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Hermann Cohen and the Quest for Protestant Judaism

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Eighty years after his death, the great German-Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), is in the midst of a most impressive scholarly afterlife. New editions of his writings, a steady stream of monographic studies, and a spate of doctoral dissertations devoted to him have recently appeared. The net effect of this literary profusion is to reclaim the reputation of one of German Jewry's leading intellectual personalities prior to the Weimar Republic, as well as to return Cohen to the centre of contemporary Jewish thought. The field of Jewish thought itself seems to be in the midst of a rather energetic period, as it brushes off its post-Holocaust languor and finds a voice in the polyphony of postmodern intellectual culture.

The renewed interest in Hermann Cohen certainly belongs to this broader current, but also has to do with more biographically specific factors, some of which are responsible for Cohen's posthumous retreat into obscurity. To begin with, Cohen was alternately mentor, polemical target, and intellectual foil to the extraordinary cadre of German-Jewish intellectuals – e.g. from Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig to Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin – that has attracted so much attention in recent decades.¹ One of the more iconoclastic members of this illustrious fraternity, Leo Strauss, recalled that "I grew up in an environment in which Cohen was the center of attraction for philosophically minded Jews who were devoted to Judaism; he was the master whom they revered."² Nonetheless, for many occasional students of these Jewish intellectuals, Hermann Cohen's name is a faint memory or even unknown.

Part of Cohen's obscurity stems from the fact that the neo-Kantian philosophical system with which Cohen's name is so closely linked, and which dominated European philosophy for well over a half century from the 1860s, fell into desuetude shortly after Cohen's death. This is not to suggest that neo-Kantianism died an easy death. Its adepts were involved in a pitched battle following the First World War with the new cadre of thinkers who sought to shift the focus of philosophical discourse from epistemological to ontological matters. The symbolic battleground on which neo-Kantianism gave way to the new current was the conference of French and

¹Gershom Scholem reports that although he and Walter Benjamin ultimately became disappointed in Cohen, they attended his classes at the *Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin, admired him, and read his Kantian writings carefully. See Scholem's account in *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn, Philadelphia 1981, p. 59.

²See Strauss' introductory essay to the English version of Cohen's Jewish magnum opus, *Religion of Reason*, Atlanta 1995, p. xxiii.

German philosophers held in Davos, Switzerland in March/April 1929 at which Martin Heidegger delivered a sharp renunciation of neo-Kantianism as represented by Hermann Cohen's student, Ernst Cassirer.

In the throes of these swirling polemical debates, Cohen's close collaborator at the University of Marburg, Paul Natorp, counselled that the time was not right to undertake a synthetic assessment of Cohen's life and work.³ Notwithstanding this advice, a number of studies of Cohen's work were produced in the twenties, including extended analyses of his philosophical system by two students, Walter Kinkel and Jakob Klatzkin.⁴

If Natorp believed that the time was not right for a full assessment of Cohen in the 1920s, prospects did not improve much in the subsequent decade.⁵ In fact, there were few serious discussions of Hermann Cohen's thought for decades until after the Second World War. The star of neo-Kantianism had faded in the constellation of European philosophy and Cohen's great faith in the progressive force of reason – as well as his belief in the utter compatibility of *Deutschtum* and *Judentum* – seemed hopelessly naive in an era dominated by the Nazi terror.

One of the earliest and most sustained post-Holocaust efforts to revive the Cohenian legacy belonged to the German-born American philosopher and rabbi, Steven Schwarzschild. Schwarzschild inaugurated his life-long interest in Cohen with a 1955 dissertation devoted in large part to Cohen's philosophy of history.⁶ In a series of subsequent essays over some three decades, Schwarzschild, who unabashedly identified himself as a "Marburg neo-Kantian", sought to call attention to and invigorate Hermann Cohen's philosophical commitment to "ethical idealism".⁷

A similar interest in the content of Cohen's teachings, and the very possibility of an ethically grounded idealism, has informed the indefatigable efforts of the Zurich-based scholar, Helmut Holzhey. As founder of the Hermann Cohen Archive in Zurich, Holzhey has overseen a vast enterprise of Cohen scholarship involving the republication of Cohen's collected writings, the supervision of numerous doctoral dissertations on Cohen, and his own substantial analyses of Cohen's philosophy, particularly his study of Cohen and Paul Natorp. The intense concern which Holzhey and his European students have evinced in Cohen's work reflects a renewed estimation of the philosophical merits of neo-Kantianism. Their systematic excavation of Cohen's *oeuvre* itself bears a powerful ethical charge to salvage a liberal-minded, rationalist world-view deeply unsettled by Nazism and seemingly at odds with the postmodern sensibility.⁸

³Natorp's advice to Kinkel is mentioned in the excellent exhibition catalogue assembled by Franz Orlik, *Hermann Cohen (1842–1918): Kantinterpret, Begründer der "Marburger Schule"*, *Jüdischer Religionsphilosoph*, introduced by Reinhard Brandt, Marburg 1992, p. 184.

⁴See Jakob Klatzkin, *Hermann Cohen*, Berlin 1921 and his later Hebrew volume, *Hermann Cohen: Shitato be-musar u-mishnato be-Yahadut*, Berlin 1923, as well as Walter Kinkel, *Hermann Cohen. Eine Einführung in sein Werk*, Stuttgart 1924.

⁵One of the last systematic treatments in this period was Simon Kaplan's doctoral dissertation, *Das Problem der Geschichte im System der Philosophie H. Cohens*, Berlin 1930. Two years later, Joseph Soloveitchik, the great Orthodox jurist and philosopher, published *Das reine Denken und die Seinskonstituierung bei Hermann Cohen*, the fruit of his earlier doctoral dissertation research at the University of Berlin.

⁶"Two Modern Jewish Philosophies of History: Nachman Krochmal and Hermann Cohen", unpublished dissertation, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1955.

⁷Quoted in Menachem Kellner (ed.), *The Pursuit of the Ideal: Jewish Writings of Steven Schwarzschild*, Albany, NY 1990, p. 6.

⁸See the brief, but helpful, introduction to Holzhey's work by Peter A. Schmid and Simone Zurbuchen, *Grenzen der kritischen Vernunft. Helmut Holzhey zum 60. Geburtstag*, Basel 1997, pp. 7–8, 10.

Under the dark shadow of the Holocaust it is understandable that some will continue to hold Cohen's persistent aspiration to reconcile – for instance, Judaism and modernity or Jewishness and Germanness – in low regard, even as a betrayal of a core Jewish loyalty. And yet, as increasing scholarly attention is focused on the vibrant cultural world of European Jewry prior to the Shoah, and as we are urged to resist the impulse to “backshadow” that compels us to regard past events or actors as necessary links in a causal chain leading to the Holocaust, then we would be well advised to consider anew not only the philosophical achievements, but also the intriguing cultural-historical predicament of Jews such as Hermann Cohen.⁹ Particularly in a world in which divided or hybrid identities are widely acknowledged and even celebrated, Hermann Cohen's concerted attempts to demonstrate the affinity between seemingly distinct thought systems and identities bespeaks an important experiment in cultural engineering in a highly complex social milieu.

We need not deny Gershom Scholem's famous claim that the German-Jewish dialogue was one-sided.¹⁰ After all, it is hard to find Christian thinkers contemporaneous with Cohen who sought to demonstrate that their German-Christian identity was identical to Judaism.¹¹ More common were those who asserted that ancient Judaism formed a part, if largely superseded, of their own Christian identity. In this regard, Cohen had regular exchanges with Protestant theologians throughout his career, but few genuine partners in his search for a reconciliation of Jewish and German-Christian cultures. But it is precisely the unrequited quality of his attempted reconciliation that interests us, for it sheds light on and adds poignancy to his predicament as a German-Jewish intellectual.

The aim of this essay is to explore Hermann Cohen's textured engagement with German culture, with a particular focus on his desire to fuse diverse traditions into what might be called Protestant Judaism. What is intriguing is that while Cohen had few Protestant partners in this endeavour, he nonetheless belonged to an historical moment in which the principle of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) was central to the activity of Protestant intellectuals in Germany. He himself embraced the term as a tool of theological clarification to describe the nature of the relationship between humans and God.¹² At the same time, Cohen understood the term in a broader, less technical sense – as a bridge between traditional religion and modern culture. It is a

⁹The critique of “backshadowing” animates Michael André Bernstein in *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, Berkeley 1994.

¹⁰According to Scholem, “(t)his dialogue died at its very start and never took place”. Gershom Scholem, ‘Against the Myth of the German-Jewish Dialogue’ in Werner J. Dannhauser (ed.), *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, New York 1976, p. 62.

¹¹Leo Strauss, however, observed a countervailing trend in which “the German spirit, turning to Jewish tendencies, makes them alive within itself...” This comment surfaced in a review of Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige*, a text which manifested precisely that tendency of which Strauss spoke. See the review in *Der Jude*, 7 (1922–1923), pp. 240–242.

¹²Cohen wrote an essay on ‘Die Versöhnungsidee’ in 1890–1892 in which he addresses not the contemporary cultural manifestations of *Versöhnung*, but typically “the prophetic concept of man's reconciliation with God”. See the English version of this essay excerpted in *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, trans. Eva Jospe, New York 1971, p. 200. It is interesting to bear in mind Amos Funkenstein's point that the term “accommodation”, a conceptual cognate of “reconciliation”, came to indicate in modern times the “emancipation of the secular from transcendental connotations”. Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History*, Berkeley 1993, p. 98.

similar understanding that undergirded the contemporaneous enterprise of *Kulturprotestantismus*.¹³ This term, which seems to have surfaced initially in the last years of the First World War, was first applied as a pejorative reference to liberal Protestants who had subordinated the integrity of religious experience to the demands of modern culture. However, the term also came to assume a more neutral connotation as a descriptor for a set of intersecting religious and social values embraced by liberal Protestants in Germany from the last third of the nineteenth century through the first third of the twentieth. The opening statement of the newly founded *Deutscher Protestantenverein* in 1863 spoke of the need for “a renewal of the Protestant church in the spirit of evangelical freedom and *in harmony with the general cultural development of our age*”.¹⁴ Accommodating Protestantism to the spirit of the time required careful calibration of political and social, as well as theological, positions. Hence, those who operated under the aegis of *Kulturprotestantismus* tended to espouse a liberal version of nationalism which envisaged the German state as a *Rechtsstaat*, motivated by a strong sense of righteousness and justice. That is not to say that *Kulturprotestanten* necessarily believed that Christianity, as a religion of the spirit, should intervene in the affairs of a political state. Christianity’s influence should be both broader and more diffuse, bestowing upon society its most exalted spiritual values. In this respect, *Kulturprotestantismus*, as George Rupp has noted, was “an expression of the Christian ethical imperative to inform and shape the whole of life so that it realizes the ultimately religious significance which is its ground and end”.¹⁵

The point of this digression to *Kulturprotestantismus* is not merely to note its contemporaneity with Hermann Cohen. It is to suggest that Cohen shared much with its adepts: the commitment to the preeminence of the ethical in understanding the spirit of religion; the conviction in the compatibility between ethical-religious values and modern social norms; and the belief that the German state, with its ethical and cultural legacy, was the most enlightened form of political expression ever developed, not to mention the catalyst for a global confederation of nation-states that heralded the messianic era. Given Cohen’s adherence to these articles of faith, it does not seem unreasonable to designate him an exemplar of a *jüdischer Kulturprotestantismus*. Seemingly oxymoronic, this term captures the tension-filled position that Hermann Cohen, and many German Jews, occupied as they passed frequently and often imperceptibly into German society, only to be reminded periodically of the discrete boundaries around their Jewish group allegiance.

¹³As early as 1865 the Heidelberg theologian Richard Rothe declared that the primary goal of a newly formed group of liberal Protestants into the “Deutscher Protestantenverein” was the “Versöhnung von Religion und Kultur”. Quoted in Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, ‘Kulturprotestantismus. Zur Begriffsgeschichte einer theologiepolitischen Chiffre’, in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 28 (1984), p. 217. Uriel Tal notes that Rothe sought to cleanse Protestantism of its irrational elements in a manner consistent with modern science. See Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870–1914*, translated by Noah J. Jacobs, Ithaca, NY 1975, p. 162.

¹⁴Graf, ‘Kulturprotestantismus’, pp. 216–217, my emphasis.

¹⁵George Rupp, *Culture-Protestantism: German Liberal Theology at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Missoula, Montana 1977, p. 9.

BETWEEN WITTENBERG AND DESSAU

It has been noted that Hermann Cohen's birthplace of Coswig lies between Wittenberg, home of Martin Luther, and Dessau, birthplace of Moses Mendelssohn.¹⁶ These two locales symbolised the poles between which Cohen's intellectual world-view was forged. It is hardly surprising that Moses Mendelssohn would have inspired Cohen. Not only was Mendelssohn a contemporary and philosophical colleague of Cohen's master, Immanuel Kant, he also exemplified the very Enlightenment-era reconciliation between Judaism and modernity that Cohen so valued in his life's work.

Cohen's attraction to Luther would seem somewhat more complicated, given the latter's periodic anti-Jewish outbursts.¹⁷ And yet, Luther was one of the most storied heroes in Cohen's philosophical pantheon. For Cohen, Luther was the prototypical German patriot, and a pioneering influence in the formation of German language and cultural identity. More significantly, Cohen identified in Luther's Reformation a principle – namely, that religion was a function not of ecclesiastical authority but of individual conscience – which resonated deeply with his own and Mendelssohn's philosophical tenets.¹⁸

That the legacy of Protestantism left a deep imprint on Cohen was acknowledged by Franz Rosenzweig in his introduction to Cohen's collected Jewish writings. In 1924 Rosenzweig observed, with Hermann Cohen uppermost in mind, that "all modern Jews, and German Jews more than any others, are Protestants".¹⁹ Rosenzweig's observations have been echoed by later readers of Cohen. Hans Liebeschütz, in an excellent historical essay on Hermann Cohen, called attention to Cohen's "radically liberal interpretation" of Luther which bespoke a deep and abiding sympathy with Protestantism.²⁰ More recently, Jacques Derrida made this point more explicit by referring to Cohen as a "Judeo-Protestant".²¹

The roots of Cohen's hybrid identity, hinted at by Derrida, reach back to his formative experience in the town of Coswig. As one of a handful of Jews in the town, Cohen was raised in an environment dominated by the Protestant Church. The powerful cultural presence of Protestantism continued to inform Cohen's self-understanding as a Jew throughout his life. Cohen's "protestant" vision assumed the form

¹⁶See E. Steintal, 'Aus Hermann Cohens Heimat' in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, 82 (April 1918), p. 222; see also Martha Cohen's introduction to the first edition of *Religion der Vernunft*.

¹⁷On Luther's derogatory attitudes toward Jews, see his 1543 text, 'Concerning the Jews and their Lies' excerpted in Jacob R. Marcus (ed.), *The Jew in the Medieval World*, New York 1983, pp. 167–169.

¹⁸See Cohen's 1915–1916 essay 'Deutschtum und Judentum', in Bruno Strauß (ed.), *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, Berlin 1924, pp. 241–243. (Hereafter *Jüdische Schriften*). See also the illuminating comments in Hans Liebeschütz, 'Hermann Cohen and his Historical Background', in *LB Year Book*, XIII (1968), p. 13.

¹⁹See Franz Rosenzweig's introduction to *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1, Berlin 1924, p. xxviii.

²⁰Liebeschütz argues that Cohen's reading of Luther reflected the influence of the school of Protestant theology associated with Albrecht Ritschl, teacher of both Friedrich Nietzsche and Ernst Troeltsch. Both the Ritschlian school and Cohen sought to immunise theological truths against the advances of historicism, in large measure by resorting to Kant. Liebeschütz, p. 13.

²¹Jacques Derrida, 'Interpretation at War: Kant, the Jew, the German', in *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), p. 54. Cohen's essay 'Deutschtum und Judentum', reinforced the author's long-held belief that there was a complete union of interests between German and Jewish identities.

of an unwavering commitment to a Judaism of ethical perfection rather than ritual observance. It also prompted him to construct an intellectual and spiritual genealogy – a “Platonico-Judeo-Protestant axis” according to Derrida – which commenced with the Biblical prophetic tradition and included Plato, Maimonides, Luther, and Kant before culminating in the modern German Jew represented by Cohen himself.²² Before exploring the contours of this genealogy, it might be helpful first to retrace Cohen’s early path from cantor’s son to Neo-Kantian philosopher.

Hermann Cohen was born on July 4, 1842 in Coswig, a small town in central Germany that belonged at the time to the principality of Anhalt-Bernburg. Situated on the banks of the Elbe River, this town hosted a tiny Jewish community that numbered some eleven families at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1800, twenty-three years after gaining the right of settlement, the Jews of Coswig were permitted to construct a synagogue on Domstrasse that was renovated in 1843. This institution assumed a dominant role in Hermann Cohen’s early life. Indeed, the family lived on the same street, since Cohen’s father served as cantor at the synagogue, as well as teacher of the town’s Jewish youth.

The Cohen household reflected the traditional piety of the parents, Gerson and Friederike (née Salomon). On the Sabbath, the family welcomed passing Jewish travellers into their home during which time the father would engage the visitors in Talmudic discussion.²³ Hermann Cohen’s deep Jewish ethos – the sense of tribal affinity that would later manifest itself in his activist stance against antisemitism – was born in this intimate ambience. So too was his often-ignored, yet expansive Jewish knowledge, which enabled the mature Cohen to draw freely on ancient and medieval Jewish sources.

Cohen’s father oversaw his son’s Jewish education.²⁴ He began to teach Hermann Hebrew from the age of three and a half, and continued to instruct him in Jewish subjects even after the young Cohen had left to attend the non-Jewish grammar school (*Gymnasium*) in Dessau at age eleven. Much later in life, when Gerson moved to Marburg, Hermann Cohen, then a renowned philosophy professor, would fill in for his ailing father as the *shaliah tsibur* (prayer leader) at the local synagogue.²⁵ Even though Cohen *filis* did not lead a scrupulously observant life, his reverence for Jewish tradition and ritual, as personified by his father, remained firm. Franz Rosenzweig acknowledged this point in the closing sentence of his introduction to Cohen’s Jewish writings when he recalled that Cohen’s great Jewish book, the posthumously published *Religion der Vernunft*, was dedicated neither to a philosophical school nor to a leading intellectual influence, but rather to the man who bestowed on him a grounded sense of German-Jewish identity: his father.²⁶

If Hermann Cohen’s allegiance to Jewish religion was forged in the insular confines of Jewish Coswig, his equally steadfast faith in the virtue of Protestant ethics

²²Derrida, p. 61.

²³Hermann Cohen, ‘Der polnische Jude’, first published in *Der Jude* (June 1916) and republished in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 163.

²⁴Steinthal, p. 223.

²⁵*ibid.*

²⁶Rosenzweig, introduction to *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1, p. lxiv.

and German culture was born there as well. By his own account, he grew up in an environment largely free from expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment. His father typified the sense of social optimism which this environment yielded and to which his son would later give telling expression. The traditionalist *melamed* felt at home in the Gentile surroundings of the town; he was friendly with Protestant teachers who respected his learning and regarded him as a colleague. He was also a proud German patriot, who at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, prayed for his country along with fellow Coswig residents in the town's church.²⁷

The example of the father's patriotism left an indelible imprint on Hermann Cohen. Throughout his life, Cohen remained convinced that Germany was the most enlightened nation known to humanity, a beacon of humanism to the rest of the world. While for many Jewish contemporaries, not to mention later critics, this view appeared contrived, it emerged quite naturally from Cohen's formative environment. In fact, Cohen was a classic representative of the kind of German Jew, ever loyal to the cherished *Bildungsideal*, to whom George Mosse has famously called attention.²⁸

This ideal was fortified during Cohen's many years of learning and teaching in German academic institutions. At the *Herzogliches Gymnasium* in Dessau, where Cohen was the first Jewish student admitted, he was in a class with eleven other boys, of whom seven went on to study Protestant theology. After four years of study at the *Gymnasium*, Cohen went to study at the new *Jüdisch-Theologisches Seminar* established in Breslau in 1854. This decision was a fitting Jewish parallel to the study of Protestant theology, and perhaps already reflected Cohen's vision of the proximity, even confluence, of Judaism and Protestantism.

At Breslau, the fifteen-year-old Cohen began to study with some of the most distinguished Jewish scholars in nineteenth-century Germany: Jakob Bernays, Heinrich Graetz, and Zacharias Frankel. Each of these scholars exerted a deep, though not necessarily favourable, impression on Cohen. The classicist Bernays was a powerful intellectual personality, and yet, Cohen recalled fifty years later "there was no living, creative, constructive thought at work in this powerful machine".²⁹

Bernay's sober and dispassionate attitude stood in contrast to Heinrich Graetz, who taught Talmud and history. Graetz was then in the midst of writing the first volumes of what would become the most important historical survey of the Jews of the century, the eleven-volume *Geschichte der Juden*. Unlike Bernays, Graetz possessed an untamed "impulsivity" which informed "his interesting and lively presentation of the great men of our literature" and which, Cohen once recalled, "elevated us to our spiritual heights".³⁰

²⁷Steinthal, p. 223.

²⁸See the classic exposition in George L. Mosse, *German Jews beyond Judaism*, Bloomington 1985. For critical perspectives on Mosse's view of the dominance of *Bildung* in German-Jewish culture, see Klaus L. Berghahn (ed.), *The German-Jewish Dialogue Reconsidered: A Symposium in Honor of George L. Mosse*, New York 1996.

²⁹My emphasis. See Cohen's recollection, 'Ein Gruss der Pietät an das Breslauer Seminar', in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 421.

³⁰*ibid.*, p. 420.

Notwithstanding Graetz's powerful effect on him, Cohen decided to leave rabbinical studies after four years.³¹ He immediately took up the study of philosophy and philology at the *Königlich Preussische Universität* in Breslau, proving himself to be an outstanding student. But like many university students in Germany, Cohen pursued his studies at more than one university. In 1864 he left Breslau and moved to Berlin to study at the *Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität*. While continuing his work in philosophy, Cohen also became enthralled with the new academic discipline of *Völkerpsychologie* developed by the renowned Jewish scholar Heymann Steinthal. This field entailed an historically grounded approach to the psychology of groups. In particular, practitioners sought to comprehend the spirit of a people by examining its language, myths, religion, ethics, and public institutions.³² Under Steinthal's tutelage, Cohen began to make use of the historical and philological tools of this new discipline. Indeed, his first published article on Plato's theory of ideas, reflecting his use of these tools, appeared in the journal edited by Steinthal and another prominent Jewish scholar, Moritz Lazarus: the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*.³³

Simultaneous with his training in *Völkerpsychologie* in Berlin, Cohen also became an enthusiastic supporter of a new philosophical movement that was gaining considerable momentum in the 1860s, and whose rallying cry was "back to Kant".³⁴ The movement had strong support in Berlin where Cohen was studying. In fact, various scholars have noted the strong links in this period between the *Völkerpsychologie* school and Berlin neo-Kantians such as Adolf Trendelenburg.³⁵ Consistent with this link, Cohen increasingly focused his intellectual energies on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, even though he did not abandon altogether the methods of *Völkerpsychologie* for at least a decade, that is, not until the late 1870s. Cohen's new interest in Kant culminated in a book and a long article in 1871, both of which revealed a lively interest and bold confidence in intervening in the bitter disputes that had erupted among the new cohort of Kant interpreters.³⁶

³¹On later occasions, Cohen proved less reverential toward Graetz, castigating his erstwhile teacher for his overly partisan, i.e. nationalistic, presentation of Jewish history. See, for example, Cohen's 1880 response to Heinrich von Treitschke's attack on Graetz (in which Cohen adds a few unflattering remarks of his own), 'Ein Bekenntnis in der Judenfrage', reprinted in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, pp. 73–94. See also Cohen's commemorative essay on the centenary of Graetz's birth, 'Grätzens Philosophie der jüdischen Geschichte', *ibid.*, 3, p. 203–212. I discuss Cohen's relationship to Graetz in a chapter on Cohen in my forthcoming book, *Beyond History: Anti-Historicism in Modern Jewish Thought*.

³²See Ingrid Belke's introduction to Moritz Lazarus, *Moritz Lazarus und Heymann Steinthal. Die Begründer der Völkerpsychologie in ihren Briefen*, vol. 1, Tübingen 1971, p. lii.

³³See, for instance, Cohen's 1866 essay, 'Psychologische Entwicklung der platonischen Ideenlehre', reprinted in *idem, Kleine philosophische Schriften*, edited by Albert Görland and Ernst Cassirer, Berlin 1927, pp. 30–87.

³⁴See, for instance, Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany, 1831–1933*, trans. Eric Matthews, Cambridge 1984, pp. 76 and 100; or Henri Dussort, *L'école de Marbourg*, Paris 1963, p. 37. The return to Kant movement sought to navigate between the perceived metaphysical excesses of the previously dominant Hegelianism and the hyper-empiricism of the new positivism. By reviving the Kantian legacy of "transcendental logic", the neo-Kantians thereby aimed to recast the focus of philosophical inquiry from metaphysics to epistemology without surrendering to a lifeless scientism.

³⁵See, for instance, Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton, Albany, NY 1997, pp. 4–5, 269–270.

³⁶Cohen's article, 'Zur Kontroverse zwischen Trendelenburg und Kuno Fischer', originally published in 1871 in the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, was reprinted in Cohen's *Kleine philosophische Schriften*. His first major book-length study of Kant, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, was also published in 1871.

In fact, it was Cohen's book from 1871, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, that attracted the attention of Friedrich Albert Lange, the philosopher renowned for his 1866 study, *Geschichte des Materialismus*.³⁷ Lange was a newly appointed professor at the Protestant university of Marburg. He endeavoured to bring Cohen to Marburg, first by convincing his colleagues to accept Cohen's *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* as an *Habilitationsschrift* (equivalent to a second doctorate and qualifying its holder for a professorial position). Lange also lobbied to gain Cohen an academic appointment to the university. He first had to convince his colleagues that Cohen, as a Jewish instructor of philosophy in a Protestant university, would not be hostile to Christianity. Lange reportedly asked Cohen if there was "any serious difference between us in regard to Christianity". Cohen's answer was telling, offering an early articulation of his deeply held Protestant Jewish sensibility: "No, because what you call Christianity – I call prophetic Judaism."³⁸ Shortly thereafter, Cohen was appointed *Privatdozent* at Marburg in 1873; three years later, he succeeded the recently deceased Lange as the chair holder in philosophy.

It was at this point that Hermann Cohen began to develop, along with his Protestant colleague Paul Natorp, the distinct tradition of neo-Kantianism that would come to be known as the Marburg School. It is important to note here that one of the most confusing features of neo-Kantianism is the fact that various and diverse groups of thinkers laid claim to its mantle. Hence, the Southwest or Baden school of neo-Kantians, which included thinkers such as Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, was particularly interested in utilising Kantian categories to establish a stable protocol for the study of history. The Marburg School of neo-Kantians, by contrast, did not share this emphasis, and was at times antagonistic to contemporary historical study. Its main objective was to affirm that human consciousness was the source of all things knowable, including experience. In rejecting the existence of a noumenal realm beyond consciousness, the Marburg School was careful to maintain that thought was not a matter of mere subjectivity. On the contrary, Cohen and his colleagues devoted considerable attention to the function of science and scientific method in framing human knowledge. Even more distinctively, Hermann Cohen and his colleagues in Marburg held that one of the chief goals of philosophy, as a scientific enterprise, was to clarify the central role of the ethical in human thought and behavior. This emphasis on the ethical not only distinguished the Marburg tradition of neo-Kantianism, but also undergirded Hermann Cohen's vision of the juncture of Jewish and Protestant ideals.

³⁷It is a measure of Lange's magnanimity that he vigorously supported Cohen's cause notwithstanding Cohen's sharp disagreement with him over the significance of materialism in the history of philosophy. While Cohen dismissed materialism as a brief episode in antiquity, Lange called Cohen's *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, "one of the most significant achievements to emerge in the field of philosophy in the last years". Quoted in Orlik, *Hermann Cohen: Kantinterpret*, p. 54. See also Poma, pp. 58–59.

³⁸Cohen expressed gratitude to Lange "without whose aid I would not have been able to become a university lecturer" *ibid.*, p. 54. For an account of Cohen's exchange with Lange, see Jehuda Melber, *Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Judaism*, New York 1968, p. 82.

AT HOME IN MARBURG?

At first glance, Marburg would seem to have been an unlikely site for a Jewish thinker to expound a philosophical system marked by the quest for a universal ethics. Home to the oldest Protestant university in Germany (founded in 1527), Marburg was a small provincial town in Hesse. The university possessed a long tradition of tolerance, extending back to its early history as a centre of Calvinist dissent. In the early eighteenth century, the theologian Christian Wolff, shunned by other German universities and feared by some Marburg professors themselves, was invited to teach at Marburg.³⁹ During this century, the fortunes of the university first improved – with a dramatic rise in student attendance – and then declined as a result of financial difficulties.

By the early nineteenth century, the university had regained some lustre through such scholars as Carl von Savigny, who was the moving force behind the “historical school of law” (*historische Rechtsschule*). Among Savigny’s students were the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm who devoted themselves to the collection and analysis of German folk traditions.⁴⁰ The university also was home to a jurist, Silvester Jordan, who authored a new liberal constitution in 1830 intended to replace the despotic rule of Kurfürst Wilhelm in Hesse-Kassel.⁴¹ However, Wilhelm’s son, Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, paid only lip service to the new constitution, and sought to stifle political expression at the university. At this point, the university’s fortunes began to sag under the oppressive weight of Friedrich Wilhelm’s control.

This rather gloomy period in the university’s history came to an end in 1866, the year in which Prussia annexed a number of northern German states, including Hesse. Prussian rule inaugurated a new era of openness and free thought for the Marburg institution. In 1872, Hermann Cohen’s mentor, F. A. Lange, joined the university, and shortly thereafter, began his efforts to bring Cohen to Marburg. Cohen, in turn, worked in tandem with Paul Natorp to attract an excellent and diverse cadre of students that included Ernst Cassirer, José Ortega y Gasset, and even the author Boris Pasternak.

These efforts to transform Marburg into a major centre of neo-Kantian philosophy were matched by vital activity in the field of theology. Wilhelm Herrmann, with whom Cohen conversed on theological matters, was appointed professor of theology in 1879. Like Cohen, Herrmann drew promising young students to Marburg through his sharp intellect and liberal inclinations. Indeed, many of the most important names in Protestant theology – Karl Barth, Martin Rade, Adolf von Harnack, and Julius Wellhausen – studied, taught or worked in Marburg at one point or another in the turn-of-the-century period.

It is clear that the Prussian annexation of Hesse gave impetus to an impressive bout of growth at the university, particularly in the fields of philosophy and theology.

³⁹For a detailed discussion of the university in this period, see H. Hermelink and S.A. Kachler, *Die Philipps-Universität zu Marburg, 1527–1927*, Marburg 1927, p. 388ff. Drawing on Dussort, Judy Deane Saltzman also provides a good summary of Marburg’s history in *Paul Natorp’s Philosophy of Religion within the Marburg Neo-Kantian Tradition*, Hildesheim 1981, pp. 32–34.

⁴⁰See Hermelink and Kaehler, *Die Philipps-Universität zu Marburg*, 477, as well as Ingeborg Schnack, ‘Die Philipps-Universität zu Marburg 1527–1977’, in Wilfried Frhr. von Bredow (ed.), *450 Jahre Philipps-Universität Marburg*, Marburg 1979, pp. 92–94.

⁴¹Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany, 1840–1945*, Princeton 1969, p. 24.

And yet, the arrival of the Prussians also introduced another, countervailing current with direct consequences for Hermann Cohen: namely, the rise of a vigorous new antisemitism which found adherents among the rural farmers and peasants of Hesse.⁴² The chief agitator was Otto Böckel, a librarian at the University of Marburg who came to know the country peasants through his work collecting German folk songs and tales.⁴³ Böckel forged a unique brand of populist politics that combined anti-Prussian, anti-clerical, and antisemitic sentiments. Campaigning under the slogan "Against Junkers and Jews", Böckel became the first openly antisemitic candidate elected to the *Reichstag* (1887).

Hermann Cohen was acutely aware of the rising chorus of antisemitic voices in his midst. He had himself been embroiled some years earlier in the infamous controversy occasioned by the historian Heinrich von Treitschke's attack on Heinrich Graetz.⁴⁴ In that earlier episode, Cohen challenged von Treitschke's claims that the Jews of Germany were unassimilable, by stating that there was hardly "any difference between Israelite monotheism and Protestant Christianity".⁴⁵ At the same time, Cohen criticised his former teacher, Heinrich Graetz, in bitter terms, accusing him of a "frightening perversity of emotional judgments".⁴⁶ The ferocity of Cohen's comments regarding a fellow Jew brought down upon him widespread condemnation within the German-Jewish community in 1880–1881, and prompted his one-time teacher, Heymann Steinthal, to break off contact with him.⁴⁷

As controversial as it was, Cohen's response to Treitschke rested on a premise that would later serve him in his role as a public figure in Jewish communal affairs: namely, that antisemitism was as alien to an enlightened German nation as Judaism was compatible with it. In Cohen's mind, von Treitschke violated the former principle, whereas Graetz denied the basic confluence of Germanness and Jewishness. He, by contrast, held firm to both principles which undergirded his subsequent career as an activist in German-Jewish defense work.

One of the most apposite instances of such activism was Cohen's role in an anti-semitic episode in Marburg shortly after Otto Böckel was elected to the *Reichstag*. In 1888 Cohen was summoned by a judge to serve as an expert witness in the trial of a local teacher who had been accused of defaming the Jewish religion. Pitted against

⁴²Richard Levy notes that while many Hessian peasants greeted the arrival of the Prussians with fear and apprehension, the Jewish population "openly welcomed the annexation of Electoral Hesse by Prussia". The resulting gap in attitude helps explain the rise of antisemitism in the region. See Richard S. Levy, *The Downfall of the Anti-Semitic Political Parties in Imperial Germany*, New Haven 1975, p. 53. See also Rudy Koshar, *Social Life, Local Politics, and Nazism. Marburg, 1880–1935*, Chapel Hill, NC 1986, p. 65.

⁴³On Böckel's activities, see Levy, pp. 39–48 and Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria*, Cambridge, MA 1988, p. 102.

⁴⁴Von Treitschke published his attack on Graetz, 'Ein Wort über unser Judenthum', in 1880. On the dispute, see Michael A. Meyer, 'Great Debate on Antisemitism: Jewish Reactions to New Hostility in Germany 1879–1881', in *LBI Year Book XI* (1966), pp. 137–170 and *idem*, 'Heinrich Graetz and Heinrich von Treitschke: A Comparison of their Historical Image of the Modern Jew', in *Modern Judaism*, 6 (1986).

⁴⁵See Cohen's response to von Treitschke in 'Ein Bekenntnis' in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 74; originally published as a separate pamphlet in Berlin in 1880.

⁴⁶Cohen, 'Ein Bekenntnis', p. 76.

⁴⁷See Dieter Adelmann, 'H. Steinthal und Hermann Cohen', in *Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Stéphane Moses and Hartwig Wiedebach, Hildesheim 1997, pp. 2–3.

the well-known Göttingen orientalist Paul de Lagarde, Cohen took a page out of the history of medieval disputations by defending the integrity of the Talmud, particularly by asserting that it was not antagonistic to non-Jews. On the contrary, Cohen argued, the Talmud was full of charitable sentiments towards Gentiles. Moreover, Cohen sought to demonstrate not only that moral precepts were prominently represented in the Talmud, but that "in many places in the Talmud one notices the tendency to shift the centre from law to ethical teachings".⁴⁸

Cohen's assertion of the primacy of the ethical in Judaism would become a standard feature of his intellectual project. In the case before us, it served as a successful tool to uphold the virtue of Judaism against antisemites; Cohen's testimony in the Marburg trial proved persuasive enough to help convict the antisemitic agitator. In broader terms, the primacy of the ethical resonated deeply with Cohen's neo-Kantianism. At the same time, it formed the basis of Cohen's protestant vision of Judaism, a sensibility born in his native Coswig and reinforced in his adopted Marburg.

Notwithstanding the outbreak of antisemitism in Hesse in the 1880s, Cohen shared with Protestant colleagues such as Herrmann, Natorp, and Wellhausen a number of important pillars of the liberal Protestant edifice they laboured to build. For example, Wilhelm Herrmann not only placed ethics at the centre of his theological investigations, but also sought to show the fundamental compatibility between New Testament morality and Kantian ethics.⁴⁹ In parallel fashion, Hermann Cohen aimed to demonstrate that a rational and universal ethical system was anchored in biblical, and especially, as we shall see, prophetic sources. The affinity between the two religious traditions was hardly foreign to Cohen. He declared, "just as Protestantism has thrown off the yoke of ecclesiastical tradition", so too ethical Judaism had thrown off the onerous yoke of rabbinic law.⁵⁰

At one level, it was inevitable that Cohen would adopt the conceptual language of the broader Protestant milieu. After all, it was he who belonged to a minority religious community seeking to demonstrate its compatibility with a sometimes hostile majority culture. His Protestant colleagues neither felt nor demonstrated the need to render Protestantism compatible with Judaism. And yet, as we noted at the outset, they spoke a language deeply resonant with Cohen's own harmonising impulses: the language of reconciliation, particularly between traditional religious faith and modern society.

Within this broader discursive world of theological and social reconciliation, Hermann Cohen was at home in a Protestant culture; but his lingering Jewish loyalties prevented him from becoming fully of that culture. It is the resulting position of

⁴⁸Cohen's brief in the trial, 'Die Nächstenliebe im Talmud', was published in Marburg in 1888 and reprinted in his *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 158; see also the editor's notes on this episode *ibid.*, pp. 338–339.

⁴⁹See Rupp, *Culture-Protestantism*, p. 38. William Kluback offers a detailed analysis of the Cohen-Herrmann relationship, including a discussion of their shared interest in ethics as well as the important philosophical differences between them. See William Kluback, 'Friendship without Communication: Wilhelm Herrmann and Hermann Cohen', in *LBI Year Book XXXI* (1986), pp. 317–338.

⁵⁰Cohen, 'Ein Bekenntnis', quoted in Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany*, p. 62. See also Gabriel Motzkin, 'Hermann Cohen's Integration of Science and Religion', in *Archives de Science sociale des Religions* 60/1 (July-September 1985), p. 44.

liminality which suggests that Cohen was the formulator of a deeply held and uniquely conceived *jüdischer Kulturprotestantismus*.⁵¹ That which Cohen shared with *Kulturprotestanten* themselves was the belief that an enlightened German nation and an enlightened ethical culture were consonant, if not identical.⁵² Their shared concern for a socially responsible nation suffused by noble ethical values rested on a spiritual lineage whose heroes included Martin Luther and Immanuel Kant. By contrast, what distinguished Cohen from his Protestant contemporaries were their respective views of the provenance of this spiritual lineage, and hence of much of Western civilisation. Whereas Christian thinkers cast their gaze quite naturally on early Christianity, Hermann Cohen focused his attention on prophetic Judaism. A good part of the intricacy of our story stems from the fact that Protestant scholars themselves demonstrated considerable interest in the Israelite prophets in this period – and, in fact, stimulated Hermann Cohen's own curiosity in the subject.

FROM THE PROPHETS TO KANT: THE LINEAGE OF PROTESTANT JUDAISM

Cohen's designation of the prophets as the starting point of the ethical tradition that framed Western history was hardly his invention. On the one hand it represented an extension and refinement of mid-nineteenth-century liberal Jewish thought, most notably that of the Reform rabbi and scholar, Abraham Geiger, for whom the prophets represented the most exalted expression of Jewish morality.⁵³ On the other, it owed much to the surrounding non-Jewish intellectual culture. Indeed, Cohen's interest in the essential, and essentialising, features of the prophets paralleled the strong desire of many nineteenth and early twentieth-century Protestant thinkers to define the essence of Christianity.⁵⁴ The most famous expression of this desire came in Adolf von Harnack's series of lectures at the University of Berlin from 1899–1900. Later published as *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Harnack's lectures argued for the indispensability of history in yielding a nuanced understanding of Jesus, his followers, and the roots of early Christianity. A good number of theological opponents, including Martin Kähler, Cohen's colleague Wilhelm Herrmann, and later Karl Barth, challenged the view that

⁵¹Cohen was here exemplary of the "double aim" which Uriel Tal identifies in German Jewry: "to integrate completely into their environment as full-fledged Germans and at the same time preserve their separate existence." Tal, *Christians and Jews*, p. 17.

⁵²See Tal's excellent discussion of liberal Protestant attitudes toward the state in the late nineteenth century in Tal, *Christians and Jews*, pp. 167–176.

⁵³In surveying the evolution of Reform Judaism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Michael A. Meyer notes that the "message of Israel's ancient Prophets, universalised beyond its original context, became for Geiger, as for the Reform movement, the most viable and important component of Judaism." Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, New York 1988, pp. 95–96.

⁵⁴See Tal, *Christians and Jews*, p. 203. Susannah Heschel argues that it was a Jewish scholar, Abraham Geiger, who actually prompted the intense Protestant interest in the essence of Christianity through his scholarly conclusion that Jesus was and must be considered a Jew. Though derivative, Protestant theology *per* Heschel failed to acknowledge Geiger. See Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, Chicago 1998, pp. 9–10.

history *per se* could ever penetrate to the core of their religious tradition.⁵⁵ The essence of Christianity, they maintained, defied historicisation altogether.

In the midst of this intense debate over the essence of Christianity, Protestant historians, in particular, developed an interest in the Israelite prophets as an early link in the chain of Christianity's evolutionary development. One of the most illuminating cases was another of Hermann Cohen's Marburg colleagues and friends, Julius Wellhausen, the famous Biblical scholar. Much of what Cohen came to know and identify with the prophets was derived from his reading of Wellhausen and other Protestant Biblical scholars for whom the prophets represented the spiritual heights of Israelite religion.⁵⁶ Yet, Cohen rejected one of the fundamental tenets of this group of scholars: the idea that the prophets represented the terminal stages of *Spätjudentum* (late Judaism), whose spiritual embers were rekindled by the new and true Israel, Christianity. In this respect, Cohen had a great deal of ambivalence for the work of Wellhausen, a man whom he liked and admired. On one hand, Cohen believed, as he noted in a eulogy for Wellhausen in 1917, that his colleague truly grasped the "ethical foundation and universalism of the prophets".⁵⁷ On the other hand, Cohen could not understand why Wellhausen's studies "concluded with the political history of Israel and turned just as quickly to the history of the Arabs". "How could he end the history of Israel so abruptly", Cohen inquired, "without even devoting attention, as a philologist, to the language of the Mishna?"⁵⁸ The familiar neglect by Christian scholars of rabbinic Judaism proved irksome to Jewish students of antiquity generally, but in the specific case of Hermann Cohen unsettled his vision of an ecumenical bond between Jews and Christians.

The divergences between Cohen and Wellhausen regarding the Israelite prophets offer a revealing glance into the nature of Cohen's immersion into Protestant intellectual culture. While Cohen relied on Protestant scholarship for a nuanced understanding of the historical context of the prophets, he could not accept the theological claim that the prophets passed on the mantle of Israel's spiritual leadership to Christianity. Rather, he insisted on the ongoing relevance, and at times the ethical superiority, of a Judaism rooted in the prophetic tradition. But even while making this Judeocentric move, Cohen paralleled the thrust of some contemporaneous Protestant thinkers such as Wilhelm Herrmann and the later dialectical theologians who sought to dig through later historical manifestations of Christianity and locate its essence in antiquity. Hence, Cohen attempted to situate the essence of Judaism – its ethical grandeur – in the ancient prophets, and neglected subsequent rabbinic writings including the Talmud, codes, and commentaries.⁵⁹ For it was the prophets

⁵⁵See Tal, *Christians and Jews*, p. 204, as well as Uriel Tal, 'Theologische Debatte um das 'Wesen' des Judentums', in Werner E. Mosse (ed.), *Juden im Wilhelminischen Deutschland, 1890–1914*, Tübingen 1976 (Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 33), pp. 599–632.

⁵⁶According to Hans Liebeschütz, "it was the work of Wellhausen and his school, which gave the prophetic message its definite place in Cohen's interpretation of Judaism." Hans Liebeschütz, pp. 21–23.

⁵⁷See Cohen's eulogy, 'Julius Wellhausen: Ein Abschiedsgruß', first published in the *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte* and reprinted in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 464.

⁵⁸*ibid.*, p. 464.

⁵⁹A notable exception was Cohen's intervention in defense of the Talmud in Marburg in 1888, typically focused on the centrality of ethics.

who first – and most profoundly – grasped that monotheism was “an exclusively moral teaching.”⁶⁰

If the prophets were the progenitors of a sublime ethical system, their spiritual heirs tended not to be rabbis but philosophers, not all of whom were Jewish. Cohen was particularly intrigued by Plato, whom he regarded as adumbrating the principles of Kantian idealism. In fact, Cohen regarded Plato, along with the Israelite prophets, as “the two most important sources of modern culture”, indeed as “the spiritual leaders of humanity”.⁶¹ Cohen did not mean to suggest that the prophets and Plato were identical, but rather that their complementarity laid the foundation for social progress in the modern world. The prophets’ social consciousness contained the “pure source of religion”.⁶² But the prophetic mind knew nothing of scientific thought or reason. It was here that Plato innovated, not merely by introducing scientific perception, but by effecting a synthesis of science and morality (*Wissenschaft und Sittlichkeit*). Without science, Cohen declared, “there could be no perception, no idea, no idealism”. Science provided the logical scaffolding for ethics, and thus enabled the human quest for the Good. In pioneering this momentous fusion of science and ethics, Plato had achieved a measure of “historical eternity” (*geschichtliche Ewigkeit*).⁶³

Those who qualified for historical eternity in Cohen’s scheme imparted a message that was not wedded to a single historical context, but which reflected the quest for a timeless and universal state of perfection.⁶⁴ While the foundations of this tradition were grounded in antiquity, the most important medieval exponent was Moses Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish scholar. Cohen’s labors to include Maimonides’s in his grand spiritual lineage led him to a reading quite distinct from other scholars. That is, he did not emphasise Maimonides’ renown as a legal decisor or his acumen as a philosopher operating in the Aristotelian mould. He rather argued that the Maimonidean system reflected a strong Platonic thrust, particularly in its preoccupation with ethics. In making this claim, Cohen creatively re-interpreted Maimonides, upending the carefully delineated hierarchy of perfections set out in the last chapter of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (3:54).⁶⁵ Thus, Cohen seems to transpose or at least blur the fourth and final perfection of the Maimonidean system, rational virtues, and the penultimate perfection, moral virtues. The effect was to proclaim the pinnacle of the Maimonidean system as ethical, not intellectual, perfection.⁶⁶

⁶⁰Hermann Cohen, ‘Der Stil der Propheten’, in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 263.

⁶¹See Cohen’s posthumously published lecture from 1916, ‘Das soziale Ideal bei Platon und den Propheten’, in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1, pp. 306 and 330.

⁶²*ibid.*, p. 310.

⁶³*ibid.*, p. 309. For elaboration, see Pierfrancesco Fiorato, *Geschichtliche Ewigkeit. Ursprung und Zeitlichkeit in der Philosophie Hermann Cohens*, Königshausen 1993, especially chapter 3.

⁶⁴It is appropriate here to recall the distinction, favoured by Kant, between the “historisch” and the “geschichtlich”, that is between empirical and *a priori* notions of history. See Yirmiah Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, Princeton 1980, p. 240.

⁶⁵See Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. by Shlomo Pines/Leo Strauss, vol. 2, Chicago 1963, p. 635.

⁶⁶According to Cohen, Maimonides adumbrated his own view that “God is not a God of metaphysics...but is rather the God of ethics.” See Cohen’s important essay, ‘Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis’, originally published in Wilhelm Bacher, Marcus Brann, and David Simonsen (eds.), *Moses ben Maimon: Sein Leben, seine Werke und sein Einfluss*, vol. 1, Leipzig 1908, and reprinted in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 3, p. 289.

In the process, Maimonides is transformed by Cohen into "the standard-bearer of Protestantism in medieval Judaism".⁶⁷ This anachronistic designation reflects Cohen's view that the great Spanish-Jewish philosopher understood the essence of Judaism to be its ethical ideals rather than its dogmas, prescriptions, or institutions. Hence, Maimonides was an appropriate precursor to Martin Luther, who also occupied a central place in Cohen's lineage. Luther's rejection of ecclesiastical authority and institutions redirected religious responsibility to the domain of the individual's conscience.⁶⁸ Indeed, in Luther, and the Reformation he heralded, Cohen located the core ingredients of the German nation he so admired – a nation rooted in the values of ethical autonomy, moral rectitude, and philosophic inquiry. This vision of Germany – and of Luther – revealed a highly selective historical approach. Rather than place Luther in a specific historical context, Cohen folded him into a sweeping trajectory of grand ethical thinkers who lay the foundation for Western civilisation.⁶⁹

A similar selectivity informed Cohen's discussion of Immanuel Kant. Despite Kant's denigration of Judaism as mere "statutory laws", Cohen saw Kantianism as compatible, indeed deeply consonant, with Judaism. In the first instance, this consonance resulted, Cohen wrote in a 1910 essay on 'The Inner Relations of Kantian Philosophy to Judaism', from the "rejection of eudaemonism and all its varieties". That is, both Kant and Judaism exhibited steadfast "opposition to egoism, selfishness, and above all the horizon of individualism".⁷⁰ By contrast, both acknowledged fealty to the universal force of reason and to the higher goal of ethical progress which issued from it. This overarching ethical thrust led Kant and Jewish philosophers to conclude that the "essence of God is morality and only morality".⁷¹ Moreover, it yielded a "social idealism...that stands in close connection to messianism".⁷² It was precisely this link between social idealism and messianism that drew ancients (the prophets and Plato), medievals (Maimonides), and moderns (Kant) together into a fraternity of ethical grandeur.⁷³ And it was this fraternity which aspired to and attained a measure of "historical eternity".

DEUTSCHTUM UND JUDENTUM: A FUSION OF CULTURAL HORIZONS?

We have already seen that the lineage of ethical grandeur that Hermann Cohen developed embraced not only illustrious individual thinkers, but also entire cultural traditions. This point is perhaps most evident in Cohen's notorious '*Deutschtum und*

⁶⁷See Cohen, 'Deutschtum und Judentum', in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 244.

⁶⁸See Liebeschütz, p.13.

⁶⁹As Hans Liebeschütz has noted, Cohen's discussion of Luther was not beholden to "the collection of single facts from the life in Wittenberg in the sixteenth century." *ibid.*

⁷⁰Cohen, 'Innere Beziehungen der Kantischen Philosophie zum Judentum', *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1, pp. 290 and 292.

⁷¹*ibid.*, p. 294.

⁷²*ibid.*, p. 301.

⁷³In eulogising his teacher, Ernst Cassirer wrote of Cohen that "(w)e encounter three fundamental moments in the thought of this great rationalist: Plato, Kant, and prophecy." See Cassirer's comments in the *Vossische Zeitung*, 18 May 1920, quoted in Orlik, *Hermann Cohen. Kantinterpret*, p. 156. Jacques Derrida, meanwhile, writes of the "Platonico-Judeo-Protestant axis" in Cohen's thought, Derrida, p. 61.

Judentum', the title given to a pair of long essays from 1915–1916 in which Cohen's harmonising instincts were at their most expansive. Written in the midst of the First World War, Cohen's essays argued that German Jews were – and deserved to be – fully at home in their fatherland. This message was addressed to world, and particularly American, Jewry, whose support Cohen hoped to elicit for the German war effort. Cohen argued that the "German spirit" had immeasurably enriched Jewish intellectual and cultural life in Germany; German Jews, in turn, exerted a nearly singular influence on the intellectual and cultural life of world Jewry.⁷⁴

While appealing to Jews abroad, Cohen was also trying to convince many at home – Jews attracted to Zionism and non-Jews attracted to antisemitism – that the locus of Jewish collective fulfillment was Germany. His claim that the Jewish and German spirits were closely entwined relied on his identification of a set of intersecting idealisms: the prophetic sense of hope for social betterment and the Protestant-German advancement of philosophical-scientific thought. The point of intersection was a rationalist ethics that impelled the human quest for perfectibility – and hence the messianic process – forward.

The idea of messianism, as distinct from a personal messiah, was a central concept in Cohen's lexicon. Although its source lay in prophetic Judaism, its renewed force owed to the "the humanity of the German spirit" which pushed toward the unity of all mankind.⁷⁵ Cohen's ability here and elsewhere to filter out xenophobic, racist, and antisemitic elements of German political culture in conceiving of this idealised view of the German spirit was an astonishing feat of repression for which he was sternly castigated in his day and subsequently.⁷⁶ At one level, this instinct reflected the social pressures toward conformity that German Jews regularly encountered and internalised. At another level, Cohen's neglect issued from the deep-seated, we might even say intoxicated, faith that there was "a kindred spirit linking Germanness and Jewishness" and, moreover, that this spirit would set in motion a global political realignment toward a harmonious confederation of nations. In so doing, this spirit, with its Judeo-Protestant-German pedigree, would stimulate human progress toward "eternal peace".⁷⁷

In chronological terms, Hermann Cohen's '*Deutschtum und Judentum*' represents the climax of his life-long pursuit of cultural and spiritual reconciliation. The essays were written a few years prior to Cohen's death, after he had moved to Berlin and assumed a position of prominence in Jewish intellectual circles there. And yet, Cohen's ecumenical language seemed out of touch with the hardened realities of the War years. The German-Jewish symbiosis of which he was a most fervent adherent, not to mention its most dedicated theorist, was assaulted by antisemites who insisted with new vigour that Jews were not serving their country in proportionate numbers and, in fact, could never be true members of the German nation. And as Cohen discovered in his debate with Martin Buber in 1916, Jewish intellectuals in Germany,

⁷⁴Cohen, '*Deutschtum und Judentum* (II)', p. 316.

⁷⁵Cohen, '*Deutschtum und Judentum* (I)', p. 267.

⁷⁶For a convenient inventory of critical responses to '*Deutschtum und Judentum*', see the editor's notes in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 476.

⁷⁷Cohen, '*Deutschtum und Judentum* (I)', p. 290.

especially Zionists, often regarded Cohen's words as antiquated and disconnected from the new spirit of Jewish nationalism.⁷⁸

Perhaps even more disappointing to Cohen than Buber's Zionist polemic was the failure of liberal Protestant intellectuals to affirm his millennial vision. It bears repeating that for all of his extensive interaction with and immersion in Protestant culture, Cohen had no real Christian partner in his spiritual journey toward a Protestant Judaism. This may come as little surprise to those familiar with theological discourse of the period, but a final example illustrates the gap between Cohen and *Kulturprotestanten* of his day. I am referring to Cohen's exchange, shortly before his death, with one of the most storied Protestant historians and theologians of the day, Ernst Troeltsch.

Uriel Tal and now Susannah Heschel have reminded us that, in the context of German-Jewish history, one's logical allies do not always become one's close friends; quite to the contrary, relations between liberal Jews and liberal Christians were often deeply strained.⁷⁹ In the case before us, Cohen and Troeltsch seemed to share a great deal, both in terms of their conception of an enlightened German polity and in their faith in an enlightened monotheistic religious tradition.⁸⁰ And yet, real and sharp divergences surfaced between them that symbolised the chasm between liberal Protestantism and liberal Judaism.

The dispute between Cohen and Troeltsch centred around a recurrent concern of both thinkers, the Israelite prophets.⁸¹ An important and contiguous problem was

⁷⁸Important excerpts of the debate between Buber and Cohen are included in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World*, New York 1995, pp. 571–577. See also Moses Gluckson's essay 'Hermann Cohen und das nationale Judentum' in *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte*, 3 (March 1919), pp. 231–235, cited in Jörg Hackeschmidt's helpful essay 'Die hebräischen Propheten und die Ethik Kants: Hermann Cohen in kultur- und sozialhistorischer Perspektive', *Aschkenas*, 1 (1995), p. 129. It is important to recall that Buber himself supported the German war effort for which he was ridiculed and exoriated by younger generations of German Zionists.

⁷⁹Tal, *Christians and Jews*, p. 220. Susannah Heschel, meanwhile, offers a withering critique of liberal Protestant circles in turn-of-the-century Germany, accusing them of lack of originality, disingenuousness, and powerful anti-Jewish animus. See Heschel, p. 226.

⁸⁰According to Wendell S. Dietrich, "(t)wo major proposals emerge on the late nineteenth-century German religious and intellectual scene-proposals for revising classic Western religious traditions in the interests of enhancing their credibility in the modern world:" namely, those of Cohen and Troeltsch. See Wendell S. Dietrich, *Cohen and Troeltsch: Ethical Monotheistic Religion and Theory of Culture*, Atlanta 1986, p. 5.

⁸¹There may also have been an overlay of personal suspicion involved in the relationship between Cohen and Troeltsch, particularly from Cohen's side. In 1913, Troeltsch dedicated the second volume of his collected writings to his mentor Paul de Lagarde, the noted nineteenth-century Orientalist. Lagarde, as already mentioned, was none other than Hermann Cohen's adversary in the 1888 trial of a man accused of defaming Judaism in Marburg. It was Lagarde who was called upon to defend the accuracy of the anti-Jewish defamations. Moreover, he was notorious for his frequent fulminations against Jews as alien and antagonistic to the German nation. See Jacob Katz's discussion of Lagarde in *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700–1933*, Cambridge, MA 1980, pp. 305–306, or George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, Madison, Wisc. 1975, pp. 100–101. Although Troeltsch did distance himself from Lagarde's antisemitism, he did appreciate Lagarde's "essentially historical, and not speculative, comprehension of religion." Ernst Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, Tübingen 1913, p. viii. Still, debates abound about the extent to which Troeltsch may have succumbed to an anti-Jewish bias himself. A particularly controversial indictment can be found in Constance L. Benson, *God and Caesar: Troeltsch's Social Teaching as Legitimation*, New Brunswick, NJ 1999, pp. 92–93. For a more tempered, though hardly flattering discussion, see Robert Rubanowice, *Crisis in Consciousness: The Thought of Ernst Troeltsch*, Tallahassee 1982, p. 126.

how best to understand, in an historicist age, the inspired values and texts of a given religious tradition. The historian Troeltsch fired the opening salvo in this affair with a lecture in 1916 on 'The Ethos of the Hebrew Prophets'.⁸² Troeltsch argued that only an historical approach to religion (*eine religionsgeschichtliche Methode*) could generate serious investigation of the Israelite prophets. Troeltsch eschewed "a transcendental-rationalist" method, an unmistakable reference to Hermann Cohen's Marburg school of neo-Kantians.⁸³ Troeltsch's preferred strategy was to contextualise, or localise, the ethics of the prophets. Hence, he averred that "the ethics of the prophets is not the ethics of humanity, but rather of Israel (as reflected) in the undifferentiated unity of ethics, law, and morality that is particular to all ancient peoples." Challenging the image of the prophets as bearers of a universal message, Troeltsch rejected any equation between their ethical message and modern notions of "humanity and freedom or, less, democracy and socialism".⁸⁴ Israelite prophecy was born and bred in the rural ambience of ancient Palestine, far removed from the more sophisticated urban cultures of the day; it was in this rural context that "an oriental-religious messianic dream" was born.⁸⁵ And it was only by moving beyond this environment that Christianity was able to revive prophetism, leading to a "profundity and interiority of pure human feeling" unmatched by either Judaism or Islam.⁸⁶

When Troeltsch offered these remarks in 1916, he was immediately challenged by a member of the audience, Benzion Kellermann who was a liberal rabbi and neo-Kantian student of Cohen's. Kellermann tried to publish his critical response in the same journal, *Logos*, in which Troeltsch published his lecture, but was rebuffed. Undeterred, Kellermann came out with a seventy page rebuttal to Troeltsch in 1917 entitled *Der ethische Monotheismus der Propheten und seine soziologische Würdigung*.⁸⁷ Later in the same year, Hermann Cohen printed a brief reply to Troeltsch, '*Der Prophetismus und die Soziologie*', that summarised many of Kellermann's main points.

Despite its brevity, Cohen's retort bristles with scornful disdain. It commences with a strong indictment of contemporary historiography whose materialist tendencies reduce all cultural achievements to social and economic conditions, and in so doing, remain blind to the "pure spiritual forces" that guide history.⁸⁸ Troeltsch's essay on Israelite prophecy masquerades as sociology, a discipline which Cohen ranks higher on the methodological ladder than history. But even the sociological approach of Ernst Troeltsch comes up far short. It grasps the ethics of Israelite prophets merely as a function of a rural "peasant mentality". Troeltsch's attempt to contextualise the prophetic impulse transforms "the universalism of the (Israelite) God into the particularism of a tribal god". "With this," Cohen laments, "Judaism as a religion is destroyed."⁸⁹

⁸²Troeltsch, 'Das Ethos der hebräischen Propheten', *Logos*, 6 (1916/17), pp. 1-28.

⁸³Troeltsch, 'Das Ethos', p. 28. See Dietrich's discussion of the distinction between Troeltsch's Baden neo-Kantianism and Cohen's Marburg version in Dietrich, pp. 56-57.

⁸⁴Troeltsch, 'Das Ethos', pp. 15 and 18.

⁸⁵*ibid.*, pp. 24-25. See also Dietrich, pp. 38-39.

⁸⁶Troeltsch, 'Das Ethos', pp. 26 and 28.

⁸⁷Benzion Kellermann, *Der ethische Monotheismus der Propheten und seine soziologische Würdigung*, Berlin 1917.

⁸⁸Cohen, 'Der Prophetismus und die Soziologie', originally published in the *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte*, 22 (25 August 1917), and reprinted in *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 398.

⁸⁹*ibid.*, p. 399.

Cohen's outrage at the content of this lecture was matched by his outrage at the timing. How, in a time of rising antisemitism, could Troeltsch dare present such a flawed perspective on Israelite prophecy, which Cohen dismissively referred to as "supposed scholarship"?⁹⁰ Troeltsch had not only misunderstood the ethical mission of the prophets; he himself had violated, Cohen implied, the ethical mission of the scholar. But perhaps his gravest sin was that he had frustrated the ultimate act of reconciliation which Cohen hoped to effect between Jews and Protestants.

Hermann Cohen's vision of a Protestant Judaism did not survive much beyond his death in 1918. The succeeding Weimar period produced a wide range of particularist Jewish expressions that departed from Cohen's synthetic ideal. And the destruction of German Jewish culture during the Holocaust meant that no indigenous school of thought arose to perpetuate Cohen's thought. But we need not judge Cohen as naive or disloyal. Rather, we would do well to appreciate the sincerity of his conviction, the range of his erudition in diverse traditions, and the trying circumstances that fueled his desire for a Protestant Judaism. Above all, we should recall the predicament of this exceptional German-Jewish figure who was as unwilling to surrender his Jewish faith as he was to surrender the myth of a German-Jewish symbiosis.⁹¹ For it not only forces us to acknowledge the rich complexity of the processes tucked neatly into a facile term like assimilation,⁹² it also illumines, in appropriately nuanced fashion, the broader condition of modern Western Jews, ever straining to achieve a balance between the poles of particularism and universalism.*

⁹⁰*ibid.*, p. 400.

⁹¹Jacques Derrida suggests that "a ruptivity, a dissociative and irruptive power" always lurked beneath such an attempted synthesis, Derrida, p. 44.

⁹²For a brilliant, if underappreciated, complication of the term, see Gerson Cohen's 1966 commencement address at the Hebrew Teachers College, *The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History*, Brookline, MA 1966.

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