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Nietzsche and Zion (review)

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p. 212: The Thanksgiving Psalms are indexed with the Rule of the Community.

passim: the publication date for J. G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* is cited throughout the book as 1985, while in the bibliography it is 1983.

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Nietzsche and Zion, by Jacob Golomb. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. 274 pp. \$39.95.

The connections between the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the initial proponents of Zionism would appear, at first glance, to be an unpromising topic for investigation. Although since the end of the Second World War Nietzsche scholars have emphasized his opposition to antisemitism, he was recruited for the Nazi cause and identified with the regime's ideology both inside and outside Germany from 1933 to 1945. Anti-Jewish sentiments are infrequent in his published writings, but they can be found in unpublished remarks, especially during the late 1860s and early 1870s, when he was part of Richard Wagner's entourage. He appears to have shared for a time Wagner's belief that Jews were responsible for the ills of the modern world. For example, in his address "Socrates and Tragedy" from 1870, he identifies Socratism, which would become a key term with a negative valence in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), with "the Jewish Press." Even after his break with Wagner in 1876, one still finds occasional lapses, such as the anti-Jewish doggerel, probably aimed at Paul Rée and included in a letter from 20 August 1883. In his published works we could note that *The Birth of Tragedy* contains an unflattering contrast between the Semitic, feminine, passive myth, and the Aryan, masculine, heroic myth, while in his later writings, the ancient Jews are excoriated as the priestly, rancorous caste that inaugurated slave morality. Nietzsche does make more generous comments about the Jews and Judaism, but he also appears to have adopted certain prejudices, such as the Jewish ability to secure world domination (*Beyond Good and Evil* #251) or the association between Jews and bankers (SW 13: 642). Even his opposition to antisemitism was motivated less by an understanding and appreciation of the Jews than by an aversion to the Christian, nationalist, collectivist mentality of these anti-Jewish crusaders of the 1880s.

Despite Nietzsche's less than affirmative attitude toward Jews and his distaste for nationalist, collectivist undertakings, Jacob Golomb has been able to demonstrate that he was of central importance for several of the most

prominent early Zionist writers. Their preoccupation with Nietzsche did not involve his political, social, or religious views, but rather and predominantly what we might call his existential imperative. Nietzsche was the writer who helped them overcome the orthodox Jewish tradition in which they were raised or, in some cases, the secularized Judaism of assimilation, and propelled them on their journey toward self-realization in Zionism. Accordingly their Nietzscheanism was not always of long duration; it occurred at a specific moment in the lives of these budding intellectuals and may have been discarded once they arrived at a more profound understanding of themselves and the need for a genuine Hebrew culture. Most important for Golomb therefore is Nietzsche as the philosopher of authenticity and self-overcoming; Nietzsche was the thinker who assisted these proto-Zionists in transforming themselves into advocates of new values in Jewish culture. Golomb proceeds by examining three pairs of figures. Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau, two “marginal Jews” (*Grenzjuden*), were assisted in their transition to political Zionism by their readings of Nietzsche. The cultural Zionists, Micha Josef Berdichevski and Ahad Ha’am, were attracted to the heroic and monumental views found in Nietzsche’s writings. Finally, the spiritual or religious Zionists, Martin Buber and Hillel Zeitlin, were able to harmonize the atheist Nietzsche with their beliefs by conceiving him as a guide on the quest toward authentic existence. Each of these writers evidences a slightly different reception of Nietzsche, but the common thread in their appropriation is that Nietzsche assisted them in coming to terms with their personal histories and conflicts, and suggested to them a path that led ultimately to Zionist convictions.

Golomb’s monograph exhibits the strengths, and suffers from the weaknesses, of most studies devoted to Nietzschean influence. He has succeeded admirably in demonstrating that a diverse group of young men, who eventually emerged as Zionists, were at one point in their development readers of Nietzsche and on occasion fancied themselves to be adherents of Nietzschean philosophy. In order to show a pervasive influence of Nietzsche over early Zionist intellectuals, however, Golomb has had to fashion a Nietzsche of a very peculiar sort. Golomb’s Nietzsche is existential, a “gentile prophet of individualism” (p. 79), an advocate of authentic being in a world devoid of metaphysical certainties. He is also a philosopher who is not necessarily against statehood (p. 18), although he wrote in *Zarathustra*: “Only where the state ends, there begins the human being who is not superfluous” (SW 6.1: 57). He is a proponent of monumental history over antiquarian history (pp. 42, 66), although in Nietzsche’s essay on history he details the disadvantages and the advantages of every type of history, suggesting that historical consciousness itself is inimical to action. He is an affirmer of “power” only in the spiritual

realm, although Nietzsche drew no distinction between a physical *Kraft* and a purely spiritual *Macht* (pp. 59, 142), which Golomb offers as definitively Nietzschean. Golomb's Nietzsche is not opposed to altruistic deeds (p. 134), although nowhere in his writings does Nietzsche advocate such actions; rather he asserts that the belief in altruism results from a moral delusion and an error in thinking. This imagined Nietzsche believes in free will (p. 204), although in *Beyond Good and Evil* (#21) the real Nietzsche ridicules those who adhere to this "cloddish simplicity." And finally Golomb's creation is not necessarily at odds with progress (p. 219), although Nietzsche consistently derided the notion of progress in the modern world as a prejudice. Golomb recognizes at one point that Nietzsche is a philosopher whose reception has been contested and about whom we have many and varying assertions (p. 81). It is therefore odd that he offers a monolithic view of Nietzsche and insists that other readers distort, misunderstand, misapprehend, and misconstrue what Nietzsche really meant.

A more productive way to deal with the issue of Nietzschean influence is to reframe it as a matter of the self-avowed Nietzscheans creating a Nietzsche in their own image. After all, assorted socialists, feminists, anarchists, democrats, nationalists, and antisemites have lauded Nietzsche, although there are frequent remarks in Nietzsche's writings directed against these very groups. There is no reason to harmonize a Zionist Nietzsche with the "real" Nietzsche; it is preferable instead to delineate how Zionists forged a Nietzsche they could admire. Scholarship would be better served if we would relinquish the dogmatism that often accompanies studies of Nietzsche's influence and concede that while no one has succeeded in defining a Nietzscheanism that has achieved universal acclaim, or in delineating what Nietzsche really stood for with any precision, many of the most accomplished thinkers of the twentieth century believed they were following in his footsteps. The more appropriate task for scholars is to examine the paths formed by those footsteps, not to match a fixed view of Nietzsche against allegedly correct and incorrect understandings. In this regard Golomb's monograph nonetheless proves invaluable, since it provides ample testimony that one of the hitherto unexplored trails traversed by Nietzscheans involves Zion.

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