

# Gershom Scholem's Critical Appropriation of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the Necessary Fiction of Historical Objectivity

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## Abstract

Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) portrayed modern Zionist historical scholarship as both a rejection and a corrective fulfillment of earlier eras of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Through attacks on his scholarly predecessors, Scholem detailed his vision for the potential of this renaissance of *Wissenschaft* to entail both objective research and a commitment to treating Judaism as a “living organism,” an approach that would ultimately ensure the scholarship could deliver value to the Jewish community. This article will explore the tensions that arise from Scholem's commitments, his occasional admissions of these tensions, and his attempts to overcome them.

## 1. Introduction

“The creation of a completely new image of our history in the broadest sense of the word – that is the task imposed upon the Science of Judaism during the generation of the renaissance.”<sup>1</sup> The monumental challenge that Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) identified as facing contemporary Jewish scholarship was not only to produce a rigorous and vital body of historical research, but also to productively appropriate the flawed heritage of the scholarly movement at its origin, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Scholem's presentation of the new mode of scholarship as both in opposition to and in continuity with earlier *Wissenschaft* portrayed the new scholarship as a corrective fulfillment of *Wissenschaft* potential. This article will explore

<sup>1</sup> Gershom Scholem: Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies, in: Gershom Scholem/Avraham Shapira (eds.), *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Time and Other Essays*, Philadelphia 1997, p. 67.

how Scholem elucidates the nature of this new chapter of *Wissenschaft* via his sharply critical attacks on its prior incarnations, which served as rhetorical counterpoints for his optimistic vision. For Scholem, the new *Wissenschaft* was to entail both objective scholarship and a commitment and ability to regard Judaism as a “living organism.” Tensions emerge between these two claims, which Scholem’s critics illustrated. Exploring these tensions and the degree of Scholem’s acknowledgement of them, this article will also consider Scholem’s attempt to maintain his ambitions for the new *Wissenschaft* to be objective, by theorizing distinctions between the scholar, teacher and audience.

## 2. Survey of Scholem’s Criticism of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*

Attacks on *Wissenschaft des Judentums* pepper Scholem’s work; however, the two most extensive articulations of his criticism are found in the 1944 article “Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies,” published in Hebrew in the Ha-Aretz newspaper for a public audience, and the 1959 lecture “The Science of Judaism – Then and Now,” delivered in English to a Jewish audience at the London Leo Baeck Institute.

“Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies” divides the history of *Wissenschaft* into three periods. The first is that of early *Wissenschaft* scholars, particularly Leopold Zunz and Moritz Steinschneider, whom Scholem praises for their scholarly rigor, despite criticizing aspects of their research. Scholem consistently names these scholars when he cites examples of productive methodology and research in early *Wissenschaft*.<sup>2</sup> The second and most harshly attacked period includes scholars such as Abraham Geiger and Heinrich Graetz, whose work Scholem regularly invokes as a polemical counter-example to his own research methods. The third period of *Wissenschaft* was centered in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where Scholem worked. Although it doesn’t escape criticism, Scholem portrays this new chapter as fulfillment of the discipline’s potential and the ambitions of the first *Wissenschaft* scholars, as well

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Dan describes the “great esteem” Scholem held for Steinschneider’s work and how he identified with him academically. Joseph Dan: Gershom Scholem. Between History and Historiosophy, Jerusalem 1985, p. 74.

as a corrective to the pervasive failings of the apologetic middle period of *Wissenschaft* in particular.

Scholem's criticism of *Wissenschaft* crystallizes around two main poles: the apologetic and ideological compromises to its scholarly integrity and objectivity, and its failure to apprehend Judaism as a living organism and consequent neglect of the vitality of chapters of its history. In his criticism of the early period of *Wissenschaft*, Scholem charges Zunz and Steinschneider primarily with the second failing, characterizing their work in macabre language as "a kind of procession around the dead," and a cold "embalming" of historical facts, invoking one of his favorite quotes from Steinschneider that their task was merely to give Judaism a "decent burial."<sup>3</sup> Despite calling Steinschneider and Zunz "demonic figures" for the coldness with which they carried out this task, Scholem deems them as in possession of "the full measure of that spiritual asceticism which is demanded of the ideal scholar," and recognizes their work as a pinnacle of *Wissenschaft's* detached objective research.<sup>4</sup>

Scholem also criticizes this first generation for a failing he deems characteristic of all historic *Wissenschaft*, the intrusion of political ideologies that compromised the scientific value of the research. He suggests that the scholars' claims to be producing disinterested "pure and objective science" were naïve if not disingenuous, in light of the "blatant political aim" that for many the discipline served in the struggle for Jewish equal rights.<sup>5</sup> Despite his general denigration of the impact of European ideologies upon *Wissenschaft*, Scholem also curiously laments the influence of romantic ideology, not for being incompatible with objective research, but rather for having been applied

<sup>3</sup> Brenner suggests that Scholem's "eerie" choice to use such violent imagery of death was influenced by the increasing contemporary reports of the mass killings in Europe. Michael Brenner: *Prophets of the Past. Interpreters of Jewish History*, Princeton 2010, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Brenner notes, for example, how in "Über den Begriff einer Wissenschaft des Judentums," Immanuel Wolf claimed both that "Wissenschaft des Judentums...deals with its object in and for itself, for its own sake, not to some special end, or out of a specific intention," and that the discipline's goal was to produce knowledge that would serve the battle for civil rights, saying "scholarly knowledge of Judaism must decide regarding the Jews' worthiness or unworthiness, their ability or inability, to have the same respects and rights as other citizens." Brenner, *Prophets of the Past*, pp. 29–30. As Michael Meyer notes, Zunz's apologetic and ideological commitments also colored his scholarship, from predicating Jewish political emancipation upon the emancipation of Jewish *Wissenschaft*, to seeking the acceptance of Jewish *Wissenschaft* within broader European *Geisteswissenschaften*. Michael Meyer: *Two Persistent Tensions Within Wissenschaft des Judentums*, in: *Modern Jewish Studies*, 24 (2002) 2, p. 112.

in an unproductive manner. Defining Romanticism's tendencies as elevating the past and focusing upon the *Volk*, he suggests that whilst it "might have been good had it been directed toward the building of the Jewish nation," it was instead destructive, as Jewish scholars internalized the "anti-Jewish" tendencies of German Romantic scholarship. These tendencies were manifested in *Wissenschaft's* distortion of Jewish history to present an idealized picture of Judaism. Scholem suggests the one exception to this negative manifestation of romantic ideology was Zunz's original program, which aimed to elevate the Jewish past and *Volk*, but was "never executed," as it was incompatible with the scholarly climate amongst his contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> In this assessment and his later claim for Zionist *Wissenschaft* to fulfill this original program, Scholem reveals an affiliation with certain aspects of romantic ideologically motivated scholarship, which stands in tension with his overall rejection of European ideologies as inhibiting objective *Wissenschaft*. This affiliation nevertheless speaks to the second pole of his ambitions for the new scholarship: to achieve what earlier research failed to do, to treat Jewish history as a living whole.

As Scholem turns to discuss the second period of *Wissenschaft*, his criticism intensifies, particularly regarding the destructive romantic influence, which had now developed into a "morose sentimentality" and tendency to spiritualize the past. For Scholem, this second period's particularly strong desire to make Judaism palatable to nineteenth-century European values undermined any possibility of inquiry that was either objective or sensitive to Judaism's holistic vitality:

"I do not believe that it would be an exaggeration to say that over the course of fifty years (1850–1900) there did not emerge from this circle so much as one authentic, living, non-petrified word concerning Jewish religion, one which did not stink of the rot of artificiality in its bones and which was not chewed up by the worm of apologetics."<sup>7</sup>

The romantic sentimentality of this "generation of gushers" was paired with the destructive influence of enlightenment thought, which motivated scholars to portray Judaism as exemplifying "the doctrine of progress," and as the product of a neat historical line of development.<sup>8</sup> "Irrational" and "demon-

<sup>6</sup> Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, pp. 59; 64.

ic" chapters from Judaism's past that delivered no apologetic value, such as mysticism and Sabbatianism, were thus removed in what ultimately became a "sentimental and idyllic dismantling" of Jewish history.<sup>9</sup> Only a totally new perspective could provide the basis for a constructive reappraisal of the Jewish past.

Shifting to the first person plural, Scholem credits the "national movement" with bringing this much-needed reorientation to *Wissenschaft*, as distorting external perspectives and ideologies could finally be cast off in order to afford an authentically Jewish point of view; to "see from within." Naming their task as "the creation of a completely new image of our history," Scholem suggests that the "living flow" could be restored to sources to reveal their vitality, and previously neglected chapters of Jewish past could be productively engaged. Placing the discipline in sharp contrast to previous generations' "castration of the truth," Scholem presents the full-scale reevaluation of the past that this new perspective demanded as "the dismantling of the dismantling."<sup>10</sup>

Scholem's trifold structure of the history of *Wissenschaft* places the new Zionist mode in continuity with the earlier chapters of the discipline. Although many earlier practices were to be rejected, certain tendencies were to be retained, such as the intellectual rigor of Zunz and Steinschneider. However, where they applied their scientific methods towards a destructive and desiccating mode of scholarship, the new generation of scholars was to use these methods at the service of "construction and affirmation." With this new perspective and attitude, the smallest historical details could finally be revealed as sources of "turbulent vitality" for the Jewish people. Scholem's program for such affirmation of the past reflects his desire to finally unleash the positive potential of German Romanticism when paired with rigorous scientific methods. For Scholem, this new *Wissenschaft* would be a "necessary surgery" to remove "the cancer from within the living body of the Science of Judaism."<sup>11</sup> Although he suggests that the new scholarship had not yet ascended to this great task, and still suffered shortcomings inherited from earlier generations, he remains optimistic about the potential of *Wissenschaft* when properly and purely executed.

<sup>9</sup> Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, pp. 63–65.

<sup>10</sup> Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, p. 69.

The first striking difference between this article and Scholem's later lecture "The Science of Judaism – Then and Now," is the far more positive and generous appraisal the lecture gives to earlier *Wissenschaft*. Although Scholem still criticizes the tendency of earlier scholars to "censor" the past and idealize Judaism, he forgivingly accounts for many cases as a necessary side effect of the important political functions that the scholarship served. The essential struggle for equal rights "forced the Jews to select certain themes," a coloring of the past that Scholem not only justifies but names as "a great achievement" in light of its successes.<sup>12</sup> However, whilst this work had served a valuable function, neither its methods nor the image of the past it bequeathed were now relevant. The new unapologetic Zionist scholarship did not share the earlier generations' motivation of "pleasing rationally inclined Gentiles."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Scholem does not portray his generation's scholarship in such a stark contrast to that of their predecessors as he had in his earlier essay. The continuity he invokes is more extensive than recommencing the intellectual rigor of Zunz and Steinschneider, suggesting rather an intergenerational collaborative effort to construct a picture of Jewish history. The challenge described in this lecture as facing Scholem's generation was less a full-scale reconstruction, than a building upon and correction of the work of earlier scholars, to repair the picture of Jewish history by restoring what earlier "naturally and quite understandably fell victim to self-censorship."<sup>14</sup>

Ephraim Urbach suggests that the contrast in tone between these pieces is due to Scholem having first overstated his criticism, before later using his more moderate lecture to characteristically self-correct.<sup>15</sup> David Myers considers Scholem's early tendency towards sharp polemics against his scholarly predecessors to reveal a "recurrent psychological dynamic." Citing Scholem's first lecture at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1925 on the authorship of the *Zohar*, which was structured as a refutation of Graetz's claim that it was written by the thirteenth-century rabbi Moses de Leon, Myers suggests that the compulsion to undermine the scholarship of earlier generations reflects

<sup>12</sup> Gershom Scholem: *The Science of Judaism – Then and Now*, in: Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, New York 1995, p. 308.

<sup>13</sup> Scholem, *The Science of Judaism*, p. 309.

<sup>14</sup> Scholem, *The Science of Judaism*, p. 309.

<sup>15</sup> Ephraim Urbach: *Gershom Scholem and Judaic Studies*, in: Paul Mendes-Flohr (ed.), *Gershom Scholem. The Man and his Work*, Albany 1994, p. 32.

Scholem's tendency towards "filial rebellion."<sup>16</sup> On Scholem's comments thirteen years later that he had come to accept Graetz's conviction that Moses de Leon was in fact the author, Myers suggests that this subsiding of the "Oedipal dynamic" could be "part of a complex process of scholarly maturation by which Scholem grew more confident in his academic surroundings and thus more willing to endorse the views of his scorned predecessors."<sup>17</sup>

However, Scholem's use of nineteenth-century scholars as rhetorical counterpoints to his own research was not limited to his early years, and therefore cannot be explained away as a sign of scholarly immaturity. Much like he did in his first lecture at the Hebrew University at the age of 28, in his mid-sixties Scholem began his book *Origins of the Kabbalah* by repeatedly and emphatically setting out his methods in direct contrast to those of Graetz and David Neumark. Whilst he may have come to accept Graetz's conviction on the *Zohar's* author, decades later he was still at pains to reject his general approach and the grounds for any correct conclusions he happened to have reached. The book opens with a summary of Graetz's and Neumark's conceptions of the Kabbalah, which Scholem immediately points out, are "so utterly different in both principle and method from those presented in this book."<sup>18</sup> He attacks Graetz's and Neumark's scholarly integrity and research into Kabbalah, slighting their arguments as "intuitive" and based on weak foundations, citing as an example Neumark's "inconceivable naïveté" in failing to undertake the necessary philological groundwork on the dating of texts. Such polemically emphatic articulations show that Scholem did not grow out of his desire to strongly distance himself from certain previous *Wissenschaft* figures.

A more compelling explanation for the differences between "Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies" and "On the Science of Judaism – Then and Now" is the difference in the social settings of their delivery. Scholem explicitly reflects on this in a 1978 interview, suggesting that only the "uninitiated" confuse the two pieces. "Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies" was written for an audience capable of thinking more critically than the London "bourgeois" Jews to whom Scholem addressed his later lecture. Suggesting that this audience

<sup>16</sup> David Myers: *Re-inventing the Jewish Past. European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History*, Oxford 1995, p. 161.

<sup>17</sup> Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past*, p. 161.

<sup>18</sup> Gershom Scholem/Raphael Zwi Werblowsky (eds.): *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Philadelphia, 1997, p. 7.

would not have been able to take the severity of critique he had launched against the *Wissenschaft* scholars in the “linguistic rage” of his former, “in part, untranslatable” Hebrew article, he says that he “deeply regrets” having had to adapt his ideas “for the Philistines.”<sup>19</sup> Avraham Shapira suggests that the contexts fully explain the difference between the two pieces, warning against seeing Scholem’s underlying opinion as having changed. Shapira cites a conversation in which Scholem illustrated his reluctance to allow the later lecture to be published by describing it as “watery.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Shapira deems the lecture as worthy of consideration, suggesting that it offers a rare example of the two levels of Scholem’s evaluation of scholarship being brought together: the rigorous critical first level of philological inquiry, and the second synthetic level of drawing meaning from this foundation.

Particularly given Scholem’s description of the article as in a “linguistic rage” and the lecture as “watery,” it seems productive to treat neither as an absolute expression of Scholem’s core position, but to consider both as part of the spectrum of Scholem’s responses to *Wissenschaft*, which incorporated both searing polemics that distanced his work from earlier *Wissenschaft*, and appraisals of the potential and select achievements of the discipline, which his work continued and fulfilled. Scholem displays this spectrum even within individual works. Calling to mind the implication that any correct conclusions Graetz reached were in spite of himself, in 1937 Scholem stated that early *Wissenschaft* scholars were “often enough [...] in the right, though not for the reasons they themselves gave.”<sup>21</sup> He shortly continued, “we should be thankful to those zealous early critics who, though their judgment and sense of values may have been affected and warped by their prejudices, nevertheless had their eyes open to see certain important things with great distinctness.”<sup>22</sup> In 1970 Scholem similarly followed a sharp criticism of the failures of *Wissenschaft* with an admission of the “enormous amount of plodding, meticulous work”

<sup>19</sup> Gershom Scholem/Jean Bollack/Pierre Bourdieu: L’identité juive. Entretiens avec Gershom Scholem, in: Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, 35 (1980), p.4. Translated by: Joel Swanson.

<sup>20</sup> Avraham Shapira: The Symbolic Plane and its Secularization in the Spiritual World of Gershom Scholem, in: Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 3 (1994), p.344.

<sup>21</sup> This formation is repeated almost verbatim in the opening remarks of the first lecture in: Gershom Scholem: Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, New York 1954, p.2.

<sup>22</sup> Gerhard [Gershom] Scholem: Kabbala at the Hebrew University, in: The Reconstructionist, 10 (1937) 3, p. 10.



of earlier scholars, from which current scholars profit, “despite the altered perspective from which historical developments are viewed.”<sup>23</sup>

By deeming aspects of prior *Wissenschaft* as of enduring value, Scholem validated the outputs of methods he deemed productive, and justified recommending or continuing them, supporting his presentation of his own research as building upon the better parts of earlier *Wissenschaft*. Furthermore, as Shapira argues, despite its reserved tone, the lecture offers a particularly useful glimpse into Scholem’s evaluation of good scholarship on a level beyond pure philological rigor. Fleshing out his earlier hint about Zunz’s “never executed” plan to channel romantic ideals towards the elevation of the Jewish past and people, Scholem here defines this “splendid plan” as to develop a “grand, youthful program for a genuine folklore of the Jews which, in his view, embraced everything that is part of a living organism.”<sup>24</sup> Scholem suggests that unlike his contemporaries, Zunz alone took “the great representatives of German romanticism” who were “emotionally attached to the living people” as his role models.<sup>25</sup> Whilst Zunz’s plan was unsurprisingly ignored in the following generations, Scholem asserts that this plan had at last been “seized upon in earnest,” by Zionist scholars. In conjunction with rigorous scholarly method, this “genuine folklore” was not to be a speculative or intuitive historical fable, but rather a history of the *Volk* that only a living connection with history could deliver.

Scholem’s careful distinction between productive and genuine folklore and disingenuous, apologetic or ideologically colored historical “constructions” that were incompatible with objective analysis is anticipated in “Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies.” His characterization of Zunz and Steinschneider as possessing the qualities of the “ideal scholar” is swiftly followed by his arch characterization of Geiger and Graetz as typifying the characteristics of the “great historian,” in an articulation that is shocking even for Scholem:

“[Geiger’s] talent for refining and purifying is impressive, and he has that sovereign ability, which makes for the great historian, to rape the facts for the sake of his construction, and to clarify the contexts through historical intuition, a dangerous and creative power possessed also by Graetz – and one completely lacking in Zunz and Steinschneider.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Leo Baeck Institute (ed.): *Perspectives of German-Jewish History in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Jerusalem 1971, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> Scholem, *The Science of Judaism*, p. 306.

<sup>25</sup> Scholem, *The Science of Judaism*, p. 306–307.

<sup>26</sup> Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, p. 60.

The dangers of “historical intuition” recall Scholem’s rejection of the methods of Graetz and Neumark in *Origins of the Kabbalah*. Aligning himself with the earlier *Wissenschaft* ambitions and rigor, throughout multiple lectures and essays Scholem defines the new Zionist *Wissenschaft* as seeking to objectively treat the whole of Jewish history, including restoring to consideration chapters such as mysticism, with an attentiveness to its vitality that only a quasi-romantic attitude could generate.

### 3. Critical Reception of Scholem’s Presentation of *Wissenschaft*

David Biale defines his well-known categorization of Scholem’s “counter-historical” method of inquiry with reference to Scholem’s relationship to his predecessors, as “unearthing the ‘hidden virtue’ from *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.”<sup>27</sup> Examples abound of Scholem presenting his mode of scholarship as redeeming the potential of the work of early *Wissenschaft* figures such as Zunz. For Biale, Scholem’s “dialectical appropriation of the past” was underwritten by his belief that “true history lies in a subterranean tradition that must be brought to light.”<sup>28</sup> Steven Wasserstrom similarly suggests that Scholem’s work contains counter-historical qualities, which imply “a study into some secret inside historical time.” He suggests that Scholem and his Eranos conference colleagues offer a “metahistorical hint – *that they know more than they are historically saying*.” For Wasserstrom, they could only intimate this “*real* knowledge,” as their scholarly approaches demanded studying religious history from an “insurmountable distance.”<sup>29</sup> However, on multiple occasions Scholem more than intimates that his work approaches such “*real* knowledge.” In “Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies,” the climactic description of Zionist *Wissenschaft*’s ability to seek hidden life in the Jewish past is termed as offering an insight into “true being”:

“The new slogan was: to see from within, to go from the center to the periphery without hesitation and without looking over one’s shoulder! To rebuild the entire structure of knowledge in terms of the historical experience of the Jew who lives

<sup>27</sup> David Biale: Gershom Scholem. *Kabbalah and Counter-history*, Cambridge MA 1982, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Biale, Scholem. *Kabbalah and Counter-history*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Wasserstrom: *Religion After Religion*. Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos, Princeton 1999, p. 160, emphasis in the original.

among his own people and has no other accounts to make than the perception of the problems, the events and the thoughts according to their true being, in the framework of their historical function within the people.”<sup>30</sup>

This is a passage that several scholars have engaged in support of their theses that Scholem was promoting a historiography in the mode of Ranke. Michael Brenner suggests that it demonstrates how, “like the great Ranke, Scholem implicitly endorsed the belief that historians could depict events and ideas as they really were.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, David Myers suggests that this passage reflects Scholem’s desire to “realize the objective potential of science.” Whereas in the Jonathan Chipman translation cited above, the motivation of the new *Wissenschaft* scholar is rendered as to seek “the perception of the problems, the events and the thoughts according to their true being, in the framework of their historical function within the people,” Myers supports his argument by offering an alternative translation that instead reads, “to see problems, events, and ideas as they actually were.”<sup>32</sup> By leaving out Scholem’s subsequent important qualification of the framework of reference for understanding historical data, Myers awards the phrase denoting their significance (“אמיתות הוייתם”) an absolute status that is absent in the Hebrew. In this passage Scholem in fact tasks *Wissenschaft* with investigating historical data, not from an absolutely objective or non-situated perspective, but rather by their significance, or “true being,” in relation to a specific social and ideological framework.

This debate on the relationship between Scholem’s claims to objectivity and the compromising intrusion of his own ideological positions goes to the heart of much critical discourse on Scholem’s work. Early critics such as Baruch Kurzweil, a professor of Hebrew literature at Bar-Ilan University and literary critic, argued that Scholem’s Zionist ideology and opposition to normative conceptions of Judaism was incompatible with his claims to scholarly objectivity.<sup>33</sup> Eliezer Schweid similarly suggested that Scholem’s commitment to “religious anarchy” and the multiple possible incarnations

<sup>30</sup> Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, p. 66 [translated by Jonathan Chipman].

<sup>31</sup> Brenner, *Prophets of the Past*, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> David Myers: *The Scholem-Kurzweil Debate and Modern Jewish Historiography*, in: *Modern Judaism*, 6 (1986) 3, p. 268. The Hebrew original is as follows, Gershom Scholem: *Devarim be-go. Pirke morashah u-tehiyah*, Tel Aviv 1976, p. 398. “לבנות מחדש את כל בנין המדע לאור הנסיון. במסגרת של תפקידם ההיסטורי באומה.”

<sup>33</sup> See Myers, *The Scholem-Kurzweil Debate*.

of Judaism it sanctioned reflected his “typical nationalist-zionist perspective,” through which he tried to undermine the dogmatic definitions of Judaism that *Wissenschaft* and idealistic nineteenth-century Jewish philosophy offered, as well as Orthodoxy’s notion of orthopraxis.<sup>34</sup> Characterizing Scholem’s work as an attempt to find “a scientific, historical-philological confirmation for his original premise,” Schweid defines this “intuitive” a priori premise as “almost a central article of faith, that mysticism entailed the essence of Judaism and source of its ability to renew.”<sup>35</sup> Joseph Dan responded with a passionate defense of his teacher, deeming Schweid’s “historiosophical” characterization of Scholem incorrect. He argued that the only fitting description of Scholem was as an objective “historian,” as Scholem had consistently and “determinedly enforced the principles of ‘pure’ scientific scholarship, of an impersonal academic approach, the objective veracity of research results and the possibility of measuring them with exact scientific and philological tools.”<sup>36</sup> Dan argued that Scholem’s conclusions were based only on the material before him and the rules of philology, rejecting Schweid’s suggestion that Scholem’s research was motivated by confirming a priori ideological commitments. Dan defined the historian Scholem as a “student and perpetuator” of his *Wissenschaft* predecessors, who criticized them only regarding instances where they failed to meet their own scientific standards, like in their treatment of Jewish mysticism.<sup>37</sup>

Whilst Dan’s comments may usefully delineate the grounds for Scholem’s criticisms of *Wissenschaft* scholars for failing to undertake rigorous objective inquiry, they do not account for his second mode of criticism, regarding the vital living dynamic of Judaism that even Zunz and Steinschneider’s precise scholarship could not capture. Furthermore, Dan does not address the degree to which Schweid’s characterization of Scholem’s intuitive grasp of the importance of Jewish mysticism accords with some of Scholem’s self-descriptions,

<sup>34</sup> Eliezer Schweid: Judaism and Mysticism according to Gershom Scholem. A Critical Analysis and Programmatic Discussion, Atlanta 1985, pp. 78–79. On Scholem’s notion of “religious anarchy,” a non-normative commitment to the validity of multiple expressions of Judaism, cf.: Gershom Scholem: Reflections on the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Time, in: Scholem, On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism, p. 16. See also Gershom Scholem: What is Judaism?, in: Scholem, On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism.

<sup>35</sup> Schweid, Judaism and Mysticism according to Gershom Scholem, pp. 33–34.

<sup>36</sup> Dan, Gershom Scholem. Between History and Historiosophy, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Dan, Gershom Scholem. Between History and Historiosophy, p. 55.

such as in his famous letter to the publisher Salman Schocken. This letter declared its intention to share “a candid word” on Scholem’s “true intentions in studying the Kabbalah.”<sup>38</sup> Admitting that he held an “intuitive affirmation” of the “mystical theses” in the Kabbalah, Scholem says that he did not enter the field of study “with the intention of writing the history of Kabbalah, but rather its metaphysics.” To seek the “higher level” that he believed to lie within Kabbalah, Scholem awards himself the necessary task of cultivating “the daring to penetrate beyond the symbolic plane and to break through the wall of history.” He continues, “it may, of course, be that fundamentally history is no more than an illusion. However, without this illusion it is impossible to penetrate through temporal reality to the essence of the things themselves.”<sup>39</sup>

This reference to the “essence of the things themselves” is a remarkable but not isolated articulation. In the same year, Scholem wrote the article “Kabbala at the Hebrew University,” which once again delineates Scholem’s dual aspirations for the new *Wissenschaft* to be objective and vital, in critical contrast to earlier periods, defining “one of the main functions” of the Jewish Studies department at the Hebrew University as “the formulation of a new approach to Jewish history, based on an attempt to view that history objectively and as a whole.” Offering a further example of the second of the elusive “two levels” that Shapira sees as so key to Scholem’s work, Scholem speaks of the “interpretation” of historical data, which the new *Wissenschaft* sponsored:

“The new approach to Jewish history affects not only the elucidation of historical facts in the narrower sense of the word; it equally changes the interpretation of the spiritual elements which have directly influenced those facts, namely, the development of Jewish thought and faith, philosophy and religious history.”<sup>40</sup>

Scholem continues, defining the task of the Hebrew University scholars as “to estimate the true value” of the historical periods they considered.<sup>41</sup> He argues that this “true value” was not attainable by the unscientific scholarship of his *Wissenschaft* predecessors. Similarly, the allusion to the “essence of things themselves” in the letter to Schocken is deemed as having been

<sup>38</sup> Gershom Scholem: A Candid Letter About My True Intentions in Studying Kabbalah, in: Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism*, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Scholem, *A Candid Letter*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>40</sup> Scholem, *Kabbala at the Hebrew University*, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Scholem, *Kabbala at the Hebrew University*, p. 9.

unattainable for earlier *Wissenschaft*, as Scholem shares his hope that rigorous historical research would now allow truth to not only break through the illusory mists of history, but “from what is called development.” This refers to the Enlightenment ideology of progress that motivated nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft*. In both cases Scholem illustrates his mode of “objective” scholarship as the necessary foundation to sponsor access to this secondary level of significance.

The passage considered from “Reflections on Modern Jewish Studies” that defines the “true being” of historical phenomena as determined by the social and ideological framework of the Jewish society to which it pertains, rather than in any Rankean detached objective sense, gives a clue to the nature of the ultimate significance of historical research for Scholem. The notion of a situated relationship between the scholarly community and historical material is also developed in “The Science of Judaism – Then and Now,” which suggests that by relinquishing apologetic approaches and theological definitions, Scholem’s generation of scholars could finally enter into a “living relationship” with the full array of Jewish sources, which “no longer sent their rays outward but, as it were, radiated only into themselves.”<sup>42</sup> The notion of a “living relationship” is essential to Scholem’s vision for the impact of historical scholarship on both its producers and consumers, although he does not yet describe what exactly these hidden rays were to illuminate, now that there was a chance that they could be seen.

These sources each negotiate the two poles of Scholem’s criteria for productive scholarship, which motivate both his criticisms of *Wissenschaft* and his manifesto for productive Zionist scholarship – objective philological groundwork, and an affirmation of the living spirit of Judaism, which the historian was to both recognize and reveal. This duality in Scholem’s presentation of historiography leads scholars like Schweid to dismiss Scholem’s calls for objectivity as insincere. Scholem’s affirmation of values that he deems characteristic of romantic ideology certainly stands in tension with his calls for the rejection of distorting ideologies. Yet, it is important to note that on occasion Scholem alludes to and even acknowledges the tensions within his approach. This article will conclude with a discussion of several occasions of Scholem’s reflection upon the non-objective qualities of his

<sup>42</sup> Scholem, *The Science of Judaism*, p. 307.

scholarship, before considering a mechanism he engages to project these implications out of the realm of the scholar and into the domain of the audience and community.

#### 4. Scholem's Admissions and Projections of Subjectivity

Scholem generally claims to undertake objective historical research, particularly in contrast to earlier *Wissenschaft*. In the introduction to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, for example, he claims that his overarching view on the history of Jewish mysticism was born from his philological "spadework," an articulation that satisfies Dan's characterization of Scholem's conclusions as not historiosophically motivated but sponsored only by the material before him.<sup>43</sup> Occasionally, however, Scholem explicitly alludes to certain choices he made that were not derived from philological analysis, particularly in his perhaps more spontaneous oral contributions at conferences. At a 1970 Leo Baeck Institute conference, during a symposium on the impact of German *Wissenschaft* upon modern research in which Urbach noted Scholem's criticisms of historic *Wissenschaft* and ambitions for "purely scientific" scholarship, Scholem advocated Zionist *Wissenschaft* as engendering a new critical turn to treating Judaism as a "living body." He continues:

"The issue whether Jewish history should be regarded as a single whole or not has not been finally resolved to this day. It is still a moot point whether all Jewish history is subject to the same determinant dynamics or is merely a collection of different fragments of episodes, each explicable by specific circumstances of general history. From our understanding and personal experience we are rather inclined to the holistic view."<sup>44</sup>

This presents the development of Scholem's view of Jewish history in a way that strongly differs from his articulation in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Rather than being a product of philological analysis, it is here described as motivated by an inclination born of personal "understanding" and "experience." Giving examples of factors that would inform such inclinations, Scholem states, "the work of scholars is essentially based on living contemporary experience," before reflecting that "the two outstanding events of our

<sup>43</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. xxv.

<sup>44</sup> Leo Baeck Institute, *Perspectives of German-Jewish History*, p. 43.

period, the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, will no doubt have tremendous effect on scientific developments.” The impact upon research “carried out against the background of this experience” would “become apparent only in the future.”<sup>45</sup>

Several years later, following a presentation on the philosophy of history by Paul Ricoeur at a 1974 conference at the Hebrew University, Scholem similarly admitted to holding certain positions and making choices, which colored his scholarship. He describes the subjective and naturally biased processes by which historians deem facts to be historically significant: “what the historian will call an event, which he sees as a member in the chain of history, or in the process of history, depends on what ideas implicitly – even if he doesn’t want to speak out about it – he has about the aim or meaning of that process.”<sup>46</sup> Quoting Isaiah Berlin’s assertion that reconstructing the past is necessary but not enough, Scholem acknowledges that “philosophical prestructures” govern every historian’s decisions and intuitions about the “character of history.” He reflects with candor on his own choices, namely to see Jewish history as a living process rather than something defined by dogmatic formulas, and to focus on previously neglected chapters of Jewish history.<sup>47</sup> By Scholem’s admission, these “prestructures” would inform the selection, ordering and implied causal relationship of the data within his historical narratives.<sup>48</sup>

What Scholem here admits to is far more pervasive than what Robert Alter describes as Scholem’s “large imaginative interpretations of the texts he invokes and of their relation to their sundry historical settings.”<sup>49</sup> More than mere interpretation of historical material, Scholem’s notion of “philosophical prestructures” reflects the fundamental act of forming a historical narrative, akin to Hayden White’s theory. White characterizes all narratives as requiring an organizational principle or order of meaning that bestows the elements of

<sup>45</sup> Leo Baeck Institute, *Perspectives of German-Jewish History*, p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> Gershom Scholem: *On History and Philosophy of History*, in: *Naharaim*, 5 (2011), p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Scholem, *On History and Philosophy of History*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>48</sup> Yaacob Dweck’s introduction to the 2016 edition of Scholem’s *Sabbatai Sevi* offers an example of the impacts of Scholem’s choices upon his historical account of the Sabbatian movement, from the pervasive commitment to seeing all developments in Jewish history as immanent, to his characterization of Sevi as mentally ill. (Yaacob Dweck: *Introduction to the New Princeton Classics Edition*, in: Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi. The Mystical Messiah 1626–1676*, Princeton 2016, pp. xlvii–li).

<sup>49</sup> Robert Alter: *Foreword*, in: Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, xv.



the narrative a significance that they do not possess as a "mere sequence."<sup>50</sup> He argues that the organizing framework of a historical narrative is inevitably a code of morality sanctioned by the authority that defines a culture or social group; and that events are selected and ranked in relationship to the group, with the resultant narrative functioning as an illustration of the ideology or "moral universe" of the group that orients it.<sup>51</sup>

Whilst Scholem's admissions of his "philosophical prestructures" does not cite his Zionist ideology in a way that would fully satisfy White's theory about the orientation of narratives, in these conferences he admits to the tensions that ultimately arise between his claim to objective scholarship and his ideological positions. Suggesting that this is a ubiquitous phenomenon, Scholem argues that "every historian" tries to avoid acknowledging the intrusion of their own "pre-structures," and "in a way poses, as an objective man – 'objective' meaning he tries to do his best in his critique of tradition, which is the historian's business: the lighting up of the field of tradition, legend, myth."<sup>52</sup> Scholem's rare admissions of the impact of his ideological commitments upon his scholarship fuel criticisms such as those of Kurzweil and Schweid. In two further important essays Scholem attempts to escape or minimize the implications of these tensions by reflecting upon the social role of the scholar within the Jewish community.

In the 1946 lecture "Memory and Utopia in Jewish History," Scholem argues that whilst barriers to scholarly objectivity are inevitable, it is the duty of the scholar to resist them. Through delineating the paradigm of "historical memory," Scholem strictly identifies the only domains where an ideological coloring of history is acceptable. "Historical memory" is the subjectively formed individual conception of history, built from the "symbols" of historical data, which happen to have been arbitrarily retained, perceived "as worthy of remembering" or entered the consciousness involuntarily. These are "crystallized" into a memory under the influence of the remembering agent's values and hopes for the future; a process once again reminiscent of White's theory of the narrative structure of historiography.<sup>53</sup> Any "crystallization" of histor-

<sup>50</sup> Hayden White: *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore 1987, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, pp. 10; 21.

<sup>52</sup> Scholem, *On History and Philosophy of History*, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Gershom Scholem: *Memory and Utopia in Jewish History*, in: Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 156–157.

ical memory is always just one of many possibilities, formed by an ideologically motivated mixture of remembering and forgetting. Scholem deems this process acceptable and productive for the individual as they relate to the past.

Scholem cannot accept such a subjective construction of historical memories on the part of the scholar, however. Despite the inevitable subjectivity that arises from the contingencies of time, place, and ideology, for Scholem, scholars have a duty to resist subjectivism: “the great danger is tendentiousness of choice – against which the only safeguard is the desire for truth.” Such a desire for truth motivates the scholar’s attempts to accurately apprehend the whole of Jewish history, a task that Scholem deems impossible but necessary: “man needs to seek truth even though he knows that it is far beyond him [...] for even if he makes full use of everything, he can only write from the givens of his time and from its memories.”<sup>54</sup> This refuses to award any value to the subjective narrative role of the historian, whose work is deemed valuable only in so far as it resists the subjective tendency. Scholars such as Myers reflect on the impossibility of this notion, describing the historian’s role as an inevitably “existential task,” and historiography “from the *Wissenschaft* generation until the present” as having “served as nothing less than a literary act of Jewish affirmation and self-identification.” Yet crucially for Scholem, the historian’s work was to enable Jewish affirmation and self-identification in others, by seeking to de-subjectivize the historical symbols they bequeathed.<sup>55</sup>

Scholem develops his demarcation of realms in a talk several decades later, “On Education for Judaism” (1971). This discusses the obligations of educators to inspire a living connection between students and the Jewish past, by providing historical material from which they could form historical memories. Describing how each generation of Jews interprets and defines Judaism for itself, Scholem notes that the ways that future generations will do this cannot be anticipated. His commitment to “religious anarchy” informs his definition of the responsibility of one generation as merely to “arouse in the next generation a sense of understanding and of general identification with the great heritage of the generations,” so that it can “take from it that which speaks to its heart.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Scholem, *Memory and Utopia*, p. 159.

<sup>55</sup> Myers, *The Scholem-Kurzweil Debate*, p. 279.

<sup>56</sup> Gershom Scholem: *On Education for Judaism*, in: Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism*, p. 84. Benjamin Lazier argues that the most significant contribution of Scholem’s early

Withholding chapters of the past, as earlier *Wissenschaft* scholars had done, ran the grave risk of inhibiting future Jewish communities from finding parts of their history to which they could relate. Describing the “severance of the living tie with the heritage of the generations” as “educational murder,”<sup>57</sup> Scholem continues, reflecting on the consequences of inhibiting the accessibility of the past to future generations:

“A people that destroys its living feeling that it is bound up with the continuity of its existence and its historical reality, the heritage of the generations – such a people will disappear. I believe in the future of our people. However, a future built upon a severance from this tradition is tantamount to handing down a death sentence on the people.”<sup>58</sup>

Scholem invokes several different roles in the process of sponsoring renewed engagement with the Jewish past. Delineating the scholar as the provider of historical data, he defines himself in this role, stating several times that he is not a teacher, but rather “a teacher of future teachers at the Hebrew University,” with the duty “to explain known or unknown phenomena.”<sup>59</sup> Teachers were, by contrast, to model an example of a subjectively determined living relationship with the past, but not to impose it upon their students.<sup>60</sup>

The distinction between scholar and teacher is key for Scholem for two reasons. Firstly, in order to maintain his claim that scholarship could sponsor true “religious anarchism,” Scholem could not define the role of the historian as anything other than to produce objective historical accounts. To acknowledge that historians impose a narrative shape onto history that might impinge upon the audience’s formation of their own individual historical memories would be to concede that every historian commits at least a degree

research into Sabbatianism was validating new chapters of history as grounds for Jewish identity formation by, for the first time, “describing heresy as a mode of Jewish self-assertion.” Benjamin Lazier: *God Interrupted. Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars*, Princeton 2008, p. 144.

<sup>57</sup> Scholem, *On Education*, p. 85. This resonates with Scholem’s description of earlier *Wissenschaft* as “historical suicide,” in: Scholem, *Modern Jewish Studies*, p. 56.

<sup>58</sup> Scholem, *On Education*, pp. 91–92.

<sup>59</sup> Scholem, *On Education*, p. 81.

<sup>60</sup> Scholem’s division between scholar and teacher reflects a further criticism of earlier *Wissenschaft*, by rejecting the vision of early scholars such as Zunz for “emancipation and scholarship” to become “the fountainhead of morality” that would be directly disseminated through educational institutions; see Leopold Zunz: *Scholarship and Emancipation*, in: Paul Mendes-Flohr / Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World. A Documentary History*, New York 2011, p. 255.

of “educational murder.” Scholem thus relegates the task of making subjective selections from history for educational purposes to the teacher, naming this as simply a model of the process that each student is to undertake. Secondly, to acknowledge that the historian’s role was influenced by subjectivities and choices would be to admit that the failings of nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft* scholars were inevitable. By defining his own mode of scholarship so heavily through critical contrast to the ideologically colored practices of his predecessors, Scholem is almost always unable or unwilling to acknowledge the ideological choices that he has himself made, as he does in his exceptional contributions at the 1974 Hebrew University conference.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Although by Scholem’s own occasional admissions the notion of scholarly objectivity was impossible, it was also impossible for him not to call for it. Scholem defines the goal of scholarship as to use objective inquiry to reveal a historical vitality that could be engaged by individual Jews in a “religiously anarchic” manner as they developed their historical memories and Jewish identities. This recalls the tension that arises between his commitment to both scholarly objectivity and the “prestructure” of viewing Jewish history in a certain way, which marked both his criticisms of past *Wissenschaft* and his ambitions for Zionist scholarship to fulfill its latent potential. Both the choices that Scholem admitted to in 1974 and the inherent impossibility of the scholar escaping the contingencies of their time and place challenge the notion that his, or any, scholarship could be objective. Despite moments where Scholem alludes to the contradictions in his position, his scheme of the division between scholar and teacher represents an attempt to, if not deny, then resist the problems arising from the impossibility of the scholar’s task. By demanding that scholarship always strive towards objectivity, and defining the realm of the teacher and student as the only domain in which subjectivity could play a valuable role, Scholem attempts to avoid letting subjective conclusions attain a damaging normative status, by displacing the subjective process of forming “historical memory” out of the scholar’s domain. This artificial distinction was a response to the looming threat of “educational murder,” and represents a logical outcome of Scholem’s commitment to multiple positions that entailed contradictory implications.