

## Article published in:

*Björn Siegel, Markus Krahl, Oskar Czendze (Eds.)*

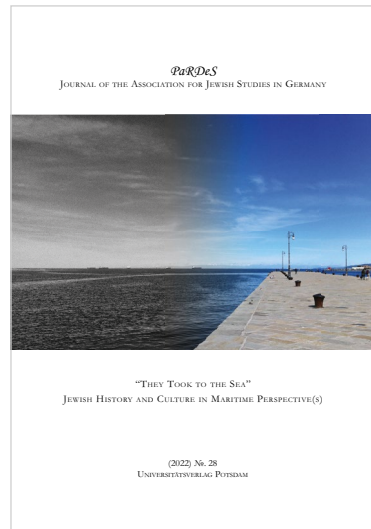
### **“They Took to the Sea”: Jewish History and Culture in Maritime Perspective(s)**

**PaRDeS : Journal of the Association for Jewish Studies in Germany, Vol. 28**

2023 – 153 pages

ISBN 978-3-86956-552-1

DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-57347>



#### Suggested citation:

Caroline Jessen: Kathrin Wittler, Morgenländischer Glanz: Eine deutsche jüdische Literaturgeschichte (1750 – 1850) (= Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 79) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 620 S., 99,00 €. PaRDeS 28 (2022), S. 128–131. DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-58589>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0

This does not apply to quoted content from other authors. To view a copy of this license visit: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

**Kathrin Wittler, *Morgenländischer Glanz: Eine deutsche jüdische Literaturgeschichte (1750–1850)* (= *Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts* 79) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 620 S., 99,00 €.**

A photograph from 1903, preserved at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem, shows the Darmstadt-born poet and translator Karl Wolfskehl, all dressed up, in a festive Arab costume, holding a massive book in his hands. When Else Lasker-Schüler, as Prince Jussuf, became acquainted with Wolfskehl in Munich some years later, she persistently addressed him as King Ramsenith. In their poetic correspondence, Lasker-Schüler marked their mutual Jewishness as being oriental and special: “Wann ziehe ich mit dir in den Krieg, holder König? Wir werden auf einem Elefanten sitzen [...]” (Else Lasker-Schüler, *Werke und Briefe. Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 6: *Briefe 1893–1913*, ed. by Ulrike Marquardt (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 2003), 224) Their kingdoms Gibon and Theben were not to be found on any contemporary map. The elaborate Orientalist imagery both Lasker-Schüler and Wolfskehl used in ‘real life’ and poetry expressed a persistent experience of Jewish particularity and alienation, in spite of the legal emancipation of Jews in Germany in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By calling Wolfskehl Ramsenith, Lasker-Schüler connected him to Heinrich Heine, whose poem “Rhampsenith” forms part of the *Romanzero* (1851), a volume of poetry featuring Heine’s *Hebräische Melodien* – a cycle of poems Lasker-Schüler connected to in 1913 by publishing her own poems under the title *Hebräische Balladen*.

Heine features prominently in Kathrin Wittler’s impressive study *Morgenländischer Glanz. Eine deutsche jüdische Literaturgeschichte (1750–1850)*. As this book reveals, the letters, literary texts, and portraits of Lasker-Schüler and Wolfskehl are merely late additions and continuations of a meaningful tradition of Jewish Orientalism dating back to a transformative and disruptive time in European Jewish history. Wittler’s study, published in 2019, explores Jewish Orientalism as a driving force in the literary field of the Enlightenment and so-called Biedermeier period – and as a phenomenon allowing us to discuss correlations of German and Jewish literary history from a new angle. The author examines how and why writers have related to the *Orient* to mark their writing as a formative part of a long-standing, multi-branched tradition of Jewish literature. Conceptualized as a “literary history”, Wittler’s study uses

the phenomenon of Orientalism as a hall of mirrors enabling her to discuss texts by authors as different as Heinrich Heine, Joel Jacoby, Fanny Lewald, Salomon Maimon, and Moses Mendelssohn – and to treat them as integral constituents of a larger discourse including non-Jewish scholars and writers such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Johann Gottfried Herder, or the Lutheran theologian and Hebraist Frantz Delitzsch.

This study of Jewish Orientalism is a complex undertaking: Wittler situates her dissertation, originally handed in at the Institute for German Literature at the Humboldt University in Berlin, between German Studies, Jewish Studies, and cultural studies of Orientalism. In her introduction, she sketches this triple field of reference as well as her topic's relevance as a background to understand current debates on the history of Orientalism and Colonialism. In this context, comments on the characteristics of German Orientalism before 1871 – its quintessentially literary character (“Morgenlandfahrten in der Poesie [...] und Morgenlandträume aus Texten”, p. 7), as opposed to British Imperialism – remain vague and leave room for debate, but they account for Wittler's decision to focus on literary texts.

Distancing herself from (monolingual) concepts of a German-Jewish literary history, a narrow modern canon of 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, essentialist ideas of Jewish literature, and a mere critique of Orientalist imagery, Wittler defines her approach as “gebrauchsgeschichtlich”. She focuses on agency, practices, self-positionings, situational and controversial references of writers to the shifting semantic field of the *Orient* (“Morgenland”, “Osten”, etc.). From this perspective (“Gebrauchsgeschichte statt Bilderkritik”, p. 12–14), the author shows that Orientalist framings of Jewish literature left ample room for creative and even contradictory messages. Literature turned into the one arena in which the intermediary role of Jews for West-Eastern transfers was actively and controversially discussed. Thus, Wittler strives to change a conversation that has often centered on non-Jewish Orientalist stereotypes of Jews and Jewish literature, by introducing her readers to an overwhelmingly rich and nuanced set of instruments – figurative speech, rhythmic qualities of language, quotations, allusions to biblical texts etc. – used by Jewish writers to create a distinct yet intermediary space for a Jewish literature vis à vis new concepts of history and national literature – and to define Jewish tradition in the age of emancipation:

“Der literarische Orientalismus dient [...] als ein Instrument, um die vielbeschwo-rene *Entfremdung* von der jüdischen Tradition als eine gezielte *Verfremdung* zu gestalten, durch die überhaupt erst eine ‘jüdische Tradition’ als solche greifbar – und attraktiv gemacht werden kann.” (p. 28)

*Morgenländischer Glanz* contains four main chapters featuring studies of individual literary texts, framed by an introduction (ch. 1) and a brief conclusion (ch. 6). While these four chapters are structured chronologically, each of them focuses on one specific aspect. Chapter 2 explores ideas of “Hebrew poetry” and the impact of new models of antiquity (Herder etc.) as a key to understand the changing standing of modern Jewish literature. Chapter 3 focuses on figures of speech and Orientalist literary symbols. This chapter is especially worth reading because of its approach to the rich fundus of a metaphorical language drawn from flora and gardening to express aspects of geographical, literary, and cultural transfer, dispersion. Chapter 4 explores references to psalm 137 (“By the rivers of Babylon – / there we sat down and there we wept / when we remembered Zion. [...]”) across literary media and art in order to show why this one psalm was used as a medium to discuss the possibility of Jewish writing. Chapter 5 follows up on West-Eastern symbolism and focuses on one single poem, Heinrich Heine’s “Fichtenbaum und Palme”, including its various publishing contexts and usages. This unorthodox decision underlines the poem’s extraordinary role and formative function in the context of Wittler’s study as well as for modern poetry in general.

Wittler gains her most convincing arguments from nuanced readings of relatively unknown (bilingual) literary texts such as Salomon Jacob Cohen’s “An die Muse” (אל הגיורן) from his book of poetry *Morgenländische Pflanzen auf nördlichem Boden* (1807). The author’s ability to present and use her readings to connect dispersed writings by Jewish and non-Jewish writers to a larger nexus of a German Jewish literary history is striking. She covers and organizes a wide array of literary texts, Jewish as well as non-Jewish, German as well as Hebrew, canonical as well as obscure. Against this background, some of her stylistic decisions seem odd. Wittler’s style is compact, dense, elegant, and concrete; and yet, she seems to have felt a need to explicate each step of her approach by referring to an inevitably limited set of phrases (“ich zeige”, “ich werde herausarbeiten” etc.). Contrary to their rhetorical function, these repetitive phrases suggest a distrust of the author in the obvious explanatory

---

power and coherence of her work. Maybe this style as well as some ostentatiously dismissive references to earlier research form part of academic convention; but they are soft spots detracting from the study's overall aplomb: Wittler reveals and discusses a widely under-researched corpus of literary texts. She frames her original approach as a literary history but covers, in fact, far more ground – including contemporary historical and philosophical texts as well as works of art, architecture and, parenthetically, notions of habitus and individual performance – and thus explores transgressive creative literary dynamics of Jewish Orientalism.

*Caroline Jessen, Leipzig*