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RETURNING TO JEWISH THEOLOGY:
FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON FRANZ ROSENZWEIG

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INTRODUCTION

There is presently a considerable amount of discussion in North America and Western Europe about the relationship between the humanities and the sciences and, by implication, what this might mean for religion. For those of us in Jewish studies, it may be helpful to consider an earlier version of debate on this topic to see what kinds of arguments were being made or visions were being put forward and what might still be relevant. In particular, I am interested in reconsidering some of Franz Rosenzweig’s ideas on a possible return to Jewish theology. While at least one important commentator on Rosenzweig, Hilary Putnam, estimated that Rosenzweig was not greatly disturbed by or interested in historical and scientific critiques of Judaism, I believe that this was a central preoccupation of his, and indeed his account of revelation was intended to displace or overcome precisely that type of critique.

In an afterword, composed in 1930, to Rosenzweig’s Stern der Erlösung (Star of Redemption, 1921), Gershom Scholem sought to provide an intellectual context for his friend’s largely incomprehensible but highly acclaimed work. Scholem concurred with Rosenzweig’s conviction that contemporary theology, both Jewish and Christian, had been enormously weakened by overinvolvement with philosophy, especially German Idealism. Philosophical thought had become the style and the standard for theology and religious thought, which should instead have been working with their own resources and materials. The historical disciplines of the Wissenschaft des Judentums as well as of psychology and sociology had emptied [entleert] the world (George Steiner would later say “disenchanted” it). Traditional notions and experiences of God’s creativity and divine-human relations had been replaced by lifeless abstractions. Rosenzweig responded through narration and display in the Stern of his own experience of divine revelation, love, and creativity. He sought to found a new way of philosophizing as well as a new theology, both of which would speak about lived experience of the divine and in which language itself took on a new type of importance.

Scholem’s own reaction to Rosenzweig’s work was that in addition to Kabbalah and the writing of Franz Kafka, it amounted to a last best hope.
for creative Jewish religiosity. Like Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber, Franz Kafka, and other contemporaries, Scholem was dismayed by the “embourgeoisement” of modern Judaism. On the other hand, he was repelled by nineteenth-century Orthodoxy and had limited patience for Reform movements. He also thought that modern physics had rediscovered the possibility of miracles. Along with Kabbalah, this was an important counter in the argumentative context in which all these thinkers and writers were working.⁴

Scholem’s view of Rosenzweig came to have a considerable influence. It was carried forward in Robert Alter’s work on Kafka and literary modernism, in Hilary Putnam’s essays on Judaism as a way of life, and in some postmodern discussions of ethical responsibility. While this work is very interesting, in my view it oddly does not quite do Rosenzweig justice. As is evident from Rosenzweig’s work, his return to Jewish theology, which turned especially on his idea of revelation, was motivated by a constant effort to regain the footing that Judaism—and religion more generally—had lost in the face of scientific cosmology and other sciences. Although many commentators have noted the importance of Rosenzweig’s theory of revelation, they rarely provide a detailed account of it and therefore fail to show Rosenzweig’s persistent engagement with the problem of how the divine world relates to the natural one.⁵ In this essay I therefore seek to describe Rosenzweig’s theory of revelation in somewhat more detail than is usual. In this way, I hope that his preoccupation with the implications of modern science will become more apparent.

THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT OF ROSENZWEIG’S WORK

Traditional metaphysics—a foundational subdiscipline of philosophy—contributed to many diverse theological conceptions of the origins of the universe and of humanity. In this way it helped fulfill one of the main functions of religion identified by the sociologist Emil Durkheim: the representative function. For Durkheim (1858–1917), whose work was very much “in the air” as Rosenzweig was writing, religion has several functions. On one level it provides practices and ideas that enable individuals and groups to live and adapt to circumstances. On a theoretical level, it provides a set of representations of the world. The practical functions would always be required, according to Durkheim; they are an essential and permanent aspect of human life and should not or could not be dismantled. But the “speculative,” representative functions would outlive their usefulness and disappear.⁶
That Rosenzweig was very much aware of the representative function of religion—and of a loss of legitimacy in this regard—can be seen in writings outside of the *Stern*. For example, in “Die Wissenschaft von der Welt” (The Science of the World), a series of lectures delivered at the Freies Judisches Lehrhaus between April and June 1922, he posed the question of how the many different worlds of art, law, faith, and nature relate to one another and whether it makes any sense to ask the further question of which one of these worlds has the most reality or truth.\(^7\) Rosenzweig begins to answer these questions by stating, first, that these are not only worlds but also worldviews [Weltanschauungen]; each purported world is actually a set of representations in someone’s mind.

Indeed, in the case of the World, unlike God and Man (the other main elements in Rosenzweig’s ontology), we must ponder whether the World is anything other than, or beyond, its representations. Rosenzweig was inclined to think not. For him, representations of the natural world are no more mind-independent or objective than any other representations. Even the systematicity and law-like aspects of these representations do not make them any less “relative” to the thinking subject than any others.\(^8\) In fact, Rosenzweig holds that art and law display more order and necessity than nature. To the implicitly anticipated objection that it is difficult to see how anything could be more necessary or orderly than, say, the laws of mechanics, he replies that art and law are more necessary than the natural world because they have orientation. The world of nature and of material things has no orientation, meaning it has no *Mittelpunkt* [centerpoint]. We will see better the significance of orientation and the *Mittelpunkt* in the next section. Rosenzweig here wishes to emphasize that the world of natural things is in a sense indiscriminate: it “knows no *havdalot,*” distinctions or separations, no center and periphery.\(^9\)

A world of representations, however, is not the same as a world of spirit [*Geist*]. Rosenzweig is at pains to point out that spirit, such as Hegel’s Absolute Spirit, is constructed or created, even as it too constructs and creates. Spirit as conceived by Hegel is an objective entity: it “realizes itself and thereby destroys the world” and it subordinates everything human to itself.\(^10\) Spirit is not a creative force; it is something itself created or constructed and seeks to dominate the world. Spirit is also to be distinguished from the soul, which is truly creative.

Rosenzweig then puts forward (though not in a very clear way) a further argument as to why the natural world known by science cannot be the most real or ultimate world: if the natural world were the most real, it would serve
as the standard or measure of reality. But a standard for all realities and representations of realities cannot itself be either a world or a representation. It must be something absolute, beyond all our other representations. Moreover, if the standard is something beyond all representations, its existence does not presuppose a person, personality, mind, or soul, holding that particular representation or person who puts it into effect. Nonetheless, the existence of such a standard would be a possible metaphysical proof for the existence of an Absolute, or God in Spinoza’s sense, which is the ground and measure of all representations. At this point Rosenzweig does not proceed to deny the existence of such a Spinozistic God, probably because he has already conveyed an alternative in the *Stern der Erlösung*.

Rosenzweig’s argument is confusing. A standard does not have to be a separately existing entity outside of anyone’s mind or separate from the things for which it is the standard. The standards of theoretical coherence, evidence, and mathematical certainty expressed through or embodied in physics are not somehow beyond the theories themselves, the representations in physicists’ minds, or the concrete expressions of those representations (in material equipment, journal articles, etc.). In addition, it is difficult to see how a standard could be equivalent to a god, even of the Spinozistic type. A benevolent interpretation of Rosenzweig’s notion would be that by “standard” he means “ideal,” and an ideal, such as an ethical one, should have or does have some sort of substantiality. But Rosenzweig does not state or explain this explicitly.

THE IDEA OF REVELATION

Rosenzweig was not concerned only with the challenges to the intellectual or representative functions of religion. He also wanted to renew traditional Judaism as a living experience and a living religion and thereby to evade the increasingly technological, stultifying world of material things and processes. Unfortunately, in the *Stern der Erlösung* his method, if there was one, was to assert his passion rather than provide coherent trains of theological or philosophical reasoning that others could follow. Rosenzweig’s avoidance of metaphysical argument on key philosophico-theological questions, such as that of revelation, has often been noted. Scholem himself harshly described certain sections of Part Two of the *Stern*, which contains the theory of revelation, as relying on “the ragged clothing of scandalous allegory and confused drivel” [Lumpengewand skandaloser Allegorie und verwirrten Geschwätztes]. It is in any case a seemingly indiscriminate mixture of religious vision, theology and philosophy.
Of the many concepts that a persuasive theology must treat, the concept of revelation is perhaps the most important. In most theologies, historically supported by a philosophical apparatus, revelation is both the metaphysical link between the divine and the human and the foundation for religious ethics. Certainly Rosenzweig held this to be so: “[What is needed is a renewal of] the offensive thought of revelation” and “[an] intrusion of the spirit into the non-spirit.”\(^{15}\) He therefore devoted a complex section to revelation in Part Two of the *Stern der Erlösung* and referred to it quite frequently elsewhere.

In general, the *Stern’s* ideas on any topic begin from the unit of individual lived experience rather than elements of a traditional ontology, such as a First Cause, Substance, or Absolute Spirit. Thus, in the section on revelation in Part Two of the *Stern*, Rosenzweig begins by reiterating some ideas already presented in the first section of the book (on metaphysics): God himself, or itself, initially transforms itself from nothingness, nonbeing, into a something, a something that creates and affirms the world. This transformation occurs in a momentary [*Augenblicklich, nicht verhängt von uran*] manner.\(^{16}\) This is also a sign of difference from the gods of mythology, who are static. They have never had the experience of moving from a condition of hiddenness to one of revealedness.\(^{17}\)

Rosenzweig suggests here as well that the movement toward creation, which is simultaneously a movement of revelation, is also a mark of difference between believer and unbeliever: the unbeliever has never experienced the hiddenness of God. For the pagan, a god may be visible and yet not revealed; for the true believer, there must be an experience of hiddenness.\(^{18}\) The movement of divine creation-revelation is irreversible; it contains a force of “infinite breath,” a force that “breaks forth directly from the depths of divine hiddenness” and “secures the revelation within creation,” preventing the condition of revealedness from reverting to one of hiddenness and secrecy.\(^{19}\) Beneath the neoplatonic or stoic references to breath, light, and fate, we have a metaphysical claim about the nature of God as a self-creating being, a being that creates other things, such as the natural world, and has the capacity to reveal itself in some instances.

From here Rosenzweig proceeds to a denial that God possesses attributes or properties such as love. Love is not a basic, unchanging property of God [*unveränderliche Grundform*] but instead is a fugitive quality that occurs only momentarily.\(^{20}\) Moreover, God’s love is not universal or total; it is given or directed only to the individual. As Rosenzweig describes it, God’s love is capricious, arbitrary: “God always loves only whom and whatever it loves”
and always only in the present [Sie (die Liebe) ist immer im Heute und ganz im Heute]. Paradoxically, however, past and future loves are bound up with present ones, as they are “devoured” [verschlungen] by present love. Rosenzweig is here retaining the Hegelian notion of sublimation; he is in effect saying that past loves are sublimated [aufgehoben in Hegel’s terminology] in present ones. But since Rosenzweig is trying to get away from German Idealism and Hegelian language in particular, he uses another term. On the other hand, he also differs from Hegel in that future loves, not just past ones, are also somehow sublimated in the present. This does not fit the Hegelian pattern of sublimation. Be that as it may, Rosenzweig insists that God’s love is the eternal victory of love over death [Diese Liebe ist der ewige Sieg über den Tod].

But how is God’s love received by the individual, and what has this got to do with revelation? Individuals must prepare themselves to receive divine love, light, and revelation, which are all entwined, by learning to see them. They does this by passing through stages of doubt and defiance. As I have argued elsewhere, for Rosenzweig defiance is a critical stage in both arriving at and maintaining faith, a process that he describes in earlier sections of the Stern. At a certain point, having become open to divine love and revelation, individuals acquire the “pride of defiance” [Stolz des Trotzes]. This defiance does not undermine their faith; on the contrary, it gives individuals the strength to withstand doubt and misfortune. This type of proud defiance is like a body of deep, still water in which individuals are immersed and feel supported and protected by it. It is a defiance that is humble as well as proud. Overall, individuals now feel sheltered and that no power can take this feeling away from them.

Rosenzweig understands the defiance of the individual also as a means of arriving at a strong sense of self (he uses the phrase “emphatic self,” or betontes Ich). This is not important in itself but is important because an emphatic self is required for an I-You relation within God, between God and an individual, and between human beings.

Revelation begins, for Rosenzweig, in the dialogue of God with himself [Selbstgespräch Gottes], in which God is, as it were, self-separated into an I and a You. God is not a self-contained, independent being but instead is a being that asks after the whereabouts of the You. The same is true for human beings. In the very posing of the question “Where are You?” (meaning where is another self), the self discovers itself, the individual discovers him/herself. Therefore, a prophet cannot be an intermediary between God and Man; rather, Man hears the voice of God and the question “Where are You?” directly. God’s own self strives to avoid becoming an entity referred to only in the third person, to
become an It, and achieves this by commanding “love Me.” The God posited and experienced by the individual who feels loved, who hears the commandment to love, and loves God in return is the true God and truly exists.\(^{25}\) This is the revealed God, as opposed to a merely independently existing God (the god of the philosophers), and comes into being only through the recognition and love of human beings.\(^{26}\) A philosophical argument for the existence of God is therefore precisely what is not needed.

Revelation is the sphere of love between an I and a You, but it is also the sphere of language. Thus, prayer is the completion of revelation. Language in this sphere exists in contrast to language in the sphere of creation, which is determinative, narrative, reifying, and conditional.\(^{27}\) Moreover, creation-as-such is to be contrasted with creation-as-revealed. Created things, as in nature, are always in the past, but creation-as-revealed is always in the present. Human individuals are the paradigm of entities that are creation-as-revelation. They have highly individualized names, and whatever has its own name cannot be seen merely as part of a species or merely as one thing among other things. More importantly, its particular location in space-time is in a certain sense nonexistent or irrelevant: it carries its “here and now” around with it.\(^{28}\)

At first glance this last statement is not only bewildering. It seems to threaten the very historicity, the veracity, the importance, even if temporary, of an individual life. But this may be precisely Rosenzweig’s intention, namely to provide a form of consolation for mortality and even for misfortune. If one carries one’s own here and now around with one, then externalities of natural existence, which include whatever may be inflicted by biological or sociopolitical processes, are not important. As Rosenzweig wrote in the lecture described in the previous section, “[Political] power wants to conquer everything. But there are things that are unconquerable.”\(^{29}\) I shall return to this theme below.

The self with a proper name seeks orientation, a centerpoint for its experiences. It cannot survive in the undifferentiated juxtaposition of things and representations. It requires an ordering that is nonetheless grounded in an external order,\(^{30}\) which it can carry around with it. Such an orientation is acquired through acknowledgment of one’s dependence on God, by naming and addressing God.\(^{31}\) It is important to note this ground provided by the external order. While Rosenzweig does not explain exactly what he means, we may infer that he is not out to either assert or deny the existence of the external, natural world in any simple way. As we saw above, he assumes the natural world to have the ultimate status of a mental representation or construct. On the other hand, as we see here, he is not prepared to deny it all reality or
significance; on the contrary, he is assigning it an ordering or grounding function. This places him closer to the Idealist tradition that he seeks to criticize rather than the existentialist one in which he is usually placed.

But Rosenzweig also maintains in these pages of the *Stern* that his conception of revelation puts creation in a different light. It is no longer creation as understood by the German Idealists, a constructed totality. The categories of that school have been transcended by his own understanding of creation, which is inextricably linked to revelation as described above, and is part of a threefold process: creation-revelation-redemption. Idealism was not able to go beyond the first stage, creation. Through its constructions of totality, of the Absolute and the All, Idealism sought to rival theologies of creation but remained limited, its notions of revelation and redemption weak or non-existent. Disconcertingly, Rosenzweig then adds that battles between differing concepts about existence, and indeed for existence, are decided by power alone.\(^{32}\) It is not clear exactly what he means by this. He could be thinking of political power, such that concepts that “win” in a society and become dominant are the end result of a struggle for political power among different groups with their different ideas and conceptions. More likely Rosenzweig is thinking of explanatory power, for he says “When concepts prove to be powerless over against others, they cede their categorical character to those others.”\(^{33}\) To have the character of a category, a concept has to be directly related to existence, not mediated by some other entity or circumstance, such as experience.\(^{34}\)

Whatever Rosenzweig may mean by “direct relation to existence, not mediated by experience,” his aim is to emphasize the revealed character of things in the world. Creation and revelation are synchronous, equally original, neither preceding the other. A thing revealed, through being named and loved, is simultaneous with its creation and creator [*Das Werk ist genau so alt wie sein Urheber*]. Rosenzweig holds that while philosophy was for centuries, up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, preoccupied with the distinctions between immanence and transcendence, it was also known that this distinction is vitiated in and through language. The Song of Songs, for Rosenzweig, is an instance of direct communication between God and Man, “a genuine spiritual love song about God’s love for the individual person.”\(^{35}\) This form of communication is what Rosenzweig seeks to achieve through his own philosophical theology of revelation, the “speaking language of revelation” [*sprechende Sprache der Offenbarung*], the I-You language of revelation, which Martin Buber also described.
The loved-named individual, who has been opened to revelation of divine love, has for Rosenzweig ontological, conceptual, and emotional priority over the merely natural human being. The natural human being falls victim to all-overcoming death, the “deathly coldness and rigidity of objects in their perishing,” but nonetheless remains within the warmth of eternal divine love. This is presumably what Rosenzweig means by the phrase, cited above, that love is stronger than death (though referring mainly to divine love, it would not preclude the remembering love of human beings with whom one has also been in an I-You relation).

Rosenzweig simply does not address, in any traditional philosophic or theological way, the conceptual issues that this view of revelation and the God-Man relation raise. For example, how does God speak directly to humans? Is a voice heard? The Song of Songs is a written text as well as a sung-heard piece of language: how did that text come into being, if not through the mediation of a person, precisely what Rosenzweig does not wish to admit? For philosophers of a traditional analytical stripe, this is frustrating. But I think it is unfair to conclude that Rosenzweig has simply failed to make a case. By passionately laying out a vision, however unsystematic and unclear, he has defiantly presented an alternative conception of belief in the existence and love of God; the sheer force of assertion is intended to reinforce the doubter’s potential or hesitant movement toward being open to divine love and to help avoid getting bogged down in logical, abstract back-and-forths.

Rosenzweig maintains that his understanding of God’s love is and revelation is _gefühlsmässig klar_; that is, it is clear to and through the emotions. He contrasts this with mere conceptual or empirical clarity. Goethe and Herder, however great their own poetry, reduced the Song of Songs to mere worldly, human love, not taking it as an expression of divine love: “The goal was always to change the lyrical, the I and You of the poem, to an epic-intuitive Him and It.” Theirs was a conception of revelation that was uncanny, disturbing _unheimlich_, and a result of the entire mind-set of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a mind-set that sought to make everything objective and to purify language. “[W]ith no other book of the Bible has there been such a critical drive to such extensive transformations, indeed overturning of traditional texts.” But removal—through misinterpretation by European poets and by science—of the feeling of being in a relationship with God through the divine word has ended only in a dead relation with some sort of objective, impersonal entity.
Surprisingly, Rosenzweig continues, science itself contained the seeds of a solution to this dismal process of humanistic reinterpretation of religious speech. It was discovered (presumably by anthropologists) that just as in the Song of Songs, in Syria it is still the case that a shepherd who marries is seen and sees himself as a king. The significance of this is not that the “humanistic” interpretation (by Herder, Goethe, and others) is confirmed. Rather, it shows, as does the Song of Songs, that love (whether to God or a human being) cannot be “purely human.”

The peasant or shepherd transcends his lowly status through his self-image, albeit temporary, as a king. Similarly, the human individual transcends his contingent, worldly status through experiencing, believing that he experiences, divine love. Love transcends empirical conditions, just as language brims with a divine transcendence [Ubersinn]. Love is empirical-transcendent [sinnlich-übersinnlich]. Thus, the image or metaphor of a king in the Song of Songs is not a decorative accessory but instead is essential, because it expresses this idea of transcendence.

The Song of Songs, for Rosenzweig, is the ultimate articulation of how an individual human self becomes an “emphatic self” and of a love that is stronger than death. In this text creation shifts into and is overcome by revelation. It is the Kernbuch der Offfenbarung, the core text of revelation.

We see, then, that despite the often murky language, the struggle between scientific or secular (humanistic) interpretations of the Bible was in the forefront of Rosenzweig’s mind as he wrote this portion of the Stern.

THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICISM

A topic that is closely linked to the science/theology theme—and concomitantly to revelation—is that of historicism. Roughly, this is the problem of how historical thinking and investigation have undermined many grounds of traditional religious belief, such as the Exodus experience of the Jews and the divinity of Jesus for Christians. As is well known in broad terms, Rosenzweig sought to overcome this problem by separating Judaism from history, claiming that Jews and Judaism are somehow beyond history. This topic has been extensively analyzed by Amos Funkenstein and David Myers, among others. Both also show how various other Jewish thinkers responded to this problem. However, while Myers describes Rosenzweig as refusing to accept “the corrosive effects of historical time” on Judaism, the role of Rosenzweig’s conception of revelation in this view of history is left largely unexplicated, and Rosenzweig’s answer to the question of “the possibility of
The co-habitation of critical historical science and faith is not entirely clear from Myers’s essay.41

We have seen that Rosenzweig was very much aware of the crisis posed for theology and religious thought more generally by scientific developments, especially in the nineteenth century. Along with the natural sciences, the disciplines of history, archaeology, the Wissenschaft des Judentums, and sociology tended to undermine long-held beliefs. Myers shows that Rosenzweig’s work was part of a wider antihistoricist effort to counter historical reductionism. It was an effort both Jewish and non-Jewish, both philosophical and theological. Rosenzweig’s views on history were shaped, according to Myers, not only by philosophical debates about the nature and meaning of history, in which Hegel and Rosenzweig’s own teacher Friedrich Meinecke were preeminent, but also by contemporary discussions within Christian and especially Protestant theology. The Jewish antihistoricists included S. R. Hirsch and S. D. Luzzatto; non-Jewish exponents included Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, and Heidegger.

We saw above that Rosenzweig maintains in the Stern that the self carries its own space-time around with it. Whatever this might mean exactly, a logical consequence would be that events in either natural or historical space-time are of secondary importance. So whether, for example, Abraham existed or not or some other historical fact mentioned in the Bible is or is not a fact within a scientific representation of the world would not matter to the individual’s possible experience of divine love and capacity to reciprocate that love. A further consequence would be that returning to theology does not mean, for Rosenzweig, denying the truth of scientific representations; it means regarding them as inessential to the main process within the individual soul or self, namely becoming open to revelation. For the purposes of the historicist/antihistoricist debate, this would mean that theology and modern scientific scholarship can coexist because they deal with different sets of representations, as Rosenzweig would put it. It is in this sense, I believe that Jews and Judaism remain übergeschichtlich, beyond history, for Rosenzweig.

However, this assessment—that Rosenzweig arrived at a stance of compatibility, if not reconciliation, between theology and the sciences, both natural and social—may be too weak. In the section on miracles that precedes the main section on revelation, Rosenzweig makes a bolder claim. After a dizzying survey of Western intellectual and religious history and the role of different moments of enlightenment (up to and including the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century), Rosenzweig states that science is too one-dimensional in form to be able to explain or cope with the variegated experiences and ideas
of humanity. Nor, as he says often, is German Idealist philosophy, for all its pretensions, able to do any better. On the other hand, Nietzschean subjective perspectivism is also inadequate.

There is only way forward from the philosophical and existential dead end that seems to have been reached, one way out of the multiplicity of Weltanschauungen on all things, within a single individual as well as within German and Western society. Philosophy, both as a generalizing discipline, with some claim to be objective or scientific, and as a discipline that has come to see the importance of a new thinking that begins with individual existence (Rosenzweig’s and others’ own contribution) must accept the entrance of theological ideas on creation and even more so on revelation. Philosophy, if not science, needs theology. Philosophy “must hold fast to its new starting point and perspective, that of the subjective, extremely personal, more, the incomensurable self that is submerged in itself, and yet arrive at the objectivity of science.”

There follow some very unclear passages as to how Rosenzweig thinks a bridge between the intensely subjective and the objective is actually formed. He is in general very resistant to precise methodological prescriptions, holding that they can come only after the labor toward something has been done. The account of the bridge seems to come down to the role of language. It would take us too far afield to explore this topic in detail, but the main idea is that spoken language is the binding element between human beings and humanity as a whole. The whole grammar of different languages embodies creation, revelation, and redemption. Language is the “organon” of revelation, and all of humanity orders itself along this “thread” of language. What we can take from these passages, which contain many mixed metaphors as well as reflections on prelinguistic thought and the origins of the cosmos, is that language provides a medium for intersubjective thinking. It is this intersubjectivity that provides the exit from pure subjectivity, the self concentrated on itself and on God’s love, and provides a transition into communal existence, into history, and the possibility of redemption. Philosophy and history (as a science or discipline with pretensions to objectivity) are thus not merely reconciled in the sense of coexisting peaceably; they become entwined with one another through the processes of creation-revelation-redemption. But the starting point must always be the individual reception of revelation.

Rosenzweig had adumbrated his ideas about historicism and revelation before writing the Stern in the essay “Atheistische Theologie” [Atheistic Theology] in 1914. This essay is often understood as expressing Rosenzweig’s
concern about the consequences of historicism and the incompatibility of historicism and religion. Indeed, that theme is strongly present. But another principal concern is the constructed quality of contemporary theology. Thus, the problem is not only that historical evidence throws doubt on many aspects of Jesus’s life, for example, or many events in Jewish history. The underlying problem is the assumption that certain ideas, such as ideas of God, can only be the result of human projections or constructions and that God, or the divine, is not an independent Other that has broken through from its realm of infinite otherness to the human world. Rosenzweig is completely unwilling to accept this assumption.

Rosenzweig is therefore at pains to distinguish the explanation of myth formation from true revelation. Scholars, especially historians, says Rosenzweig, describe myths as the accretion of certain ideas around historical persons, events, or peoples and reduce the features of their objects of study to purely human terms. Thus, myth is understood as the superhuman product of a human creation process [das Übermenschliche als Ausgeburt des Menschlichen], and revealed religions are understood as mere myths. But, Rosenzweig maintains, precisely here lies evidence for the power of revealed religion: while the fact that myths are accretions of legends and fantasies around historical persons and events shows that they (the myths) are in an uninteresting sense untrue, it also shows that the same persons and events have an actuality, a historicity, that too can be captured by faith and revealed religion. Through its theories of human projection, historicism seeks to eliminate the vast difference between divine and human as well as the seemingly humiliating idea of revelation. But once a historical moment occurred in which the thought or experience of revelation was actually present, the shadow of this experience can never be entirely removed. Try as they may, human beings, and especially Jews, cannot escape from revelation as the central idea of faith.

CONCLUSION

Rosenzweig did not present a clear, unified definition of the scope and methods of Jewish theology, as at least some of his contemporaries sought to do or as some of the principal Jewish philosophers in the past had done. Indeed, it is not evident that he was doing theology at all. Nor did he put forward any kind of detailed engagement with modern science (as Maimonides and others had sought to do), despite living in an era that saw great innovation in both the natural and social sciences, including Einstein’s theories of relativity and
Durkheim’s theories of society. He was aware of developments in the latter two sciences and yet was brusquely dismissive of them, relegating them to a realm of “unimportant truths.” Ultimately his central concern was to assert, rather than argue for, the primacy of the revelation of God’s love to the individual over everything else.

This religious vision, though supported only intermittently by philosophical arguments, is nonetheless reminiscent of some earlier Jewish thinkers. The vision of the individual open to divine love recalls Maimonides’s conception of providence in the *Guide for the Perplexed*:

> The providence of God, may He be exalted, is constantly watching over those who have obtained this overflow, which is permitted to everyone who makes efforts with a view to obtaining it. If a man’s thought is free from distraction, if he apprehends Him, may he be exalted, in the right way and rejoices in what he apprehends, that individual can never be afflicted with evil of any kind. For he is with God, and God is with him.

It may also call to mind Bahya ibn Pakuda’s concepts of devotion and trust in God. However, in both of these cases the overflow of divine love is constant, not momentary or instantaneous and seemingly arbitrary, as it is for Rosenzweig. Nonetheless, both of these theories have a strong neoplatonic coloration, as does the *Stern*; they are permeated by images of overflowing light and love.

Rosenzweig’s return to theology is in many respects problematic for the contemporary post-Holocaust reader. The supremacy of revelation over natural and sociohistorical processes as he describes it is difficult to accept. Divine love, in Rosenzweig’s characterization, is so fugitive and arbitrary and the processes of political and physical destruction is so great in the time since his death that one cannot see how one might attain to or retain such love. Yet the thought that one is somehow bathed in divine love, no matter what, is consoling. Ultimately for many readers, philosophical and scientific skepticism in regard to Rosenzweig’s conceptions of revelation and of a return to theology may remain in the foreground, the vehemence of his assertions notwithstanding. But as Rosenzweig’s own fortitude in the face of historical and biological misfortune shows, that is probably our loss.

NOTES


3. Ibid., 532.


8. Ibid., 658.

9. Ibid., 661.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 662–63.

12. Ibid.


17. Ibid., 176.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 179.

20. Ibid., 183.

21. Ibid.

23. Rosenzweig, Stern, 187.

24. Ibid., 198.


26. Ibid., 203.

27. Ibid., 207.

28. Ibid., 208.


30. Rosenzweig, Stern, 208.

31. Ibid., 209.

32. Ibid., 210.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., 213.

36. Ibid., 222.

37. Ibid., 223.

38. Ibid., 224.

39. It is surprising that Hilary Putnam, who devoted an entire chapter to Rosenzweig on revelation, did not mention this lengthy discussion of the Song of Songs. Instead, Putnam quite artificially (as he himself recognized) brought in an analysis of Abraham and Genesis. See also Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy*, 43–45.


42. Rosenzweig, Stern, 117–18.

43. Ibid., 123.


45. Ibid., 692–93.

46. Ibid., 693.

47. Ibid., 697.

48. Apart from the classics of Jewish theology and philosophy, a contemporary of Rosenzweig’s, Alexander Altmann, produced a cogent essay: Alexander Altmann, *Was ist jüdische*
Theologie? Beiträge zur jüdischen Neuorientierung (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag des Israelit und Hermon G.M.B.H., 1933).

49. Franz Rosenzweig, “Das neue Denken,” in Zweistromland, 152.

50. Ibid., 159.
