

HEBRAISM AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY IN H.A. WOLFSON'S THEORY OF HISTORY

by WARREN ZEV HARVEY

I

Harry Wolfson (1887–1974), who was raised in the small Lithuanian town of Ostryn¹ and educated at the renowned Slobodka Yeshiva, immigrated with his parents to the United States at the age of 16. In 1908, at the age of 21, he arrived as a freshman at Harvard University, where he was to remain until his death, to become one of the greatest historians of philosophy. In those days, however, he was neither a philosopher nor a historian of philosophy, but a Hebrew poet. Like Rabbi Judah Halevi, the medieval Hebrew poet and theologian who was then his hero, he wrote poems full of Jewish national passion and love of Israel.²

His first essay on the history of philosophy was published in 1912 in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*.³ The essay, written originally for a course given by George Santayana, was called: "Maimonides and Halevi, A Study in Typical Jewish Attitudes towards Greek Philosophy in the Middle Ages."⁴ In this essay, as one

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1. Whence the name he chose for himself: Harry Austryn Wolfson.
2. On Wolfson's life, see Leo W. Schwarz, *Wolfson of Harvard*, Philadelphia, 1978.
3. N.S. vol. 2, pp. 297–337.
4. This essay has been reprinted in Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, Cambridge, Mass., 1973–77, II, pp. 120–160.

might have expected, the young Hebrew poet praised Halevi as a “Hebraist” and condemned Maimonides as a “Hellenist.”⁵

In this youthful essay, written in an excellent poetic style, Wolfson developed with great originality some old ideas of S.D. Luzzatto, Ahad Ha’am, and David Neumark, on the one hand, and Matthew Arnold and Horace Kallen, on the other. He spoke of two opposing life-views: the Hebrew and the Greek. According to him, the Hebrew life-view was fundamentally *ethical*,⁶ and the Greek life-view fundamentally *cosmological*. “The Jews,” according to his evaluation, “beheld nature subjectively, and based their view of life on the inner experience” of man, while the Greeks “beheld life objectively” and saw “things as they are, without their relation to man and his visions, fears and pleasures.” While the Jews were thus concerned with the response of *man* to nature, the Greeks were concerned with *nature* in itself. The Jews saw the world as always in flux, “for consciousness is a stream, and the pulse of life is never at rest”; while the Greeks saw the world as stable, as an eternal system of coherent law. The Jews saw the world as changing history, as “the movement of events”; the Greeks saw it as “an immutable hierarchy of forms.” The Hebrew life-view was “dynamic and functional,” while the Greek life-view was “static and structural.” The striking difference between the Jews and the Greeks concerning the divinity was a direct consequence of their differing views of life. The Jews had a *personal* God, who maintained a *mutual* relationship with man: “Return to Me and I will return to you” (Mal. 3:7). The Greeks, on the other hand, had a God who was no more than a logical or metaphysical term, and certainly maintained no personal connection with man.⁷

Later in the essay, Wolfson explains that the struggle between these two life-views began when the Jews came into contact with Greek culture. Here, Wolfson tells us about Philo of Alexandria and the medieval Jewish philosophers, and displays no satisfaction with them. True, he does not explicitly call them “traitors,” but it seems to me that we would not err were we to conclude from his remarks that he felt them to be such. In his judgment, the Jewish philosophers, while of course outwardly continuing to observe the practical commandments of Judaism, in fact eliminated its contents (the Hebrew life-view), and replaced it with philosophy (the Greek life-view). “Philo and the medieval philosophers continued to worship

5. “Maimonides is Hellenist, Halevi a Hebraist” (p. 336, cf. p. 306).

6. Here, perhaps, one may discern the influence of his studies at the Slobodka Yeshiva, which was a center of the *Mussar* (“ethics,” “morals”) movement.

7. Pp. 297–301. In accordance with his anthropocentric interpretation of Hebraism, Wolfson does not argue here (as, for example, those who speak about “ethical monotheism” have often argued) that the Jews’ ethical life-view followed from their concept of God, but rather that their concept of God followed from their ethical life-view.

God in the Jewish fashion, but their conception of God became de-Judaized." Young Wolfson was of the opinion that between the Hebrew practical life and the Greek theoretical life of these Jewish philosophers there was no true contact, but only "an artificial parallelism."⁸

In opposition to the Hellenizing tendency to subordinate Judaism entirely to philosophy, Wolfson contended, there arose a "counter-movement" whose intention was to define Judaism in terms of Judaism itself. Representatives of this counter-movement appreciated the virtues of Greek philosophy, but understood that Judaism and philosophy are two completely different things, and that any attempt to reconcile them must be nothing other than "a mere dallying with meanings." This counter-movement set for itself two goals: the one, to criticize philosophy and to undermine the common belief that it possesses absolute truth; the other, to redefine the Jewish position.⁹

Medieval Jewish philosophy was thus, in the eyes of young Wolfson, a movement of Hellenizing tergiversates, the most typical representative of which was, of course, Maimonides. The counter-movement which arose against it was, in his eyes, a movement of uncompromisingly loyal Hebrews, and its most typical representative was Judah Halevi.¹⁰ Accordingly, Maimonides was branded by Wolfson "a true convert to Aristotelian philosophy."¹¹ "Maimonides is Hellenist... rationalist... Maimonides subordinates everything to reason, which, for him, is alone the master of man."¹² As opposed to Maimonides, Halevi was portrayed by Wolfson as being loyal to the God of Israel and to the Hebrew view of life.¹³ Halevi, writes Wolfson, understood the essential difference between the Prime Mover of the Greeks, which is no more than the conclusion of a syllogism, and the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, who is known through the experience of human life. In other words, he understood that the God of philosophy has no "pragmatic significance" since He does not influence the life and deeds of man either in one direction or the other; but the God of religion has a decisive pragmatic significance, such that the religionist "cannot dwell upon the earth" without his God, and when he begins to doubt His existence "there is a sudden

8. Pp. 304–5.

9. Pp. 305–6.

10. P. 306. Another important representative of the "counter-movement" was, in Wolfson's opinion, Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (see pp. 335–6, nn. 3, 4). Wolfson's sympathy for Crescas led him to write his doctoral dissertation on him (1915), and later to take him as the subject of his first major book, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (1929).

11. P. 306.

12. Pp. 336–7. Cf. p. 307: Maimonides does not seek in the views of the philosophers support for the Jewish religion; rather, "his aim is solely to show that Scriptures and Talmud, correctly interpreted, strictly harmonize with the philosophical writings of Aristotle."

13. P. 316–37.

disruption of all of life's values, and there ensues a state of suspense in which any positive action is impossible."¹⁴ Halevi's argument for the God of religion and against the God of philosophy was, according to Wolfson's analysis, an "empirical" and "pragmatic" one: the religious Hebrew conception is "truer" than the philosophic Greek conception just because "the experience of the many" proves that it "serves human purposes most adequately."¹⁵

In short: in the body of this first essay, Wolfson condemned Maimonides for accepting philosophy, and lauded Halevi for rejecting it.¹⁶ However, at the end of the essay, Wolfson arrives at an unexpected paradoxical conclusion. He concludes that today, *from a purely philosophic point of view*; Halevi is far more important than Maimonides! The *Guide of the Perplexed*, he states decisively, is today an anachronistic book, a mere "scholastic apology for religion," while Maimonides' philosophy is truly "medieval."¹⁷ In contrast, Halevi's *Kuzari* is described by Wolfson as a book which from the philosophic point of view is today very modern, one might almost say avant-garde!¹⁸ According to Wolfson, Halevi was a "skeptic,"¹⁹ "empiricist,"²⁰ "intuitionist,"²¹ and above all things a *pragmatist*.²² A pragmatist! Such was the claim of this student of a student of William James, a claim made in the halls of Harvard at a time when the memory of that great philosopher of pragmatism was still very fresh and his ideas the focus of philosophic activity.²³ Wolfson even went so far as to state that "contemporary [philosophic] thought, the whole pragmatic movement, may find its ivisions foreshadowed in Halevi's discussions."²⁴ And so, according to Wolfson's analysis, Maimonides, who had wanted to write philosophy, wrote only "a

14. Pp. 316–18.

15. P. 320.

16. It should be noted that Wolfson does not see Halevi here as a critic of a particular philosophic system, but as a critic of philosophy in general. "The *Kuzari* is a critique of philosophy in general, of the philosophic method and temper of Halevi's time, and especially of the universal attempt to identify it with theology and religion" (p. 307, and cf. p. 336).

17. P. 337.

18. *Loc. cit.*

19. Pp. 306, 337. According to Wolfson, Halevi's skepticism concerning the intellect is connected with the Hebrew view that the world is continuously in flux (see above, n. 6). Wolfson attributes to Halevi a bold, extreme version of this view: "The world is a chaos, whose sole and miraculous unifying principle is a supreme Will, which is itself unstable and capriciously changing" (p. 322).

20. Pp. 318, 320, 325, 327, 336. Cf. above, nn. 14, 15.

21. Pp. 325, 327.

22. Pp. 317, 320, 337, and cf. p. 335. Cf. also above, nn. 14, 15. Hebrew pragmatism, according to Wolfson, is both ethical ("Knowledge must be an instrument for action... Speculation can afford man no happiness unless it has a basis in action," p. 335) and epistemological ("We cannot know the world as it is, but we can know it so as to live in it," p. 337).

23. James taught at Harvard from 1872 to 1907. He died in 1910.

24. P. 337.

scholastic apology of religion," while Halevi, who in fact had wanted to write an apology of religion, wrote philosophy in the most modern sense of the term. He who accepted philosophy is today no longer of philosophic interest, while he who rejected it appears today as the true philosopher!

We have thus seen that in his first essay Wolfson already sought to show that Hebraism, although fundamentally opposed to Hellenism, does not necessarily need to be opposed to philosophy, and that in the historical struggle between Hebraism and Greek philosophy *Hebraism was victorious*; for if young Wolfson saw in the pragmatic movement the thought of Halevi, then he must also have considered it to be a philosophy whose life-view is more Hebrew than Greek, which is to say, a philosophy which is in effect *Hebraized*.

II

In his numerous and important books and articles on the history of philosophy, the mature Wolfson — still a Hebrew nationalist — gave up the position he had held in his first essay, and developed a bold and novel conception of the history of philosophy.²⁵ According to this conception, there are three periods in the history of Western philosophy: (1) the Greek (from the pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic philosophers); (2) the Scriptural or "Philonic" (from Philo of Alexandria to Spinoza); (3) the modern (from Spinoza on). The central innovation of this conception, of course, is that concerning the Scriptural or "Philonic" philosophy. Philo of Alexandria, who had been seen in Wolfson's youthful essay as merely a Hellenizing Jewish philosopher, is now seen as *the inaugurator of a mighty revolution in the history of Western philosophy*. Philo, according to Wolfson's new conception, created a thoroughly new philosophy by interpreting Greek philosophy in the light of Hebrew Scripture. *Nota bene*: contrary to Wolfson's earlier view, which was and I believe still is the generally accepted view among historians, Philo is seen here first and foremost *not* as the interpreter of Scripture in the light of philosophy, but the opposite: *the interpreter of philosophy in the light of Scripture*. In other words, he is seen here not as a Hellenizer of Hebraism, but as a *Hebraizer of Hellenism*. The Philonic revolution, according to Wolfson, was thus a revolution in the *philosophic* tradition, not in the Jewish tradition. It did not create a new Judaism (and, in point of fact, Philo had hardly any influence at all on the Jewish tradition), but it did create a *new philosophy*, a philosophy bound up with Scripture and which must come to terms with the Hebrew life-view. Philonic philosophy, Wolfson held, was one homogeneous philosophy common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — the three religions with cognate Scriptures.²⁶ This philosophy, Wolfson argued, reigned supreme in the

25. Although the rudiments of this conception may already be found in his book on Spinoza (1934), the conception achieved its more or less final form in his book on Philo (1947).

26. In this connection, it may be observed that in the Hebrew edition of Wolfson's *Philo* (trans.

Western world until the 17th century, when Spinoza dethroned it by liberating philosophy from Scripture.

That the Philonic revolution was a Jewish revolution in philosophy and *not* a philosophic revolution in Judaism was clearly emphasized by Wolfson:

With a single exception, none of the peoples who after the conquests of Alexander began to participate in Greek philosophy contributed anything radically new to it... The single exception was the Jewish population of Alexandria. This Alexandrian Jewish population produced out of its midst a school of philosophers who consciously and deliberately and systematically set about remaking Greek philosophy according to the pattern of a belief and tradition of an entirely different origin.²⁷

Thus, Philo and the other Jewish philosophers in Alexandria created a *philosophic school* which initiated a remaking of Greek philosophy according to the Hebrew view of life. Regarding these Alexandrian Jewish philosophers, Wolfson stated with confidence:

Indeed they did try to present Judaism as a philosophy, but philosophy had to yield to Judaism on every point on which the two met in real conflict.²⁸

It will be noted that this generalization flatly contradicts the evaluation of Philo and his followers which Wolfson had proffered in his early essay. No longer Hellenizing compromisers, the Jewish philosophers now appear as loyal Hebrews. One should not be surprised if these comments of Wolfson's on behalf of the loyalty of the Jewish philosophers to their Judaism remind us of his comments on behalf of the "counter-movement" and Judah Halevi in his early essay.

Indeed, despite the great change in Wolfson's conception of the history of philosophy, there is a distinct *continuity* between his youthful and his mature positions from the standpoint of the question of Hebraism and Hellenism. Wolfson did not give up the idea of the centrality of the struggle between Hebraism and Greek philosophy, nor did he give up the idea of the victory of Hebraism in this struggle. Yet if the young Wolfson had sought to prove that the Hebrew life-view is not foreign to modern philosophy, the mature Wolfson sought to prove that it had not been at all foreign even to pre-modern philosophy. If in his youth Wolfson had thought that the Hebraization of philosophy took place covertly (and through non-Jews) at the end of the 19th or the beginning of the

M. Maisels, Jerusalem, 1970), the subtitle is translated misleadingly: "Foundations of Jewish Religious Philosophy." Wolfson's own subtitle reads: "Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam."

27. *Philo*, Cambridge, Mass., 1947, revised 1968, I, pp. 3-4.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

20th century with the emergence of pragmatism in the United States. In his maturity he thought that this Hebraization had already taken place overtly (and by Jews) almost 2,000 years ago.²⁹

According to the mature Wolfson's theory of the history of philosophy, Western philosophy has been influenced by Hebraism in two critical senses: (1) all Western philosophy from the Jew Philo to the Jew Spinoza bears the imprint of the Philonic Scriptural revolution, which was in truth a *Hebrew* revolution; (2) the medieval Jews — and foremost among them Maimonides! — took part significantly in the development of Western philosophy.³⁰ Wolfson accented the importance of Hebraism in the history of Philonic philosophy by fixing two Jews at its two poles.

III

In 1921, more than ten years before the crystallization of his theory of Philonic philosophy and about ten years after he had written "Maimonides and Halevi," Wolfson wrote these words:

Medieval philosophy is one philosophy, written in three languages, Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin, and among these Hebrew holds the central and most important position. In it we have the full efflorescence of Arabic thought and the bud of much of scholasticism... The time will come when the history of philosophy, medieval as well as early modern, will have to be radically rewritten, and rewritten it will be as soon as the contents of these [medieval Hebrew philosophic] writings become more widely known...³¹

With his own hands, Wolfson did indeed rewrite the history of medieval and early modern philosophy; and he argued not only that the Jewish philosophers had an important part in it, but also that the part of the Christian and Muslim philosophers was itself fundamentally *Hebrew*.

IV

We have now seen that, according to the theory of history of the mature Wolfson, Hebraism decisively influenced the history of Western philosophy. To be sure, this theory completely contradicts the accepted historical notions of the 19th century and especially the historiography of Hegel, even as it completely contradicts

29. Moreover, it is a mistake to think that according to the conception of the mature Wolfson modern philosophy is entirely free of Hebrew elements. First, modern philosophy contains remnants of Philonic philosophy; second, pragmatism presumedly remains in the category of Hebraized philosophy.

30. Quite obviously, the change in Wolfson's conception of the history of philosophy made possible the rehabilitation of all the Jewish philosophers who had been considered "Hellenists" in his youthful essay. This is most conspicuous with regard to Maimonides, who was metamorphosed from traitor to hero.

31. "The Needs of Jewish Scholarship in America," *Menorah Journal*, VII, 1 (1921), pp. 32–3.

the view of Wolfson the undergraduate collegian who wrote an enthusiastic paper for Professor Santayana on Maimonides the Hellenist and Halevi the Hebraist.

In the final chapter of *Philo*, Wolfson addresses himself to Hegel's conception of the history of philosophy. In Wolfson's opinion, Hegel's conception is nothing but a "metaphysical restatement" of the Christian theological conception of Eusebius and Augustine according to which "everything that came before Christianity is to be considered only as preparatory to it and everything that happened outside of Christianity is to be considered only as tributary to it."³² Wolfson reminds us that according to Hegel's conception, the history of philosophy is divided into three periods: (1) the Greek, deriving from the heathen world; (2) the medieval, deriving from the Christian world; (3) the modern, deriving from the Teutonic world which is itself basically Christian. Within this Christian-Hegelian framework, Wolfson continues, there is room for only a "cursory mention" of Philo as introductory to the study of the Neo-Platonists, and in general there is no room to notice Jewish and Muslim philosophy except "in an external and historic way."³³ Wolfson, of course, does not say as much, but perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that in his own conception of the history of Western philosophy he strove to replace the traditional Christian disposition with a new Hebraic one.

Against the Christian-Hegelian threefold division of the history of philosophy stands Wolfson's new threefold division mentioned above (at the beginning of section II). While Hegel's division is based on the supposed development of *Geist* in history, Wolfson's is based on the relationship between philosophy and Hebraism. For him, Greek philosophy was that philosophy which knew not Scripture; Philonic philosophy, that which served Scripture as a handmaid; and modern philosophy, that which freed itself from Scripture. It almost goes without saying that while according to Hegel progress may be seen in the history of philosophy, according to Wolfson there is no such progress. According to him, Greek philosophy had already worked over all the main philosophic problems; Philonic philosophy added a new dimension to them by uniting philosophy with the Hebrew life-view; and modern philosophy is ultimately a return to Greek philosophy. From this conception of Wolfson's, one receives the impression that the most interesting philosophy is not the modern — which is nothing but a rehash of Greek philosophy — but the Philonic (i.e., Hebraized) philosophy, which preserved within itself the vitality of Greek philosophy and joined it with the Hebrew life-view.

32. *Philo*, II, p. 440.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 441.

V

The old historian did not betray the young Hebrew. Wolfson's work in the history of philosophy is justly known for the breadth of its impressive erudition, and is distinguished by its precise philological analyses in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Arabic. Yet, for all that Wolfson's theory of the history of philosophy is preeminently scientific, it is in its soul *Hebrew*. If you will, it is a Hebraic revolution in the study of the history of Western philosophy.

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