non-accessible for English readers. George Y. Kohler's book aims to remedy this situation, through a presentation of every instance of Wissenschaft treatment of the kabbalah from 1822 up to the early twentieth century, focusing on the scholars who wrote and published in German. Consequently, together with more familiar figures, such as Abraham Geiger or Moritz Steinschneider, the study introduces many lesser-known scholars as well. Among the latter are the Hungarian Ignaz Stern; Abraham Adler, brother of the famous German American Reform rabbi Samuel Adler; and David Joel, head of the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary and brother of the pioneer historian of Jewish philosophy, Manuel Joel.

The book comprises twenty short units that generally follow a combined temporal and thematic line: each unit treats the publications on kabbalah produced by one or more Wissenschaft scholars at roughly the same time and, when relevant, also the reviews and responses to their key publications. For example, the second unit is titled "Leopold Zunz and Moritz Freystadt (1818-1832)," whereas units 7 to 9 cover Jellinek's publications in 1851-52, the "first reactions" to Jellinek, and his publications in 1853-54, respectively (p. vii). The second-to-last unit complements the focus on the Wissenschaft's scholarly republic of letters throughout the rest of the book by looking at the

popular dissemination of Wissenschaft views on kabbalah in Jewish textbooks published from the 1870s and after. The last unit, an epilogue, extends the time covered by the book to 1907, by examining further textbooks and publications in that later period. This predominantly chronological organization corresponds with Kohler's declared aim to provide an overview of the emergence and development of nineteenth-century studies of kabbalah within the Wissenschaft movement. Accordingly, Kohler does not enter into an assessment of Wissenschaft's achievements in the actual analysis of kabbalah's history and ideas, an area that he explicitly leaves for contemporary experts on Jewish mysticism.

In addition to making this era in kabbalah research more accessible, Kohler also seeks to correct what he sees as a grave misunderstanding. With few exceptions, Kohler argues, contemporary scholarship and the broader public hold that early Wissenschaft scholars intentionally neglected the study of kabbalah and misrepresented it, motivated by rationalistic embarrassment, a desire to advance emancipation, and an effort to portray Judaism in a positive light before non-Jewish eyes. Kohler traces the roots of this view to Gershom Scholem, the figure most strongly associated with the study of Jewish mysticism in the twentieth century, whose negative description of his predecessors was uncritically accepted by Scholem's students and readers. In contrast to this myth of neglect, the book demonstrates that questions regarding the authorship of the Zohar, the origins of Jewish mysticism, and the history of kabbalah were of central concern to major figures of the Wissenschaft des Judentums movement. Despite their overall personal negative views of kabbalah, Kohler shows, Wissenschaft scholars devoted much time to obtain and study kabbalistic manuscripts, and some of their ideas anticipated those of scholars who came after them.

According to Kohler, a key to this somewhat contradictory combination—of a manifest dislike yet scholarly investment—lies in the theological premises of the scholars under discussion, most of whom, Kohler notes, served as community rabbis and members of the German Jewish Reform movement. Their resistance to kabbalah was thus related, Kohler claims, to their denominational affiliation, which involved the conviction that modern Judaism is, and ought to be, a rational religion, understood as a historically developing phenomenon, based on an eternal message of ethical monotheism. The perceived irrational nature of kabbalah, and its assertion of religious authority based on the Zohar's dubious claims to ancient authenticity, endangered this vision. An additional explanation concerns what in the eyes of Wissenschaft scholars was a disfigurement of Jewish thought by mystical speculations and its related preference of a mystical world of fantasies over ethical engagement in real life. Nevertheless, Kohler insists, the outcome of such an approach did not lead to kabbalah's neglect but to opposite results: "The more a scholar was interested in showing the 'harmfulness' of Kabbalah, the more space he reserved for the description of its doctrine, while this description, of course, had to answer all criteria of the scholarly ethos of the nineteenth century in order to indeed serve the educational purpose to warn against the 'dangers' of kabbalistic thought" (p. 20).

An exemplary case treated extensively by Kohler is that of Heinrich Graetz (whose work is discussed in about 50 out of a total 263 pages), the most prolific Jewish historian of his generation and a main target of attacks by Scholem and later scholars. Focus on Graetz's admittedly pejorative terms in his discussions of kabbalah, Kohler argues, obscures his actual and lasting contributions to its scholarship and ignores the conventions of historical writing during his time. Following the same style adopted by the great German historian Leopold von Ranke, Kohler explains, Graetz included judgmental character descriptions within the body of his narrative and kept the more technical and impartial scholarship to attached foot-

notes, which, in turn, were mostly ignored by Graetz's critics. Thus, with his subjective theological commitments to Judaism as ethical monotheism, and seeing kabbalah as dangerous and its ideas as foreign to Judaism, Kohler writes, "Graetz was convinced that, in cases where fully justified, the historian is free to 'execrate' and resent any elements of his account he so chooses, like all other human beings" (p. 208).

On a theoretical level, therefore, the book's occupation with professed attitudes vis-à-vis actual research of kabbalah pertains to the more philosophical issue of fact-value distinction. On an epistemological, ontological, and moral level, can discussion of the facts (in this case, primarily kabbalistic text) be separated from the normative views (here, an ethics that excludes Jewish mysticism) held by those who study them? On this issue, Kohler states in the introduction: "Ideological differences do not necessarily have a decisive influence on research results," and among his main examples is Scholem's ultimate, albeit little admitted, agreement with Graetz on the authorship of the Zohar (p. 24). Yet this case, it seems to me, rather shows the degree to which Scholem, despite his Zionist motivations, followed the same philological methods as those used by Graetz. In this, as discussed by David Myers and others, Scholem's approach was characteristic of the Jerusalem school of Zionist historians, who remained committed to the Wissenschaft ideal of impersonal scientific and objective research. If we take methodology as value-free then Kohler's argument stands, but if one sees methodology as mired in ideological assumptions, then the agreement between Scholem and Graetz only indicates that they shared more than Scholem was willing to admit.

On this topic, an illuminating example of Graetz and Scholem's shared world, I suggest, emerges from Graetz's disclosure of his personal views regarding kabbalah, cited by Kohler in the book. In the tenth volume of his *History of the Jews* (1868), Graetz blamed kabbalah for creating "unspeakable delusions within Judaism," even in the hands of its most "honest" cultivators, such as Nachmanides and Luria, and he took kabbalah's gravest sin to be the subsequent leading of Judaism's best intellectual talents, such as seventeenth-century kabbalist Moses Luzatto, to "chase after shadows" and throw themselves "into the abyss" (p. 208). Strikingly, the same association between kabbalah and the abyss was also central for Scholem, who in 1937 wrote to his publisher that the study of Jewish mysticism needed the "courage to venture out into an abyss."[1] Similarly, two decades later, in a letter to a colleague regarding his work on the Sabbatean movement and its kabbalistic underpinnings, Scholem declared: "I never knew that Judaism flees from abysses. Quite the contrary: so far as I know, Judaism has opened up history's main abysses."[2] Thus, despite contrasting attitudes regarding kabbalah—for Graetz a danger, and for Scholem a treasure—both scholars nevertheless applied to kabbalah the same strong metaphor, which classifies kabbalah on the side of the irrational, non-normative, and mysterious.

The question of ideology and scholarship in kabbalah research, past and present, remains an unresolved but critical issue. In the context of the current discussion, to what degree do negative attitudes of kabbalah held by early Wissenschaft scholars, and the positive attitudes held by Scholem and his students, inform the way texts are read, understood, and assessed? More broadly, what are the theological, political, and epistemological assumptions undergirding kabbalah scholarship and its methodologies? Through its extensive documentation, and interrelated challenge to Scholem's historiographical delimitation, Kohler's book provides a fresh context for engaging with these questions. Readers of Kohler will have the rare opportunity to meet the pioneers of the academic study of Jewish mysticism in Germany and decide for themselves whether their attitudes to kabbalah led to its neglect or misunderstanding. They will also be invited to reflect anew on the relationship between rationalism and mysticism,

and between personal views and professional judgments.

Notes

[1]. Gershom Scholem, "A Candid Word about the True Motives of my Kabbalistic Studies," in *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-history*, by David Biale (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 31-32.

[2]. Gershom Scholem, "To Zwi Werblowsky," in *A Life in Letters, 1914-1982* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 372.

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