In 1751 the German Protestant theologian Johann Salomo Semler married Christiane Döbner. During the honeymoon the newlyweds packed house and moved from Coburg to Altdorf, where a new academic job awaited Semler. In fact, he spent much of the trip visiting libraries, including the university library at Erlangen, where he met the great historian Johann Martin Chladenius. Years later, when Semler wrote his autobiography, he made no reference to any spousal chagrin at the seemingly less than romantic way he spent the time, but he did describe in detail both Chladenius’s culinary habits—he cooked his own food, which Semler found most peculiar—and the books that lay open on Chaldenius’s desk: a work by the Lutheran orthodox Johann Andreas Quenstedt as well as the Lettres sur la religion essentielle à l’homme, by the freethinking Marie Huber.

The anecdote does not feature in Tuska Benes’s deeply erudite, highly ambitious, and sometimes problematic book, but it might serve as a milestone somewhere near the beginning of the story she tells. It conveys the importance, even urgency, of critical ideas about reason, religion, and history. By implication at least, it suggests a decisive choice for theology: whether to double down on the confessional doctrine of divine revelation as God’s self-disclosure in creation and, even more, in sacred scripture, or to reinvent the concept in accordance with the demands of the age. Finally, and most important, it gives a sense of the larger thesis Benes puts forward. She holds that many, if not most, German intellectuals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries not only chose the latter but did so from often profoundly different standpoints.

Debate over the concept of revelation loomed large in the century around 1800. Participants in the debate included many thinkers who are typically considered to be among the most difficult to understand in modern European thought—one need not yet mention Immanuel Kant or G. W. F. Hegel; Semler himself wrote huge books as ingenious as they were opaque. The debate itself, moreover, occurred during the momentous epoch that Reinhart Koselleck once called the Sattelzeit,
when a broad series of political and cultural—and, as Benes demonstrates so well, theological—concepts acquired much of their current meanings, and that both defined and reflected the fundamental experiences of modernity. Her central argument is that revelation in this period was “re-framed”: no longer the “divine dispensation of doctrine” (or “propositional revelation”), it became, as it passed through the hands of modern philosophers and theologians, “an historical process grounded in human experience” that could reconcile the apparently competing claims of faith, reason, and history (p. 4).

The European Enlightenment provided the stage on which the Sattelezeit, and so too this debate on revelation, was enacted. Benes takes this mostly as a given. She begins not with traditions inherited from earlier periods, such as the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, or indeed still earlier, massively influential reflections on revelation by thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas or Duns Scotus. Rather, she launches her study, in chapter 1, with a broad, synoptic account of revelation in late eighteenth-century Protestant thought that revolves around Baruch de Spinoza, G. W. Leibniz, Christian Wolff, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and Kant. Chapter 2 looks at new engagement in comparative history of religion. It focuses on Johann Gottfried Herder, Christoph Meiners, and Karl Friedrich Stäudlin, among others, and keeps a close eye on the racialization of German debates about religion in general and revelation in particular. In chapter 3, on comparative mythology, the development of German language theory assumes the central role. Chapter 4 moves, in turn, to the realm of nature and natural history as a medium of revelation. This section of the book, especially the influence accorded to the physician and natural scientist Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert, is perhaps the most original. Schubert’s Die Symbolik des Traumes (1814) was a wild success in its time. Foreshadowing Sigmund Freud, Schubert argued that dreams provided access to a forgotten divine language which was still discernible in the natural world; the psyche, in other words, continued to hold access to a “lost primordial epoch imbued with divine truths but buried in secrecy and unintelligible to rational reconstruction” (p. 120). Chapter 5 examines major familiar post-Kantian thinkers, namely Hegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and F. W. J. Schelling. In chapter 6, a host of Catholic intellectuals are summoned to account for their attempts to navigate the quandaries of the modern age, including the Wolffian Benedikt Stattler; the Benedictine Beda Mayr, among the first Catholic theologians to engage Lessing; the Kantian Georg Hermes; J. S. Drey, member of the so-called Tübingen school; and the neo-Thomist Joseph Kleutgen. Jewish thought on revelation from Moses Mendelssohn to Abraham Geiger occupies chapter 7. The final chapter returns to Protestantism and the rather different conceptions of revelation in the thought of August Tholuck, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Søren Kierkegaard. The burden is to show how various post-critical “subjective” and “objective” strategies for reconciling faith and reason collapsed in the middle of the nineteenth century into “extreme anthropomorphism, philosophical reductionism, and a moralism independent from God,” on one hand, and “existentialist deliberations with no bearing on doctrine” or “rational comprehension,” on the other hand (pp. 254–55). The very brief conclusion glances at one-sided characterizations of nineteenth-century religion by WWI-era “crisis thinkers,” such as Karl Barth and Franz Rosenzweig, which have tended to overdetermine scholarly opinion.

One of the most exciting aspects of Benes’s book is the sustained attention it gives to theology. Though this might seem to be an obvious point, it is worth highlighting. Some years ago, Rudy Koshar had to ask—and in doing so, admonish—the field, “Where is Karl Barth in modern European history?” Benes simply takes theology seriously. She has mastered a remarkable range of authors and presents her ideas in an equally impressive style. Throughout the book she displays a stunning ability to communicate difficult material
in lucid and engaging ways—and to incorporate lesser-known but hardly less significant thinkers. These features make her book a must-read.

Yet there are some aspects of the book that give the reader slight pause. The deliberate attempt to examine Catholicism and Judaism alongside Protestantism is highly salutary. As George S. Williamson and others have argued, the fact of Germany’s confessional divide must inform our perspective, even if not every study must be comparative in exactly the same way. But the actual discussion of Catholic and Jewish thinkers in the book is consigned to chapters 6 and 7 and seems like an afterthought. More to the point, though, is the very concept of revelation. One of the main tasks the book sets for itself is to elucidate shifting meanings of revelation (pp. 4–5), but some categories are not explicitly defined or explained. For example, the basic theological distinction between “natural” or “general” revelation and “scriptural” or “special” revelation does not seem to appear in the account. Significant attention is given to “primordial” revelation, a “lost original wisdom that could rectify the seeming fragmentation of the present in the years following the French Revolution” (p. 3). This is the case particularly in chapter 2, on the comparative history of religion, and in chapter 3, on comparative mythology, though it recurs throughout the book. How does this concept relate precisely to other forms or kinds of revelation? Is there some conceptual slippage? Did the “rebirth” of revelation in the nineteenth century depend on the idea of “propositional” revelation as a foil? If so, was there something reductive to the account of revelation as only propositional (the “divine dispensation of doctrine”)? Engagement with some of the nuanced material that predated 1750, such as scholastic prolegomena or the post-Reformation tradition of the discipline of biblical theology, would help illumine the picture, for much modern theology depended both on what came before and what was perceived to have come before.

Benes’s concerted effort to include forgotten voices pays real dividends, but there are a few peculiar omissions from her work. It is curious that the Old Testament scholar W. M. L. de Wette, whose star shone at least as brightly as Schleiermacher’s in the early 1810s, receives mention in the book only once, in passing. More surprising is the complete neglect of David Friedrich Strauss. Though Strauss was not the first to claim that the Gospels contained myths, his book Das Leben Jesu (1835) provoked a remarkable intellectual and institutional debate on the facticity of biblical history, the sense in which the Bible functioned as revelation, and the very nature of scientific engagement with the text. There are other notable sources on revelation specifically from the 1780s to the 1830s that one might have expected to find included, for example, by Hermann Olshausen, Christoph Friedrich von Ammon, or Karl Leonhard Reinhold. There is a rich guide to this literature in the textbooks and encyclopedias (theologische Enzyklopädie) of the age. Similarly, political and institutional developments are mentioned—in fact, they are emphasized at the beginning of the book—but do not factor substantively into the narrative. Though Benes appropriately prefers to let the diverse cast of characters speak for themselves in the book, greater historical contextualization beyond the introduction would have been beneficial.

Despite these concerns, The Rebirth of Revelation remains an excellent achievement. Tuska Benes skillfully brings to the fore an astonishing array of thinkers without inundating the reader or digressing from the topic at hand, outlines complex theories clearly and with aplomb, and in doing so breathes new life into the modern history of ideas. The Rebirth of Revelation certainly belongs with the raft of recent innovative historical scholarship on theology and religion in nineteenth-century Germany. It is a pleasure to read and will be invaluable to anyone who is interested in the
place of religion in the intellectual history of modern Europe.

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