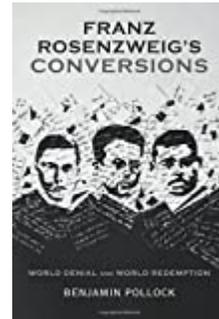




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Coherence or Contradiction?

In 1953, Nahum Glatzer published his influential book, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*. For decades, Glatzer's book was one of the only sources of original texts by Rosenzweig and served as the introduction to Rosenzweig for American readers.

Stressing the unity between Rosenzweig's life and thought, Glatzer devoted much attention to Rosenzweig's biography. The most dramatic element was his moving account of Rosenzweig's near conversion to Christianity and subsequent return to Judaism. Glatzer recounted Rosenzweig's early training in European philosophy, especially his encounter with German Idealism. But Glatzer noted that Rosenzweig "moved away" from German philosophy "toward the 'existential' philosophy that took its starting point in the situation of the concrete individual," and was particularly drawn to religion. The problem, according to Glatzer, was that Rosenzweig felt barred from accepting religion because of his training in "the sciences, in logical criticism, and in the methods of modern historical research." [1] More specifically, Rosenzweig accepted historicism, which led him to adopt

a relativistic view of truth.

Glatzer claimed that conversations Rosenzweig had with his cousin Rudolf Ehrenberg and his friend Eugen Rosenstock, both baptized Jews, finally freed him from the shackles of relativism. On the night of July 7, 1913, in Leipzig, Rosenstock confronted Rosenzweig's relativism with a simple confession of Christian faith in a loving God. For Rosenstock, his faith encounter with a loving God provided an orienting experience that annihilated relativism.

Glatzer noted that, at the time, Rosenzweig considered Judaism an arid, dead religion. But he claimed that Rosenzweig was so impressed that a serious scholar like Rosenstock could confess a simple, living faith that he decided to follow his cousin's lead and become a Christian. Rosenzweig's one caveat was that he do so as a Jew. On the Day of Atonement in 1913, Rosenzweig attended a synagogue service in Berlin. According to Glatzer, the service so moved him that he recognized that he could best honor the insights gleaned from his conversation

with Rosenstock by embracing Judaism.

In his new book, *Franz Rosenzweig's Conversions: World Denial and World Redemption*, Benjamin Pollock seeks to shatter what he calls this "foundational myth" about Rosenzweig's conversion. To emphasize the predominance of this "myth," Pollock spends two pages citing writers from every decade since the 1950s who have perpetuated it. These writers include leading Rosenzweig scholars, such as Paul Mendes-Flohr and Stéphane Mosès.

Pollock tells us that what spurred him to question this "myth" was a note from Rosenzweig's "Paralipomena" written in 1916, three years after the so-called *Leipziger Nachtgespräch* (Leipzig Night-Conversation) with Rosenstock. Referring to the conversation, Rosenzweig wrote, "What it means that God created the world and [is] not just the God of revelation—this I know precisely out of the Leipzig night-conversation of 7.7.13. At that time I was on the best road to Marcionism." This passage is so important to Pollock that he cites it in full five times (pp. x, 19, 59, 120, 147).

For Pollock, Rosenzweig's conversion was not from relativism to living faith but from Marcionite world denial first to Christian world affirmation and finally to Jewish world affirmation. The ancient Gnostic-Christian heresy Marcionism taught that the world is the creation of a demonic power identified with the God of the Old Testament, while the God of the New Testament is a benevolent God who is wholly transcendent. According to Marcion, one could only be saved by rejecting the world and taking refuge in faith in Jesus through which one connects with the transcendent benevolent God. Thus, Marcion rejected the Old Testament as sacred writ, and propounded a pessimistic view, which saw any attempt to redeem the world through human activity as futile.

Pollock claims that what changed for Rosenzweig during the *Leipziger Nachtgespräch* was not that he abandoned historicist relativism by witnessing Rosenstock's orienting faith. Rather, it was that he moved from a Marcionite view that saw the only connection between God and the world as through revealed faith, to the view that God was also the creator of the world. Rejecting Marcionism, Rosenzweig came to think that the world could be redeemed through human action.

Pollock is not the first to claim that Rosenzweig was worried about Marcionism. A quarter century ago, in his book *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and*

the Experience of Modernity (1991), Mendes-Flohr argued that concern over "Neo-Marcionism" informed both the *Star of Redemption* and Martin Buber and Rosenzweig's Bible translation. More recently, Irene Kajon has asserted that Gnosticism was at issue during the *Leipziger Nachtgespräch*.^[2] What is new is Pollock's detailed attempt to prove that Rosenzweig's *only* concern during the *Leipziger Nachtgespräch* was with overcoming Marcionite Gnosticism and his drawing a straight line from that conversation to the *Star of Redemption*.

Pollock marshals his encyclopedic knowledge of the Rosenzweig corpus to make his argument, which proceeds in two steps. First, Pollock contends that by 1913 Rosenzweig had abandoned historicist relativism. Pollock concedes that prior to 1910 Rosenzweig exhibited "heartly support for the historical relativism fashionable in his day" (p. 27), but he claims that in the wake of the failure of a conference that Rosenzweig helped organize in Baden-Baden in 1910, he came to reject historicist relativism. Pollock's main proof text in support of this claim is a passage from a letter to Hans Ehrenberg in which Rosenzweig wrote: "You must draw the consequences of Baden-Baden.... You, tempter, led me to believe in the phantom of the 'time': a society [*Verein*] of the un-unifiables [*Unvereinbaren*] on the ground of just this its un-unifiability?... But how differently we understand it now than I did at the time." Pollock comments, "The rebuke to which Rosenzweig aims at his cousin here suggests that mere months after Baden-Baden, Rosenzweig no longer took historicism seriously as a possibility of conceiving of the reconciliation between selfhood and wordliness" (pp. 27-28). I confess that I do not understand what Rosenzweig meant by "the phantom of the 'time'" or "a society of the un-unifiables" whose opaqueness makes it difficult to see how they support Pollock's interpretation.

The second step in Pollock's argument is his claim that Rosenzweig's later reflections about the *Leipziger Nachtgespräch* show that overcoming Marcionism was at issue. Here Pollock is on firmer ground. In addition to the 1916 note from the "Paralipomena" mentioned above, he cites other evidence, such as a 1919 letter to Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy in which Rosenzweig wrote, "What then did 1913 change?... My Judaism was *never* reborn. My worldliness was *reborn* at that time, this is correct. I had been able to take the world seriously since then, because since then I took seriously the world activity of Christianity" (p. 60). Pollock's approach also helps make sense of a letter Rosenzweig wrote to Rudolf Ehrenberg some three months after the *Leipziger Nachtgespräch*,

in which he wrote, "I had taken the year 313 for the beginning of the collapse of true Christianity because it opened for Christianity the opposite way through the world from which the year 70 opened for Judaism" (p. 61). Pollock explains Rosenzweig as asserting that, as a Marcionite, he saw Christianity having attained worldly power with Constantine's conversion in 313 as evidence of its decline. By contrast, he saw Judaism as having come closer to the truth of Marcionite world denial by its loss of political power with the fall of the Temple in 70 CE. When, however, Rosenzweig affirmed that "God created the world and [is] not just the God of revelation," he adopted a more positive view of Christianity whose goal he saw as having a world-historical mission to reconcile the soul with the world, and came to see Judaism's loss of political power as evidence of its retreat from the world and hence of decline. For Pollock, Rosenzweig's subsequent decision to remain Jewish involved recognizing that a central concern of Judaism was with repairing the world. In the final chapter of the book, Pollock shows how understanding the importance of Rosenzweig's overcoming Marcionism illuminates the *Star of Redemption* by illustrating the centrality of world affirmation in that work. In this way, he finds "coherence" between Rosenzweig's personal development and mature philosophy.

In light of the evidence cited by Pollock, one wonders how previous scholars got things so wrong. Pollock hypothesizes that it was because they were blinded by extra-scholarly considerations. In particular, he suggests that scholars erred because they wished to read Rosenzweig as an "inspiring" model for "those struggling in the modern world with matters of spiritual identity, in general, and with matters of Jewish identity in particular" (p. 8). Pollock also speculates that in the wake of World War II the picture of a Rosenzweig drawn to Christianity who chose to remain a Jew provided a model for interfaith dialogue.

It is a truism that all scholars are guided by personal concerns. But in the face of Pollock's evidence it would be surprising, indeed shocking, that so many important scholars were so completely mistaken about Rosenzweig's conversion. What was their evidence?

It turns out that they relied on many explicit statements by both Rosenzweig and Rosenstock. For example, in a letter from Rosenzweig to Rudolf Ehrenberg three months after the *Leipziger Nachtgespräch*, Rosenzweig wrote, "In that night's conversation Rosenstock pushed me step by step out of the last relativistic posi-

tion that I still occupied and forced me to take an absolute standpoint.... Any form of relativism is now impossible to me." [3]

In a 1917 letter to Ehrenberg, Rosenzweig affirmed the impact of Rosenstock's simple faith: "I was immediately disarmed by Rosenstock's simple confession of faith.... The fact that a man like Rosenstock was a conscious Christian ... at once bowled over my entire conception of Christianity and of religion generally including my own." [4] These texts, and there are several others, paint a picture of a Rosenzweig concerned by historicist relativism who saw in Rosenstock's orienting Christian faith a way out of his existential conundrum.

Pollock is aware of these texts. But rather than conceding that they provide evidence for the scholarly consensus about Rosenzweig's conversion, he attempts to harmonize them with Rosenzweig's Marcionism. According to Pollock, when Rosenzweig spoke of his "relativistic position," he was referring not to historicist relativism but to "subjectivism." For Pollock, this "subjectivism" is "quite compatible" with Marcionism. Since this is a crucial point, it is worth citing Pollock's explanation of it in full: "If the Marcionist denies the world and experiences salvation only through a personal faith relation to the God who is wholly transcendent to the world, the subjectivist philosopher likewise denies any objective, worldly standard outside himself; orients himself solely according to his own subjective 'center'; and holds all truth to be relative to every subjectivity" (pp. 49-50). So according to Pollock, the Marcionist denial of the world and reliance on salvation through personal faith in a transcendent God is "compatible" with subjectivist philosophy, which denies all objective standards and considers all truth as being relative to individual subjectivity. But Marcionism affirms the absolute reality of a transcendent God who reveals himself to man. As such, it is *not relativistic* and so is *incompatible* with subjectivism.

Why does Pollock feel the need to harmonize sources that indicate that Rosenzweig was concerned with relativism during the *Leipziger Nachtgespräch* with those that indicate that Marcionism was at issue? No less than ten times Pollock stresses his desire to present a "coherent" account of Rosenzweig's conversion narrative (pp. ix, xi, 4, 5, 85, 88, 96, 118, 217, 219). As he puts it in the conclusion: "The harmony between Rosenzweig's life and his thought is compelling. By this I mean that it permits us to tell a *coherent* story, to present the events of the summer of 1913 as a kind of biographical introduction to Rosenzweig's mature philosophical thought. The

sort of harmony we find between Rosenzweig's life and thought, I would hazard to say, makes for good thinking. Does it make for good life?â (p. 219, emphasis added).

Pollock assumes that coherence makes for good thinking. Not everyone would agree. Ralph Waldo Emerson famously remarked that "with consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do." In the case of Rosenzweig, Pollock's assumption that his thought is fully coherent is particularly doubtful. Part of what has attracted generations of readers to Rosenzweig is his laconic, maddeningly elusive style that defies all attempts to definitively pin down his meaning. Affixing a single, clear meaning to Rosenzweig's writings seems to do violence to them.

Moreover, if contradiction and ambiguity can be constitutive of carefully written books, how much more is this true of oral conversations? Most people can surely recall conversations where they voiced multiple, contradictory positions. Pollock has no transcript of Rosenzweig's conversation with Rosenstock. Rather, he relies on recollections penned months or years later. That Rosenzweig and others may have recalled the *Leipziger Nachtgespräch* in multiple, contradictory ways is surely possible, if not likely. During his conversation with Rosenstock, Rosenzweig could have been vacillating between the incompatible positions of historicist relativism and Marcionite world denial. Why must Pollock doggedly insist that everything that Glatzer, Mendes-Flohr, and others taught us about Rosenzweig's conver-

sion is a myth?

A serious lacuna in Pollock's discussion of Rosenzweig's Marcionism is its detachment from historical context. Marcionism was an important concept for Protestant and Jewish thinkers in late Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany. One wishes that Pollock would have devoted more space to comparing Rosenzweig's Marcionism with discussions found in the work of Adolf Harnack, Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, and Hans Jonas, as well as with the historical Marcion.

Although I do not fully accept Pollock's central thesis, his book is a welcome contribution that helps us better appreciate Rosenzweig's engagement with Marcionism and its role in the development of his thought.

Notes

[1]. Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1953), xiii-xiv.

[2]. Irene Kajon, *Contemporary Jewish Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 36.

[3]. Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Rosenzweig and the Crisis of Historicism," in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1988), 143.

[4]. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, 24.

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