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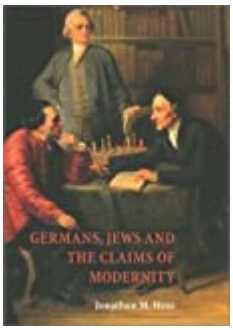

Jonathan M. Hess. *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. xi + 258 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09701-6.

Reviewed by Willi Goetschel (University of Toronto)

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The challenge of writing the history of the German Jewish experience in modernity has long assumed the stature of paradigmatic significance–a debate that dates from the first attempts to articulate the claims and counterclaims to a modernity negotiated between conflicting and conflicted interests. One of the most significant issues to emerge from it has been the increasing awareness that the historical challenge has become that of how to read the unique constellation of the eighteenth-century German Jewish problematic. Methodological questions abound in this area, all of which point back to the question of the hidden assumptions of the multitude of disciplines involved in such a project, just as it could be said that the emergence of a distinct German-Jewish problematic posed a challenge to the religious, cultural, legal, social, and political discourse of the time. In both cases, the difficulties if not aporias arising from attempts to categorize the phenomena made it necessary to respond to this hermeneutic predicament, if not creatively, then at least in the preemptive manner of polemic.

In other words, the question of how to write and read German Jewish history still represents a key issue for the way we understand modern thought, the constructions of identities, and ourselves. Jonathan M. Hess's study *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* provides an important contribution to the ongoing debate that has, in the last decades, begun to move away from the anachronistic model of assimilation towards one that views German-Jewish emancipation as a process of both assimilation and dissimilation (the resistance against the pressures to adjust to what modern culture held up as new norms), on both sides. Jews did not enter a modern world in which national, social, political, and religious agendas were already set and defined. Rather, the Jewish move towards social and political emancipation occurred at a moment when German culture and society themselves experienced crucial social, political, and cultural transformations, which were occurring in a cultural setting where Jews had had a strong and sustained presence over centuries. But with the move towards modernity and the emergence of the national state as the increasingly determining fixture in the search for modern German identity–whose urgency was anything but mitigated by the deeply felt lack of political unity and integration of one single state–the "Jewish Question," the discourse on how to respond to the challenge of Jewish resistance to the imposed regimes of modernity and the modern nation state, gained an ever-growing significance.

With this state of affairs in view, Hess seeks to trace the trajectory of the emergence of the German Jewish project of emancipation via a close examination of the historical context in which the debate on German Jewish

emancipation emerged. Hess shows that the framework of this debate was dictated in decisive ways by a German agenda that defined a road to emancipation and assimilation that was often impossible to accept for Jews who saw themselves as more than simply adaptable and "improvable" subjects called forth to comply with a kind of universalism curiously at odds with Judaism's own and distinct claims to universalism. As Hess' analysis persuasively reminds us, Jews were welcomed on terms that were not only dictated by theologians but left little room for dialogue. Their hold proved especially insidious in its eighteenth-century guise of secularized claims. Fleshing out Johann David Michaelis's peculiar blend of Oriental scholarship, which sought to find evidence for the claim of Christianity's superiority by enlisting anthropological research on Arabs, Hess highlights the hermeneutic thrust that dictated the confines in which the "Jewish Question" was debated. Michaelis was not only Moses Mendelssohn's nemesis but also responsible for the way in which Orientalism set the stage for the discourse of emancipation. Michaelis's approach applied notions of colonialism whose implications would inform the way even progressive liberals like Christian Wilhelm Dohm came to frame their argument for civil equality of the Jews. In the eyes of Michaelis and like-minded contemporaries, Jews were merely a step away from being dispatched to the German colonies, where their historical mission would be to disseminate the gospel of German know-how and work ethic to the inhabitants of the sugar islands, making sure the revenues would flow back to keep life sweet and comfortable at "home." Hess rightly stresses the "extent to which Orientalism and modern anti-Semitism come onto the scene as interrelated inflections of Enlightenment colonialist discourse" (p. 89), a phenomenon that allows him to approach the node of conflict and tension that the discourse on Jewish emancipation acts out, with a fresh look. Hess's examination traces how Michaelis's "scientific" attempt to understand the Christian-Jewish difference mapped a heuristic model onto the Orient and its "Arab" population that allowed him to address the issues on the home front in a way that imported the imagery of the colonial sphere back home. Such argumentation led, of course, to a perfect closure of the hermeneutic circle that left little room for anything but pre-programmed results.

For Dohm, however, and other liberals who welcomed the "civil improvement" of the Jews, the argument for civil equality was linked to a notion of internal colonization that curiously mirrored the problematic of the external colonization so deeply intertwined with Michaelis's brand of Orientalism. While manifestly critical of Michaelis's doctrinaire view, which ruled out the possibility of the improvement of the Jewish nation as a whole, Dohm echoed Michaelis's colonial thinking pattern. Dohm's project followed the line of "surrogate colonialism" (p. 44); the only apparent difference between the two is that Dohm replaced Michaelis's autocratic paternalism with another, more liberal, but ultimately no less problematic approach. Hess is particularly strong where he adds historical depth to the picture of both Michaelis and Dohm. Read against the backdrop of eighteenth-century German internal and external colonialism, the discussion on "civil improvement" gains a historical specificity that gives its claims sharper contours. Bringing both authors into focus as participants in a larger debate on the question of the German political order, Hess highlights the problematic nature of their common assumptions. Hess sharply outlines the parameters that defined the gaping divide separating the Christian from the Jewish side in this debate. His discussion of Michaelis and Dohm provides a convincing framework for the consensus of eighteenth-century secular Biblical scholarship and early liberal thought as being in agreement, albeit with different agendas, to view Judaism and "the Jewish Question" as nothing more than a problem that required a solution.

This particular form of modern, secular view informs both Michaelis's and Dohm's stance on the "Jewish Question." This view is critically different from the medieval varieties of this strain, which German Jews faced as they formulated their own claims and expectations of modernity. In tracing Moses Mendelssohn's appropriation of Jesus as a Jew, moreover, Hess brings to the fore a critical intervention that has so far eluded the attention it deserves. But the most important result of the chapter on Mendelssohn is the point that his *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism* presents "an alternative mode of universalism" (p. 128) that still awaits full critical appreciation. By introducing a new concept of Judaism, Hess points out, Mendelssohn is able "to articulate a universalist vision grounded in an appreciation of cultural and religious difference" (p. 128). For Mendelssohn, the articulation of this universalist vision was grounded in the theoretically bold and original philosophical argument he advances in *Jerusalem*. Hess' presentation of Mendelssohn's bold and original move toward articulating this universalist vision, however, remains sketchy. This is unfortunate because Mendelssohn's philosophical argument, which lies at the heart of this move, articulates a critique whose force has not lost its significance.

Instead, reiterating the conventional wisdom of scholarship on Mendelssohn, Hess' conclusion that "the importance of *Jerusalem* lies less in its success than in its failure" (p. 135) reasserts a received idea that stands in stark contrast to the trajectory of the otherwise new approach this study seeks to take.

Overshadowed as it was by the importance of Mendelssohn, the succeeding generation has for a long time been perceived as merely epigonal. Reassessing the contributions of such figures as Saul Ascher and David Friedlaender allows us, as Hess argues, to complicate our view on the dynamics of emancipation and assimilation. If Kant assimilated Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* to his own approach, which was characterized by a lack of sympathy for the genuinely religious and spiritual sphere Mendelssohn sought to recover as genuine elements of modernity, Ascher responded to Kant's and Fichte's anti-Jewish musings by exposing the ideological moment which guided a reasoning that strayed off the path of reason. In a bold move that sides with the critical Kant against a Kant that had betrayed his own principles when it came to the question of the social recognition of Jews or the legitimacy of Judaism as a living tradition, Ascher articulates a new, and for his generation more contemporary, concept of Judaism that claims the Kantian ideas of freedom and autonomy as the very core values of Judaism itself. Ascher thus initiates the eventually so momentous tradition of Jewish Kantians. On the other hand, as Hess reminds his readers, the non-Jewish Kantians and Fichteans, never felt compelled to take on this challenge. Remarkably, Ascher's *Leviathan, Or on Religion with Respect to Judaism* (1792) and his *Eisenmenger the Second (1794)*, which referred to Fichte, were not entirely ignored by his contemporaries. But, as German Jews were reminded again and again, the German public showed little interest in a discourse that resisted complete compliance and ultimate submissions to its terms. A critique such as Ascher's that sought to criticize Kant from within would only be viewed as a failed attempt at assimilation at best, or a misguided endeavor at proselytizing Germans at worst. But if German discourse lent a deaf ear to theoretical claims of Jews arguing their Jewishness, the attitude was no different when it came to suggestions to solve the situation practically.

Hess is most convincing in his concluding chapter that revisits David Friedlaender's bold proposal of 1799 to join the church, a suggestion he advanced in the name of Jewish Berlin elite families. Jewish historiography has been unforgiving, discarding Friedlaender's attempt as a deeply disturbing moral surrender. But Hess shows that a closer look suggests otherwise. Taking the lead from the surprisingly reserved reaction of the enlightened Protestant church official, Provost Teller, and other contemporary responses, Hess revisits a debate that displayed some reluctance at extending love to its neighbors but was ultimately to define the discourse of the beginning new century in crucial ways. Careful examination of this discourse challenges us to revise the view on a key event whose interpretation still informs the way we approach, write, and theorize the modern German Jewish experience. Astonishingly, few contemporaries saw Friedlaender as advocating assimilation and surrender. Instead, the majority of contemporaries eyed his proposal of baptism as the Trojan horse Jews were employing as a scheme to penetrate the walls of German civil society. Hess's analysis of the "subversive manner" in which Friedlaender's proposal was "claiming a privileged role for Jews that is difficult to subsume within a concept of assimilation" (p. 180) brings home the importance of a renewed reconceptualization of the dialectics of emancipation and assimilation. Understanding German and Jewish history critically requires not only a careful examination of the specific context of each and every of these events but requires, as Hess suggests, the critical contextualization of Jewish and non-Jewish, pro- and anti-Jewish voices as they, with and against each other, shaped the emerging discourse on modernity with their respective dynamics.

If Hess's detailing of the argumentative ammunition on both sides of the debate on Jewish emancipation and civil equality amounts to a welcome contribution, his concluding claim (against Gershom Scholem's suggestion "that all German-Jewish dialogue amounted to a 'a cry into the void' on the part of Jews") that these interventions did, after all, "elicit responses" (p. 206) seems curiously at odds with the Jewish requests for dialogue that remained unanswered, many of which Hess so eloquently musters. In his trajectory, Hess reflects in important ways the vision advanced by Hermann Levin Goldschmidt in the 1950s and 1960s in his study, *The Legacy of German Jewry*. Goldschmidt argued that the history of rejection, persecution, and final annihilation of German Jewry led to a transformation of its cultural achievements into a legacy that lives on as a critical chance for rethinking the Enlightenment as both a limitation and an opportunity for critique of modernity. Hess's point, that Jewish voices of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided a critique of the Enlightenment from within that still awaits critical appreciation, is a valuable reminder that there is more to the Enlightenment than its narra-

tive of empowerment and victory over the dark powers. As Enlightenment comes increasingly into view as a project marked by its disabling moments as much as its successes, Hess reminds us that the problematic of the Enlightenment poses a challenge that informs our contemporary debate in ways more profound than are typically acknowledged.

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