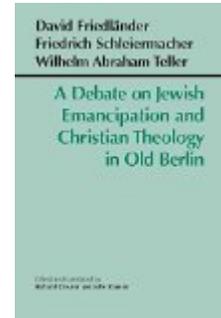


**David Friedländer, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Abraham.** *A Debate on Jewish Emancipation and Christian Theology in Old Berlin.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004. xiii + 177 pp. \$12.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-87220-719-6.



**Reviewed by** Jonathan M. Hess

**Published on** H-German (September, 2005)

In 1799, at a moment when the prospects of Jewish emancipation in Prussia seemed bleak, David Friedländer, a wealthy member of Berlin's Jewish cultural elite, published an "Open Letter to His Reverend, Provost Teller, Councilor of the Upper Consistory in Berlin" that many subsequent Jewish intellectuals came to denounce as the ultimate example of opportunist assimilationism. In his letter to Provost Teller, a leading church official and a liberal Protestant theologian who was extremely well known in his day, Friedländer, the self-styled heir to Moses Mendelssohn, proposed that a group of Jewish householders like himself undergo baptism in exchange for political rights. The nineteenth-century Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, not surprisingly, chastised this move as a "cowardly," "silly," "dishonorable" and "foolish" plan, accusing Friedländer and his cronies of seeking to destroy the possibility of sustaining Jewish identity in the modern era.[1] In her biography of Friedländer's Berlin contemporary Rahel Varnhagen, Hannah Arendt argued in a different register but similarly lambasted Friedländer. Bemoaning the lack of a political struggle for equal rights for Jews as Jews in this era, she depicted

him as the prime example of a Jew who sought to abandon solidarity with his less fortunate brethren. All Jews like Friedländer wanted, Arendt commented, was "to escape from Jewishness, as individuals if possible," and it was thus hardly surprising that he proposed mass baptism a viable solution.[2]

Friedländer published his letter anonymously, in the name of "several Jewish householders." For the most part, interestingly enough, his Protestant contemporaries hardly found this group of Jewish elites to be selling out to pressures for assimilation or abandoning Judaism. Indeed, along with another anonymously published essay on Jewish baptism from the same year, Friedländer's letter provoked widespread debates in Berlin and elsewhere, with no fewer than forty pamphlets, books, and journal articles appearing between 1799 and 1801. In the eyes of many of its contemporaries, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, the "Open Letter" hardly exemplified opportunist assimilationism; to many in the Prussian capital around 1800, Friedländer and his Jewish householders were clearly offering up a sham

conversion to Christianity, under the surface of which lay a passionate defense of Judaism and a subversive plea for citizenship and equal rights. [3] In this sense, Friedländer's letter and the controversies it provoked represent a significant milestone in debates on Jewish emancipation, minority rights, and political universalism in the German lands, a symptomatic set of deliberations over religious tolerance, citizenship and assimilation that are not without relevance today.

Richard Crouter and Julie Klassen's volume *A Debate on Jewish Emancipation and Christian Theology in Old Berlin* puts forth complete and unabridged translations of the four key texts in this controversy, and in doing so they have performed a great service to scholars and students of religion, theology, German history, and Jewish Studies. Affordably priced at just \$12.95, this volume is well suited for use in undergraduate and graduate courses. The translations are excellent and highly readable, and the selections are appropriate. The volume contains, in addition to Friedländer's letter and the other essay on Jewish baptism that helped launch the debates, Teller's response to Friedländer and, last but not least, a text that represented for many contemporaries the most balanced and thorough discussion of the issues raised by Friedländer's proposals: Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Letters on the Occasion of the Political-Theological Task and the Open Letter of Jewish Householders*. Of these four texts, only Schleiermacher's *Letters* has previously been translated in its entirety, and as Crouter points out, Schleiermacher scholars have largely ignored this text and rarely placed it in context, despite the fact that its genesis lies in the same period that witnessed the publication of Schleiermacher's now classic *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Up until now, only a brief excerpt of Friedländer's letter was available in English, in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz's widely used reader, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*. Both Teller's response to Friedländer and the anonymously published "Po-

litical-Theological Task concerning the Treatment of Baptized Jews" are produced here in English for the first time.

In addition to useful explanatory footnotes to the texts, the editors provide a three-page chronology, a helpful list of further reading, focusing on works in English, and two substantial essays of their own. Crouter, a noted Schleiermacher scholar, opens the volume with a lucid and highly accessible introductory essay that sets the stage for the debates in Berlin in 1799. He surveys the effects of the Enlightenment on Protestant theology and Jewish intellectuals, explores the process of Jewish emancipation in Prussia and Christian-Jewish relations in Berlin, and gives important biographical and historical background for the texts and authors under study. Crouter's essay ensures that this complex set of texts will be accessible to the non-specialist. In her postscript to the volume, subtitled "contemporary parallels and permutations," Julie Klassen reflects on the continuing legacy of the issues issued by the "Open Letter" and brings the challenges facing Friedländer, Schleiermacher, and their contemporaries around 1800 into the present, focusing here almost entirely on contemporary Germany. In this context, Klassen surveys issues of multiculturalism in Germany today and explores the persistence of what she terms "ethnic essentialism."

Klassen's essay, while interesting in itself, does not always forge as effective a bridge as it might between the concerns of Friedländer and his contemporaries and more recent debates in Germany. One wonders, for instance, why more attention is not paid to issues of race, culture, and nationhood in mid- and late-nineteenth-century Protestant theology, and there are many who would question the appropriateness of the term "ethnic essentialism" when talking about Jews, Protestants, and the legacy of the Enlightenment in Berlin around 1800. There are also striking parallels between Enlightenment visions of the incompatibility of Jewish law with modern citizen-

ship and more recent debates in the West about Islam and modernity that would merit mention here. Klassen does gesture toward the growing significance of Islam in the West but does so only briefly; her chief concern lies with categories of ethnicity and nationhood, which seems an awkward postscript to a volume that is first and foremost about religion and citizenship. But these are all minor concerns. This volume does a tremendous service in bringing to life, in English, one of the key moments in German debates over Jewish emancipation, religious tolerance, and citizenship. It should thus be of great interest not simply to students of Schleiermacher and Jewish history but to all those concerned with the relationship between politics and religion at the turn of the nineteenth century and in our day as well.

#### Notes

[1]. Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, trans. Bella Löwy (Philadelphia: JPS, 1895), vol. 5, pp. 421-428.

[2]. Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, ed. Liliane Weissberg, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 88.

[3]. See the discussion of the debates unleashed by Friedländer's "Open Letter" in Jonathan M. Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 169-203.

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**Citation:** Jonathan M. Hess. Review of Teller, David Friedländer; Schleiermacher, Friedrich; Abraham, Wilhelm. *A Debate on Jewish Emancipation and Christian Theology in Old Berlin*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

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