



James A. Diamond. *Jewish Theology Unbound*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 304 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-880569-4.

Reviewed by Sam Brody

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Commissioned by Barbara Krawcowicz (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

The title of James A. Diamond's *Jewish Theology Unbound* is polemically directed toward the ancient Christian canard depicting Jews as slavishly laboring under the yoke of their law (by contrast to Christians, who experience freedom through the divine grace of Christ's sacrifice). This trope survived into modernity in both religious and secularized form, appearing in Immanuel Kant's philosophy as a condemnation of Jewish heteronomy and again in Hegel as a superseded moment in the history of religion. More recent Christian theology has attempted to confront its own legacy of supersessionism, but this does not seem to have relieved Jewish theologians of their perceived obligation to continue rejecting it themselves; Jewish theology, it seems, must always demonstrate its own possibility.

Diamond, of course, has hitherto not primarily been known as a Jewish theologian but as a historian and scholar of medieval Jewish thought, and in particular of Maimonides. Readers of his previous work may be surprised, then, by the extent to which this new work diverges from his past writing. While Maimonides certainly receives due mention over the course of the argument in *Jewish Theology Unbound*, he hardly dominates. At times Diamond disagrees with him outright, preferring to build his claims on rabbinic midrash or even on Zoharic mysticism. The historian of

Jewish philosophical-theological rationalism has written a philosophical theology, but its philosophy is not rationalism.

What kind of theology, then, is this? Perhaps because of its still-apologetic, still-polemical nature, Jewish theology lacks the detailed professional subdivisions of its Christian counterpart. Nonetheless, despite Diamond's desire to distinguish his own project from so-called systematic Christian theology, the latter has language that helps to clarify what he has written (p. 20). For one, it is a biblical theology, focused primarily on the normative exegesis of Tanakh. Diamond begins with the Masoretic recension, a choice he defends on the grounds that this is where "authentic" Jewish tradition really begins (although he cites a significant amount of biblical scholarship that is not necessarily concerned first and foremost with the final form of the text). He then engages in close philosophical and linguistic readings, selecting and arranging biblical episodes according to the needs of his argument. The goal is normative insight, and commentators from the Tannaim to contemporary scholars are enlisted in pursuit of it; Rashi, Nahmanides, and Martin Buber each make numerous appearances. It is not a theology of practice; halakha is mentioned only when a particular law conveys a relevant norm. It is also not a liturgical theology; there is very little

discussion of particular prayers or holidays, and the rhythms of the Jewish calendar play almost no role in the argument. What animates Diamond here is the elaboration of essential truths of tradition.

In this sense, *Jewish Theology Unbound* is also a *kerygmatic* (proclamatory) theology. It is oriented toward the truth of revelation, but that truth does not always appear obvious in the sources, and sometimes it proceeds subtly from text to commentator, unfolding through history. One method of Diamond's is to examine each occurrence in the Hebrew Bible of a particular word or phenomenon, beginning in Genesis and proceeding forward. He does this in his first post-introductory chapter, "Biblical Questioning," where he systematically treats each scriptural instance of a question, beginning with Genesis 3:9 (God's "where are you?" directed to Adam). By layering question upon question, Diamond illuminates the central role of questioning in a text often taken to be the very paradigm of heteronomous authority and at the same time argues that "a connective thread of suffering" links each instance (p. 57). The agony and suffering experienced by the questioning biblical figures, in turn, raises the existential question of the purpose of being, setting up a basic contrast for Diamond between the "wonder" that motivates philosophical questioning in Athens and the "pain, despair, anxiety, and frustration" that motivates "the Hebraic challenge" to such philosophy (p. 58). Toward the end of the book, Diamond employs the same method to examine each occurrence of the word 'eved, or "slave," arguing that a close analysis of the development of the term in context reveals that although the Hebrew Bible seems to sanction slavery, in fact "the very first norm of Judaism, or what has become caricaturized as the religion of law, is itself the mandate to liberate" (p. 197). The essential truth of liberation shines through the mere appearance of permission for slavery; "slavery can only persist if there is dereliction regard-

ing the laws intended to slowly undermine it toward eventual abolition" (p. 198).

Summaries such as these cannot do justice to the many ingenious close readings Diamond carries out through the course of the book. He takes the claim that Judaism is about freedom extremely seriously, illustrating it through sustained discussions of the nature of God and God's relationship to Israel and arguing that God intends for human beings to experience freedom *from God* as a form of *imitatio dei*. Following his discussion of biblical questioning, Diamond substantiates this claim through a chapter-long discussion of God's name, siding with the existentialist reading of the name as signifying dynamic Becoming over the rationalist reading in which it represents static, eternal Being. Another chapter is devoted to the rabbinic practice of bringing the divine name into the mundane world (the book's most sustained discussion of halakha), claiming that this shows how the rabbinic sages understood and continued the biblical legacy of freedom as human empowerment. Chapters on love, death, and martyrdom hammer home the central point that Judaism prizes life and survival over the kind of religious zeal that might motivate dying for God; rather, Diamond argues persuasively, it is only dying for *others* that is ultimately sanctioned by the biblical and rabbinic sources. A chapter on angels, somewhat awkwardly placed between the discussions of martyrdom and slavery, largely succeeds at a kind of theological judo, using one of the most "mythological" of biblical figures to underscore the centrality of ethics and the inter-human versus exaggerated concern with the divine realm. And a final chapter confronts the Shoah through engagement with the *Esh Kodesh* of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira (1889-1943), sermons written in the very midst of the Warsaw Ghetto. Here, Diamond argues that Rabbi Shapira's biblical exegeses can be read as in line with his own central argument, in that they try, in various ways, to "reorient God's gaze from some metahistorical end of history to the *now* of history, to a 'nowness' that

induces divine intervention to divert the original course of history with an immediate halt to unbearable and undeserved suffering” (p. 224).

Diamond’s work will interest anyone with an interest in contemporary Jewish philosophical theology. Its central vision of a Judaism that is fundamentally about freedom is inspiring and invigorating and supported by a wealth of clever yet serious interpretive work (the reading of love in the Song of Songs is particularly original). In the spirit of Diamond’s paean to Jewish questioning, I conclude by directing some questions of my own to his work and its implications. For although there is no chapter here dedicated to politics, there is a throughline of political theology, and perhaps even of biopolitical theology (given the consistent and emphatic focus on “life”).

Diamond argues repeatedly that the freedom that is central to Judaism cannot be realized except in community with others. The absence of such community leaves the individual vulnerable to persecution and enslavement. This community, in turn, needs both a home/land to live on and a guarantee of independence, which Diamond repeatedly interprets as “sovereignty.” This is because “liberation from oppression in itself is incomplete without assuring a stable future far less prone to lapsing back into a state of subservience” (p. 83). Yet is not the state, the mechanism by which Diamond imagines this stable future to be secured, in significant tension with the ideal of “becoming?” Does the state itself not pose a significant threat to the very freedom it is intended to guarantee, and as a result should it not be much more problematic for a theology of Judaism that centers freedom? How do freedom and becoming even relate to stability? Why does stability, as an ideal, not problematize freedom and becoming, as contrary ideals?

Diamond does not really address these questions, acknowledging that “another full-length work” would be required to fully address the theological implications of renewed Jewish

sovereignty (p. 238). And to be fair, landedness, peoplehood, and self-governance could be expected to be central to any biblical theology. Yet much of *Jewish Theology Unbound*, including the interpretation of the difficult and moving work of Rabbi Shapira, also depends on another source—a rather uncritical appropriation of the thought of Emil Fackenheim, whose work Diamond has discussed elsewhere, including in an edited volume dedicated to his memory.[1] Fackenheim’s particular style of religious Zionism permeates and animates the conception here of the relationship between the Shoah and the future of Jewish theology, and especially of the form of the centrality of the State of Israel to that future.

I find this dependence on Fackenheim problematic for intertwined historical and theological reasons. For example, in my view, it affects the exegesis: while there is a long tradition of rabbinic dispute about whether to consider the establishment of the monarchy as divinely commanded, Diamond writes as though the matter is settled; “the appointment of a king” is a mandate with which Israel is charged, alongside “the battle against Amaleq.” The biblical exegesis slides nearly imperceptibly into contemporary commentary, as modern language is anachronistically applied to the reading of the rabbis: “Divine wholeness is conditional on the Jewish nation-state winning a geopolitical war against evil” (p. 98). Diamond writes stirringly about the Jewish tradition’s rejection of using human beings as expendable cannon fodder in the name of God; does holy war to restore God to wholeness not also, perhaps, stand in a somewhat problematic relationship to freedom? Or take another example: Rabbi Shapira’s discussion of Caleb’s encouragement to the Israelites in the wake of the negative report from the spies on the strength of the Canaanites (Num. 13:30-1): “R. Shapira wonders at the fact that all Caleb resorts to is a rhetorical ‘Let us go up [advance],’ rather than engaging them and repudiating their logic (*sekhel*) and their reasoned argument (*divrei ta’amehem*).” According to Diamond, this wonder-

ment “is reminiscent of the passionate debates that consumed the early Zionist movement. There were those like Herzl who envisaged the possibility of an independent Jewish state and those who considered his vision of a Jewish homeland a delusional fantasy” (p. 239). This comparison works, for Diamond, because both Caleb and Herzl make totally non-rational leaps of faith. Shapira here “prospectively adumbrates Fackenheim’s own post-Holocaust views on Israel and Zionism,” since the establishment of the modern Jewish state, too, flies in the face of all logic and inspires a miraculous sense of astonishment (p. 240).

But *does* it? This, to be sure, is Fackenheim’s theological position. But unlike the case of the Masoretic text, where Diamond acknowledges and avows his treatment of it as a whole for theological purposes even while he makes use of historical-critical biblical scholarship that does not assume such wholeness, here there is no mention of, let alone recourse to, scholarship in history or political science that might depict the establishment of the modern Jewish state as the wholly unmiraculous result of ordinary political processes. Thus it becomes possible for him to write that “any political rejection of Israel is also synonymous with a blasphemous attack on God” (p. 241). The actual history of the Zionist movement, as a largely secular movement based on a canny political realism, is suppressed here, and the dominance of pre-Shoah religious Jewish anti-Zionism is obliterated completely by the Fackenheimian lens. One need not be an expert in the literature of settler-colonial studies to see the success of Zionism over the course of its first sixty years as comparable to the similar historical successes of North American or Australian settlers, rather than a *sui generis* miracle “so astonishing that the more it is explained the deeper the astonishment becomes” (p. 240).

The cover of *Jewish Theology Unbound* depicts Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, made famous by Walter Benjamin’s reading of it in his “Theses on

the Philosophy of History” (1942). The discussion of Benjamin in the text takes place only on the last few pages, however, where his angel of history is linked up to the other angels discussed earlier in the text and his “storm of progress” is connected to “a long history of civilization’s refusal to listen to the metaphysics of the angelic encounter” (p. 245). I am no Benjamin scholar, but I suspect that reconciling Benjamin and Fackenheim is not as easy as Diamond makes it seem. In one of his more Benjaminian moods, Diamond writes that “While one must accommodate oneself to the exigencies of a divinely ordered structure vis-à-vis the earth, one can, indeed *must*, overcome what is humanly orchestrated vis-à-vis the social hierarchy” (p. 195). To that, understood as encompassing *all* our states and economies, this reviewer says *amen*.

Note

[1]. Sharon Portnoff, James A. Diamond, and Martin D. Yaffe, eds., *Emil L. Fackenheim: Philosopher, Theologian, Jew* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

Sam Brody is assistant professor of religious studies at University of Kansas. In 2018 he published Martin Buber’s Theopolitics.

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