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Ancient Jewry—Modern Questions:
German Historians of Antiquity on the
Jewish Diaspora¹

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When Adolf Hitler justified the antisemitic policies of his National Socialist government at the *Reichsparteitag* of 1935, he quoted, among others, the famous historian Theodor Mommsen.² In his *Roman History* Mommsen had called the Jews of Caesar's time the "Ferment der nationalen Dekomposition" and at the *Reichsparteitag*, which introduced the so-called Nuremberg Laws excluding "non-Aryans" from German citizenship, Hitler made use of that statement. He saw the Jews as corrupt beings undermining national unity and the highest values of the German people and the "Aryan race," and he believed that Mommsen had the same in mind when he wrote about ancient Jewry. Already in *Mein Kampf* Hitler had quoted Mommsen's words several times. In addition, National Socialist agitators, such as Goebbels and Rosenberg, used the slogan for antisemitic propaganda.³ In 1933, the Prussian minister-president Hermann Göring visited the Prussian Historical Institute in Rome. At a reception he was introduced to the German medieval scholar Theodor E. Mommsen, the grandson of the famous historian of antiquity. Göring was very pleased. He addressed the younger Theodor, who later emigrated to the United States, referring to the old Mommsen: "The German people will always be grateful to your grandfather for his words about the decomposing spirit of Judaism."⁴

It is quite obvious that Nazi leaders tried to exploit the prestige and international reputation of Mommsen for their own propaganda purposes. But the question remains: How could it happen that criminal politicians, like Hitler, Goebbels or Göring, based their antisemitic propaganda

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² *Völkischer Beobachter* 261 (18 September 1935) 2.

³ See C. Hoffmann, *Juden und Judentum im Werk deutscher Althistoriker des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, *Studies in Judaism in Modern Times* 9 (Leiden 1988) 102 f.

⁴ F. Gilbert, *A European Past: Memoirs 1905–1945* (New York and London 1988) 107.

precisely on Theodor Mommsen, the greatest German historian of antiquity and Nobel Prize winner for literature? Is it true that, as a German journalist said in 1965, “there was a direct connection between Mommsen’s description of the Jews as the ‘element of decomposition’ and Hitler’s description of the Jews as anti-German elements of national destruction?”⁵ To put it more generally: Was there an anti-Jewish tradition in German intellectual life of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, encouraging antisemitism and thus finally preparing the way for Hitler and his criminal policy of genocide? I will try to answer these questions by analyzing the ways in which three important ancient historians of the nineteenth century presented history. Johann Gustav Droysen, Theodor Mommsen and Eduard Meyer dealt not only with Greek and Roman history in their works, but were also concerned with Jewish history to varying degrees. The portraits they painted of ancient Judaism hint at the way the Jews and Judaism were perceived and evaluated in the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated middle class of the nineteenth century. Two questions have to be asked: (1) What impact did secularisation have on the interpretation of Jewish history? When the theological interpretation of history in general, and of Judaism in particular, lost its influence, what was it replaced by? (2) How important was the ongoing political debate concerning the emancipation of the Jews and the “Jewish question” for historiographical interpretation? Did the widespread political and cultural antisemitism emerging in the 1880s influence historiography? In my paper, I will concentrate on a single aspect of ancient Jewish life and its evaluation by nineteenth-century German historians: the Jewish diaspora. Historians felt especially interested in and challenged by the fact that the Jews of antiquity lived not only in Palestine, but had populated the whole Mediterranean world since Persian and Hellenistic times. Moreover, the Jewish diaspora in ancient times formed an obvious parallel to the condition of Jewish minorities in the national states of the nineteenth century. Thus, the presentation and evaluation of the Jewish diaspora in German historians of antiquity give insight into their views on the Jews and Judaism in general.

Johann Gustav Droysen:

The Synthesis of Athens and Jerusalem as *Præparatio Christiana*

Johann Gustav Droysen⁶ was born in 1808 in a small town in Pomerania, the son of an army chaplain. He died in 1884 in Berlin after long and wide-

⁵ A. Metzger, “Der Dialog zwischen Deutschen und Juden,” *Die Zeit* 21 (21 September 1965) 32.

⁶ On Droysen’s life and works, see J. Rüsen, “Johann Gustav Droysen,” in H.-U. Wehler (ed.), *Deutsche Historiker II* (Göttingen 1971) 7–23; F. Jaeger, *Bürgerliche Modernisierungskrise und historische Sinnbildung: Kulturgeschichte bei Droysen, Burckhardt und Max Weber* (Göttingen 1994); R. Southard, *Droysen and the Prussian School of History* (Lexington, KY 1995).

ranging activities as an historian of ancient and modern times, and as a liberal politician. He is above all well known in the history of classical scholarship for his conception of the Hellenistic Period. When Droysen studied at the University of Berlin in the late 1820s, he saw the university in its golden age. August Boeckh, the classical philologist, and Georg Friedrich Hegel, the philosopher, were his most important teachers. Whereas Droysen adopted Boeckh's method of philological criticism and his interest in the field of methodology, it was Hegel who inspired the young Droysen with the philosophical interpretation of history.⁷ However, Droysen never became a dedicated disciple of Hegel. His unorthodox but strong religious beliefs counterbalanced philosophical fashions.⁸

Already at the age of 25 Droysen worked out his discovery of the Hellenistic Period in his *Geschichte Alexander des Grossen* and in the following two-volume *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (1836 and 1843). With these studies he created a new understanding of the period between Alexander the Great and the beginning of Christianity. Whereas the traditional approach understood this period of history as a time of decadence and decline—compared to the heights of Greek culture in the fifth century B.C.—Droysen called it a period of progress and movement, thus preparing for Christianity. The Hellenistic Period was to Droysen essentially that stage in the evolution of paganism which led from classical Greece to Christianity. With this positive view Droysen revised the traditional interpretation.⁹

How did the Jews and Judaism function in this conception of history? How did Droysen assess the role of the Jewish diaspora in the historical process leading to Christianity? It is striking that at first Droysen did not consider Judaism to be of any importance for the rise of Christianity. At that time, in the 1830s, he was strongly influenced by classicism and in particular Grecophilia, which was widespread in the German educated middle class. Accordingly, in his dissertation he defended the thesis that Christian doctrine is closer to the Greek than to the Jewish religion.¹⁰ In 1838 he wrote: "It was the mission of Greek culture to achieve the transition from a pagan to a Christian world. Greek culture succeeded in the most difficult and productive task in the history of mankind."¹¹ When Droysen speaks of Christianity, the emphasis is invariably on the encounter between Greeks and non-Jewish Orientals: The Jews are left out.

Only in 1843, at the end of the second volume of his *Geschichte des Hellenismus*, did Droysen deal with the Jewish religion. He mentions

⁷ See J. Rüsen, *Begriffene Geschichte: Genesis und Begründung der Geschichtstheorie* J. G. Droysens (Paderborn 1969) 16–22.

⁸ See Southard (above, note 6) 32–68.

⁹ On Droysen's conceptualization of the Hellenistic Period, see R. Bichler, "Hellenismus": *Geschichte und Problematik eines Epochenbegriffs* (Darmstadt 1983).

¹⁰ J. G. Droysen, *Kleine Schriften zur alten Geschichte* II (Leipzig 1894) 431.

¹¹ Droysen (previous note) 63.

Judaism as an important factor in the origin of Christianity. His pattern of interpretation is clearly influenced by Hegel: Historical change does not develop in a straight line, but dialectically by way of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In Droysen's view, Judaism forms the antithesis to the Greco-pagan world. Whereas totality is the essence of Greek paganism, Judaism makes a sharp distinction between terrestrial worldliness and an extra-worldly God. Because of the Jewish diaspora, a confrontation arises in the Hellenistic period between the two principles, the Greek principle of worldliness and the Jewish principle of extra-worldliness.¹² Only Christianity brings the confrontation to an end and synthesis takes place: "Along with the gospel mankind finds consolation and hope and new strength. It is the deepest elements of the Jewish and Greek nature that—reconciled and melted into each other—form a new beginning. There is no longer the rigid, extra-worldly God of the Jews, no longer the infinite distracted diversity of Greek anthropomorphism."¹³ Unfortunately, Droysen did not elaborate his concept of the melting—or the cultural exchange—between Greek and Jewish elements in Hellenistic times. At the end of the 1840s he turned completely to modern history and contemporary politics. After the revolution of 1848 he was deputy of the liberal faction in the German National Assembly at Frankfurt.

For our question it is important to keep in mind the fact that Droysen viewed the Jewish diaspora only according to its theological and cultural importance. He does not refer to political or national criteria. Although Droysen was heavily involved in contemporary politics, and his historiography generally reflects his liberal political ideas, this is not the case with his interpretation of the Jews and Judaism. Why not? Why did Droysen not elaborate in detail the intercultural exchange between Jewish and Greek ideas in Hellenistic times, as he had originally planned? An interesting answer to this question was given by Arnaldo Momigliano, who pointed out that Droysen's closest friends during this period, as well as his first wife, were of Jewish origin and had converted to Protestantism. Silence on Judaism was the official line in this circle. Droysen seems to have conformed absolutely to this convention in his relations with his friends of Jewish origin. The taboo, says Momigliano, also influenced Droysen as an historian:

He had started from the notion that Christianity can be explained with little reference to Judaism. He had perhaps come to realize the weakness of such an exclusive approach. The work of the Tübingen school had indeed shown that it was difficult to talk seriously about the origins of Christianity without a prolonged study of the Jewish background. Droysen did some work on Jewish texts, but he never brought himself to face the whole

¹² J. G. Droysen, *Geschichte des Hellenismus* III (Munich 1980) 424.

¹³ J. G. Droysen, *Historik: Vorlesungen über Encyclopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte* (Darmstadt 1974) 305.

problem of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. It was the problem which at a personal level had deeply concerned his best friends, his wife and his relatives—and it was going to affect his own children. He must have known that his friends were thinking about it in their silences. He remained silent, too. The *History of Hellenism* was never finished.¹⁴

Fascinating as it is, Momigliano's thesis is based to a large extent on speculation. There are obviously also other reasons which may have kept Droysen from finishing his *Geschichte des Hellenismus*. In particular, his move to the University of Kiel, his involvement in politics and, resulting from this, his turning to modern history. Moreover, the inner contradictions in Droysen's conceptualization of the Hellenistic Period as a glorious time on the one hand, and a time in need of rescue on the other, also may have made a resumption more difficult.¹⁵ In addition, the discrepancy between two different subjects or "agents" in Droysen's conceptualization of *Heilsgeschichte*, the Greeks and the Jews, could, by making use of Hegel's dialectics, easily be reconciled in a brief sketch. In historiographical detail, for example in portraying the Wars of the Maccabees, it would have been much more difficult.¹⁶ Be it as it may, Droysen's assessment of the Jewish diaspora is clearly influenced by his theological interpretation of history. His Christian belief made him prefer a traditional religious perspective and prevented him from portraying the Jews and Judaism according to modern standards. In Theodor Mommsen we meet a different point of view.

Theodor Mommsen: National State and Minorities

Theodor Mommsen¹⁷ is the most famous nineteenth-century German historian of antiquity. His *Roman History* was translated into many languages and in 1902, one year before his death, the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to Mommsen for this publication, written nearly 50

¹⁴ A. Momigliano, "J. G. Droysen between Greeks and Jews," in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Middletown, CT 1977) 307–23, at 318 (originally published in 1970).

¹⁵ Bichler (above, note 9) 107–09.

¹⁶ See Hoffmann (above, note 3) 85 f.

¹⁷ On Mommsen's life and works, see K. Christ, *Von Gibbon zu Rostovtzeff: Leben und Werk führender Althistoriker der Neuzeit*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt 1979) 84–118; L. Wickert, *Theodor Mommsen: Eine Biographie*, 4 vols. (Frankfurt am Main 1959–80); A. Heuß, *Theodor Mommsen und das 19. Jahrhundert* (Kiel 1956); A. Wucher, *Theodor Mommsen: Geschichtsschreibung und Politik*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen 1968); A. Demandt, "Theodor Mommsen (30 November 1817 – 1 November 1903)," in W. W. Briggs and W. M. Calder III (eds.), *Classical Scholarship: A Biographical Encyclopedia* (New York 1990) 285–309; C. Meier, "Das Begreifen des Notwendigen: Zu Theodor Mommsens 'Römischer Geschichte,'" in R. Koselleck et al. (eds.), *Formen der Geschichtsschreibung* (Munich 1982) 201–44. On Mommsen's presentation of the Jews and Judaism, see L. Wickert, "Theodor Mommsen und Jacob Bernays: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Judentums," *HZ* 205 (1967) 265–94; H. Liebeschütz, *Das Judentum im deutschen Geschichtsbild von Hegel bis Max Weber* (Tübingen 1967) 192–201; S. Zucker, "Theodor Mommsen and Antisemitism," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 17 (1972) 237–41; W. Boehlich (ed.), *Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit* (Frankfurt am Main 1965).

years earlier. Mommsen was not only an outstanding scholar. As a political writer, and later as a Member of the Prussian Diet and of the Reichstag, he committed himself to a liberal, progressive policy, strongly resenting and opposing Bismarck's conservative government. At the University of Kiel, Mommsen studied Roman law, classical philology and history. He was taught by, among others, Droysen. After finishing at the university, Mommsen went on long excursions through Italy, working in the field of epigraphy. In this way he laid the foundation for what would become one of the most important projects in German classical scholarship of the nineteenth century, the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. In 1851 Mommsen was dismissed as extraordinarius in Leipzig for his political commitment in the revolution of 1848. He was offered a chair in Zurich, where he began writing his *Roman History*. The political emotions of the years following the failed revolution and the still unrealized unification of Germany are reflected in this work. Between 1854 and 1856 the first three volumes appeared. They cover the period up to Caesar. Only in 1885 was Volume 5 published, containing the history of the Roman provinces during the Roman Empire. Volume 4, which was supposed to cover the history of the Empire, never appeared. In his *Roman History* Mommsen refers to the Jewish diaspora only twice: In Volume 3 (1856) he reflects on the role of the Jews in Caesar's empire, and the famous chapter, "Judaea and the Jews," in Volume 5 (1885) concentrates on the causes and roots of the war between Rome and the Jews in the first century A.D.

How does Mommsen assess the role of the Jews in the Roman Empire at the time of Caesar? His point of departure is the fact that founders of empires such as Alexander the Great and Caesar supported and granted specific privileges to the Jewish minority. Obviously, the Jews were able to play an important role in the process of transforming Greek and Latin national culture into a cosmopolitan world culture. According to Mommsen, they were the "ferment of cosmopolitanism and national decomposition," and thus encouraged the process of dissolving different ethnicities and accelerating the intended synthesis of nations. Mommsen assumes that Alexander and Caesar used the Jews as instruments for their plans to build an Empire. In the Jews they saw the "historical element . . . which the statesman could neither ignore nor combat."¹⁸ Only because of this did Alexander and Caesar protect the Jewish religion and offer the Jews privileges. Their attitude was not based on philosemitism but on political realism:

The two great men [i.e. Alexander the Great and Caesar] of course did not contemplate placing the Jewish nationality on an equal footing with the Hellenic or Italo-Hellenic. But the Jew who has not like the Occidental

¹⁸ T. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, 9th ed. III (Berlin 1904) 549. The translation is from T. Mommsen, *The History of Rome* (Glencoe, IL 1957) V 418.

received the Pandora's gift of political organisation, and stands substantially in a relation of indifference to the state; who moreover is as reluctant to give up the essence of his national idiosyncrasy, as he is ready to clothe it with any nationality at pleasure and to adapt himself up to a certain degree to foreign habits—the Jew was for this very reason as it were made for a state, which was to be built on the ruins of a hundred living polities and to be endowed with a somewhat abstract and, from the outset, toned-down nationality. Even in the ancient world Judaism was an effective leaven [*Ferment*] of cosmopolitanism and of national decomposition, and to that extent a specially privileged member in the Caesarian state, the polity of which was strictly speaking nothing but a citizenship of the world, and the nationality of which was at bottom nothing but humanity.¹⁹

One cannot fail to notice Mommsen's ambivalent description of the Jews. On the one hand, the reader is aware of a clearly pejorative evaluation. Explicitly, Mommsen calls Judaism "not the most pleasing feature in the nowhere pleasing picture of the mixture of nations," and stresses that "the Latin and Hellenic nationalities continued to be exclusively the positive elements of the new citizenship."²⁰ On the other hand, Mommsen concedes the Jews—precisely because of their adaptability and homelessness—a historical role in Caesar's empire. Summarizing Mommsen's argument, one might say that Judaism—according to its appearance—is a mainly negative element disliked by the Westerners of the old as well as of the new world. However, when one looks at it from a higher historical point of view, Judaism fulfilled an important mission in the development of the Roman Empire and had finally to be judged positively. Here, Mommsen makes use of the dialectical pattern of Hegel's *Geschichtsphilosophie*. The new and most remarkable feature in Mommsen's characterisation of the Jewish diaspora is his secular and modern point of view. The intellectual tradition of Judaism and the importance of the Jewish religion in the Hellenistic Period are for Mommsen of no interest at all. Whereas Droysen stressed the religious-cultural development leading to Christianity, Mommsen focusses on the political development of a secular cosmopolitan culture. Thereby, he explains ancient history with the help of modern terms. He uses nineteenth-century attitudes when writing about the Jews of antiquity. Because of this technique, Mommsen takes up arguments which played a prominent role in his contemporaries' view of the Jewish minority, e.g. Jews have no homeland, they constitute a nation of their own and assimilate with difficulty to foreign nations. To Mommsen, ancient and modern conditions explain each other. However, his intention is by no means antisemitic, in the sense of the contemporary antisemitic movement. He does not want to

¹⁹ Mommsen (previous note) 550 (translation, V 418 f.).

²⁰ Mommsen (above, note 18) 550 (translation, V 418 f.).

exclude the Jews as foreigners, but rather to reinterpret their historical mission. Here Mommsen makes use of Hegelian speculation: Jews become agents of the *Weltgeist*, they accelerate the historical development and are representatives of a secular *Heilsgeschichte*. The reason Mommsen stressed the importance of the Jews only, disregarding people like the Syrians, Egyptians, Arabs and Phoenicians (including them would historically have been more plausible), might be found in the traditional Christian interpretation of history, which singles out the Jews as “chosen people” and which was even in a secular way still effective. Moreover, Mommsen was probably influenced by his Jewish friend Jacob Bernays. In Bernays as well as in other Jewish intellectuals of the nineteenth century, for example Moses Hess, we meet the idea of the Jews as catalyst (*Ferment*) of historical developments. It is likely that Mommsen was influenced by these ideas.²¹

Hence, Mommsen’s interpretation was speculative and shaped by contemporary ideas of nationalism, but it was not at all antisemitic. But if that was the case, why did Mommsen’s characterization of the Jews as “ferment of national decomposition” develop into one of the most effective antisemitic slogans? For nearly a quarter of a century Mommsen’s statement was not interpreted in an antisemitic way. Only in 1880, when the new political movement of antisemitism gained prominence and when the so-called *Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*²² reached its peak, did the slogan become widely known. It happened in the following way: After the foundation of the German Reich in 1871, a collapse of the stock market followed due to excessive speculation. The economic crisis led to a revival of anti-Jewish sentiments among the public. The rapidly growing antisemitic movement demanded the repression of the “predominance” of the Jews and the retraction of Jewish emancipation.²³ At that time the historian Heinrich von Treitschke justified antisemitic agitation on principle. Although he pretended not to be an antisemite, he nevertheless took over the main antisemitic arguments. He criticised the alleged Jewish predominance in the press and in finance and went so far as to state: “The Jews are our misfortune.”²⁴ Treitschke thereby made antisemitic arguments safe for

²¹ See Hoffmann (above, note 3) 95 f.

²² See Liebeschütz (above, note 17) 153–82; Hoffmann (above, note 3) 96–103, 123–28; D. Claussen, *Vom Judenhass zum Antisemitismus: Materialien einer verleugneten Geschichte* (Darmstadt and Neuwied 1987) 110–36; J. P. Reemtsma, “Die Falle des Antirassismus,” in U. Bielefeld (ed.), *Das Eigene und das Fremde: Neuer Rassismus in der Alten Welt?* (Hamburg 1991) 269–82; M. A. Meyer, “Great Debate on Antisemitism: Jewish Reactions to New Hostility in Germany 1879–1881,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 11 (1966) 137–70; C. Hoffmann, “Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit 1879/81,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 46 (1995) 167–78.

²³ On the history of antisemitism in Germany, see R. Rürup, *Emanzipation und Antisemitismus: Studien zur “Judenfrage” der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Göttingen 1975); P. Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria*, rev. ed. (London 1988).

²⁴ Boehlich (above, note 17) 11.

polite society, especially for academia. Based on his authority, students founded antisemitic fraternities which excluded Jews.²⁵

Right from the outset Mommsen condemned Treitschke's articles. Together with other liberal professors, among them Droysen, Mommsen initiated a public declaration against antisemitism. Although the declaration did not directly address Treitschke, everyone knew that it was meant for him. Treitschke responded by imputing to Mommsen an inconsistent attitude, and it was he who dug out Mommsen's sentence and made use of it in a polemical way. In a letter to a newspaper Treitschke wrote: "I do not agree with my colleague's pessimistic opinion of Jewry's activity as ferment of cosmopolitanism and national decomposition all over the world, but do hope that in the following years social integration and reconciliation will follow the already attained emancipation."²⁶ It was part of Treitschke's polemical strategy to impute to Mommsen an anti-Jewish implication. He deliberately quoted Mommsen's words out of context. He did not mention Mommsen's positive intention concerning the term "process of decomposition" (leading to a cosmopolitan world culture) and used the term "corruption/demoralization" (*Zersetzung*) instead of "decomposition." By doing so Treitschke alluded to a central antisemitic accusation against the Jews, i.e. their national unreliability and undermining of the dominant culture.²⁷ Treitschke's reply to Mommsen was eagerly taken up by the antisemitic press and by conservative politicians. Soon Mommsen was quoted as chief witness for antisemitism. After that, Mommsen tried to clear up the situation by publishing his booklet, *Another Word about our Jewry*,²⁸ in November 1880. He transferred his idea of "decomposition" to the present time, stressing the Jews' positive influence on loosening German regional identities and in this way helping to form a German identity in the newly founded nation-state. However, Mommsen's analogy was not really convincing. To nationalistic critics, the cosmopolitanism of the Jews did not manifest itself in their being above German tribalism, but in their international relations, i.e. living in Frankfurt, Paris and London. Mommsen's attempt at clarifying the situation failed also because the acceptance and propagation of antisemitic stereotypes were already widespread in the society of the Second Empire. Mommsen's description of the Jews as "ferment of national decomposition" became an essential part of

²⁵ See N. Kampe, "Jews and Antisemites at Universities in Imperial Germany II: The Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität of Berlin: A Case Study of the Students' 'Jewish Question'," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 32 (1987) 43–101, at 46 ff.; idem, *Studenten und "Judenfrage" im Deutschen Kaiserreich: Die Entstehung einer akademischen Trägerschicht des Antisemitismus* (Göttingen 1988) 23 ff.

²⁶ Boehlich (above, note 17) 211 f.

²⁷ See R. Schäfer, "Zur Geschichte des Wortes 'zersetzen'," *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Wortforschung* 18 (1962) 41–80, at 62 ff.

²⁸ T. Mommsen, *Auch ein Wort über unser Judentum* (Berlin 1880), translation in P. R. Mendes-Flohr and J. Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York and Oxford 1980) 280–87.

antisemitic rhetoric and nearly all antisemitic agitators made use of it. It would, however, be wrong to blame Mommsen for a process that occurred only because of deliberate misrepresentation.

The intensity of the dispute between Treitschke und Mommsen led to a final break-off of their friendship. This makes us overlook their rather similar attitudes towards the “Jewish question” in general. Mommsen too was of the opinion that the Jews should fully assimilate to the German dominant culture. Due to his liberal and anticlerical ideology, Mommsen had no sympathy for retaining religious forms of life. So he advised the Jews to be baptized or, at least, to have their children baptized—not for religious reasons, but for the sake of the unity of the German nation. Mommsen declared:

Admission into a large nation has its price. The people of Hanover, Hessen and Schleswig-Holstein are prepared to pay the price, and we all feel that they are giving up a part of themselves. But we make this sacrifice to our common fatherland. The Jews, too, will not be led by another Moses into the Promised Land; . . . it is their [the Jews’] duty to do away with their particularities, wherever they can do so without offending their conscience. They must make up their minds and tear down all barriers between themselves and their German compatriots.²⁹

In Mommsen’s view, the Jews should give up their ethnicity, which was regarded as responsible for their position as outsiders. This demonstrates that even German liberalism of the time did not accept any form of ethnic pluralism. Mommsen’s analysis of the Roman–Jewish conflict in the first century A.D. (in the fifth volume of his *Roman History*) was influenced by this very point of view. The Jewish War is seen as a conflict between state and church, between the Roman secular great-state and the Jewish rabbinical state: As religion was not restrained in the Jewish community by public authority, tension arose between religious fanatics and representatives of the Empire. Therefore, there were problems with Herod and later on with the Roman procurators. Even the Jewish diaspora was of no help in mitigating religious fanaticism. Although there were many Jews in the diaspora who had assimilated to Hellenistic culture, their common bond as Jews was in crucial questions after all stronger: “In all essential matters, especially when confronted with oppression and persecution, the differences of Judaism disappeared; and, unimportant as was the Rabbinical state, the religious communion over which it presided was a considerable and in certain circumstances formidable power.”³⁰ Thus, war between Rome and Jerusalem seemed inevitable. “The question concerned was one not of faith but of power; the Jewish church-state, as head of the Diaspora,

²⁹ Mommsen (previous note) 16 (translation, 287).

³⁰ T. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, 5th ed. V (Berlin 1904) 497. The translation is from T. Mommsen, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire from Caesar to Diocletian II* (New York 1906) 185.

was not compatible with the absoluteness of the secular great-state.”³¹ Examining Mommsen’s historical analysis in relation to his contemporary conflict, one gets the impression that Mommsen warns his Jewish contemporaries of another catastrophe like the one in A.D. 70.³² He was convinced that only by giving up their position as outsiders and by fully assimilating to their environment could the Jews prevent a similar catastrophe and be safe from antisemitism and persecution.

Unlike his predecessors, Mommsen was not interested at all in the cultural importance of ancient Judaism, but proceeded from a consideration of the coexistence of Christians and Jews in nineteenth-century Germany. The focus of historical perception is not the intellectual-religious tradition and the impact of Judaism, but the socio-political situation of the Jews as a national minority. With Mommsen, the transition from a religious into a national and political way of argumentation for Jewish history becomes evident. In Mommsen’s politically oriented historiography, the nineteenth-century “Jewish question” and ancient events explain one another. In both cases Mommsen’s view is formed by nationalistic and liberal ideas which generally characterize his political *Weltanschauung*. Due to nationalistic ambitions, he demands the Jews’ total assimilation and integration into the dominant culture; because of his liberal attitude he rejects religious forms of life and vehemently attacks clericalism. Mommsen’s political struggle against the rising antisemitism in the German Empire derives from the same idea. Mommsen was disturbed about the unity of the young German national state and about its political culture. Therefore, he vehemently opposed the antisemitic “civil war” against the Jews. This attitude, however, did not mean an acceptance of ethnic pluralism and of a Jewish national sub-culture within Germany.

Eduard Meyer: National Culture and Sectarian Loyalties

In the annals of the study of ancient history, the name Eduard Meyer³³ stands for a bold attempt by a single scholar to present a comprehensive history of antiquity, from its Oriental beginnings down to Roman times, on the basis of independent study of the sources. Actually, Meyer’s conception of a universal history of antiquity was not new; what was unique was how

³¹ Mommsen (previous note) 542 (translation, 239).

³² See Liebeschütz (above, note 17) 197.

³³ On Meyer’s life and works, see Christ (above, note 17) 286–333; W. M. Calder III and A. Demandt (eds.), *Eduard Meyer: Leben und Leistung eines Universalhistorikers* (Leiden 1990); G. A. Lehmann, “Eduard Meyer,” in M. Erbe (ed.), *Berlinische Lebensbilder IV: Geisteswissenschaftler* (Berlin 1989) 269–85; C. Hoffmann, “Eduard Meyer (25.1.1855–31.8.1930),” in Briggs and Calder (above, note 17) 264–76. On Meyer’s presentation of the Jews and Judaism, see M. Schreiner, *Die jüngsten Urteile über das Judentum kritisch untersucht* (Berlin 1902) 99–116; Liebeschütz (above, note 17) 269–301; Hoffmann (above, note 3) 133–89. On all of Meyer’s work, see H. Marohl, *Eduard Meyer Bibliographie* (Stuttgart 1944).

he succeeded in combining a far-reaching, synchronist point of view with a great precision of detail. He brought the history of Egypt and the Near East, including Israelite and Jewish history, within the purview of the historian of antiquity. Meyer liberated the history of individual peoples and countries from their isolation. Thus, the historical epochs of Menes and Hammurabi, Moses, Homer, Diocletian and Justinian, were presented in their own context.³⁴ When Meyer died in 1930 it was clear to all experts in the field that, given the increasing wealth of material and the specialization of research, no individual historian would ever again be capable of mastering such an extensive field of research.

Meyer's upbringing and education formed the foundation of his impressive academic work.³⁵ At the Johanneum in Hamburg, Meyer learned Hebrew and the rudiments of Arabic, in addition to the classical languages. Continuing his studies in Bonn and Leipzig, he then proceeded to acquire the other important ancient Oriental languages: Egyptian, Persian, Turkish and Sanskrit. He also learned to read cuneiform texts. Meyer was interested in the ancient Orient as the first epoch in the development of the human intellect. He was convinced that he could use the methods of positivist research to illuminate areas that had previously been in the domain of religious or philosophical speculation—the descent and prehistory of humankind and the origins of language, religion, culture and morality. In the tradition of the rationalist critique of religion, the young student regarded the history of religion as “the most interesting aspect of the history of illusions.” He attended Christian services “in order to undertake cultural studies” and was outraged at the “sham, hypocrisy and immorality which religion has brought to the human race.”³⁶ Despite this critical, even polemical, attitude towards the influence of religion on public and intellectual life, Meyer was forever fascinated by the history of religion as an academic discipline. When he was twenty, he wrote his dissertation under the supervision of the Egyptologist Georg Ebers on the Egyptian god Seth-Typhon. The history of religion was also prominent in his main academic work, the five-volume *Geschichte des Altertums*, which first appeared during the years 1884–1902. Further editions occupied Meyer until his death in 1930, and he also published monographic studies on the history of individual religions, such as the Mormons and the beginnings of Christianity.³⁷ Meyer's study of ancient Jewish history also resulted from

³⁴ See V. Ehrenberg, “Eduard Meyer,” *HZ* 143 (1931) 501–11.

³⁵ On Meyer's intellectual development, see C. Hoffmann, “Die Selbsterziehung des Historikers: Zur intellektuellen Entwicklung des jungen Eduard Meyer (1855–1879),” in Calder and Demandt (above, note 33) 208–54.

³⁶ See Hoffmann (above, note 3) 136.

³⁷ E. Meyer, *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen. Mit Exkursen über die Anfänge des Islams und des Christentums* (Halle 1912); E. Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart and Berlin 1921–23). On Meyer's works on religious history, see the essays by A. Henrichs (182–207), F. Parente (329–43), E. Plümacher (344–67) and R. Schlesier (368–416) in Calder and Demandt (above, note 33).

his general interest in religious history. Meyer believed that the general structure and development of ancient religious history were demonstrated with particular clarity in the relatively well-preserved history of the Jewish religion. In approaching Jewish history as an integral part of general history, Meyer clearly deviated from the mainline of contemporary biblical criticism, especially as represented by the great Göttingen scholar Julius Wellhausen. At the same time, it must be kept in mind that Meyer agreed with Wellhausen's fundamental evaluation of ancient Judaism.³⁸ Meyer too saw "Judaism" as no more than a religious sect that reduced the great ideas of the early Israelite national period to a narrow-minded system. The prophets were just as ambivalently judged. On the one hand, they were immense personalities, full of creative individuality; on the other, they exerted a paralyzing influence on state and political life. They were "idealistic critics" who "never went beyond negation." Overall, Judaism, as it established itself after the Babylonian exile, was for Meyer a petty "religion of laws," through the primacy of which every "natural" national, political and intellectual development was stifled.

In Meyer's opinion, the Jewish diaspora is a direct consequence of what he called "Judaism." "By detaching the confessors of the national religion from their native country and their local cult, by their strictly separating themselves from all non-Jews, it became possible to hold on to each member, wherever he might have been dispersed."³⁹ Meyer's attitude towards the Jewish diaspora is extremely negative. He seems to envision the attempt of a religious sect materially defrauding and exploiting an environment considered by them to be inferior. As the Jews define their difference from the environment in a religious and not in a national way, they are able, as Meyer sarcastically writes, to "adapt themselves to all circumstances and to make a profit from them; Jahwe provided his people with this legitimate advantage over the pagan. Everywhere Jews proved to be a clever people knowing how to get on."⁴⁰ Thus, Meyer derived the (supposed) Jewish affinity for financial dealings and cheating of the non-Jewish world from the religious structure of Judaism. Like "all exclusive sects," the Jews too had developed "a lively activity" in business affairs, "which considered the ruthless exploitation of non-believers to be the God-given right of the Jews."⁴¹ According to this view, ancient antisemitism was nothing but an understandable reaction to the unsocial behavioral patterns of the Jewish religion. Obviously, Meyer's view is biased and cannot withstand scientific analysis. Meyer tries, for instance, to prove his thesis of the "typical profit-making Jew who is greedy for money"⁴² by

³⁸ For a detailed discussion, see Hoffmann (above, note 3) 159–65.

³⁹ E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, 5th ed. IV.1 (Stuttgart 1958) 203.

⁴⁰ Meyer (previous note).

⁴¹ Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums* (above, note 37) II 32.

⁴² Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums* (above, note 37) II 129.

hinting at the novel-like narratives of Joseph and Hyrcanus by Josephus; Meyer states: “the figure of Shylock is clearly evident in these characters.”⁴³ Meyer draws his conclusion from pure fiction when applying the above statement to the Jews’ behaviour in the diaspora—not a really convincing method. Due to his biased view, Meyer considers the Jews’ acculturation to Greek culture as superficial and opportunistic. Meyer writes extremely negatively as well about the Hellenistic party in ancient Jewry, calling it “Reform-Judaism” and hinting at the “parallel” phenomenon at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Meyer does not ascribe the motives of this movement to real conviction but to opportunism: “The intelligent ‘Reform-Jewry’ has always had an instinctive feel for the way of the ruling class and how to make a profit; their aim of staying on top by any means has always been relevant to them.”⁴⁴ For Meyer, there never existed real contact between Greek and Jewish culture, not even in Philo’s time. For the ancient Jews, Greek education always remained superficial and misunderstood, in the same way—and here he draws an interesting parallel to his own times—as high German culture remained superficial and misunderstood for the Polish Jews who had immigrated to Germany.⁴⁵ Meyer considered the Jews’ survival in the diaspora after the catastrophe of A.D. 70 to be proof that they were an “unchivalrous” people. A “chivalrous” people would have remained faithful to their country and perished with it.⁴⁶

With his use of cliché and caricature, Meyer’s judgements of the Jewish diaspora clearly deviate from the historiographic tradition of German classical studies in the nineteenth century. His assessments are formed according to the following criteria:

1. Meyer’s critical, and in part polemical, assessment of ancient Judaism follows in the tradition of Enlightenment religious criticism. In essential points, it also agrees with the clichés about a “degenerate religion of laws” that were widespread in the Protestant theology of the time. However, Meyer’s more favourable alternative was found not in Christianity, but in the enlightened, secular Greek culture of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. In Meyer’s view, ancient Judaism’s post-exilic development represented an aberration of history: It developed no forms of independent political culture, but contented itself with serfdom and heteronomy. Its intellectual life was formed by restraint of conscience and by clerical regimentation; it was no full national unit, but lived dispersed as a “state within states” among other nations. Meyer’s assessment of ancient Judaism was greatly intensified by the fact that Jewish ideas had, via Christianity and Islam, exerted significant influence upon the course of

⁴³ Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums* (above, note 37) II 32.

⁴⁴ Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums* (above, note 37) II 146.

⁴⁵ Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums* (above, note 37) III 314.

⁴⁶ See N. Goldmann, *Mein Leben als deutscher Jude* (Munich and Vienna 1980) 122.

history. For him, ancient Judaism in this way became an intellectual factor, certain characteristics of which influenced even contemporary religion—for example, English and North American Calvinism—and as such had to be taken seriously. Thus, Meyer never tired of emphasizing the negative effects of the “Jewish heritage” on Western history. In his view, religious fanaticism, intolerance, persecution of heretics and religious disputes and wars in the Christian world were the fatal consequences of an intellectual attitude that arose from and was preserved in Judaism. The polemical harshness of Meyer’s historical writing was thus in large part based on the realization that these origins could be detected in ancient Judaism; that Judaism should be viewed as a negative paradigm and ideologically opposed. Here Meyer’s anti-Judaism was essentially based on his anti-religious and anti-clerical attitudes. His assessments of religious phenomena in England and the United States were equally negative.⁴⁷

2. Meyer’s negative view towards Judaism is based not only on religious criticism; the political aspect also plays an important role. Normative ideas concerning national honour and patriotism as well as a conservative, culturally based anti-capitalism and anti-modernism shaped Meyer’s view on the Jewish diaspora. To Meyer, the Jewish diaspora reveals the absence of loyalty, the opportunism and the greed of the Jews. Because they do not feel responsible for a native country, Jews are profit-seeking and constitute a foreign group in their host-countries. On the one hand, this leads to an adaptiveness, on the other hand to exploitation of the environment. Here, Meyer’s attitude clearly reflects contemporary antisemitic ideas. His political denunciation of the ancient Jewish diaspora, calling it a stateless group of exploiters, reflects Meyer’s criticism of the Jewish minority of the twentieth century. His pejorative treatment of Hellenistic “Reform-Judaism” was also—and perhaps mainly—aimed at the Jewish revolutionary intelligentsia of the Weimar period. This is demonstrated in his correspondence.⁴⁸ However, as he was convinced that the Jewish character had not changed since antiquity, it made no difference to him. Before 1918 Meyer kept away from political antisemitism and clearly distanced himself from racist views. He had many Jewish friends and students, among them Eugen Täubler, Victor Tscharikover, Elias Bickermann and Victor Ehrenberg. However, after the German defeat, the revolution and the creation of parliamentary democracy, which the conservative and nationalistic Meyer considered a catastrophe and a “national disgrace,” he spoke out publicly as rector of the Berlin University against East European Jewish immigration and “Jewish participation” in the

⁴⁷ See C. Hoffmann, “Meyers England- und Amerikabild,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Reihe Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften* 40.9 (1991) 45–53.

⁴⁸ See Hoffmann (above, note 3) 185 f.; G. Audring, C. Hoffmann and J. von Ungern-Sternberg (eds.), *Eduard Meyer – Victor Ehrenberg: Ein Briefwechsel 1914–1930* (Berlin and Stuttgart 1990) 31–33, 111–13.

revolution.⁴⁹ His work took on obvious antisemitic undertones. It required only a small number of deletions and changes of emphasis to turn Meyer's negative cultural assessment of ancient Judaism, which he had already presented in 1896, into a polemical caricature aimed at the political situation of the present.

With his conservative, nationalist attitudes, Meyer sympathized with Jewish national aspirations and saw in Zionism a possible solution to the "Jewish question." In 1925–26 Meyer took a long-awaited tour of the Orient, viewing the sites of the ancient history to which he had devoted his academic life.⁵⁰ During this trip, Meyer spent several weeks at the beginning of 1926 in Palestine, where he gave a lecture at the new Hebrew University, viewed Zionist settlements as well as ancient sites and met with several former students. Upon his return, he presented his impressions of his journey to the "Zionistische Vereinigung" of Berlin. Here he made a positive assessment of Jewish colonization work. The pioneers in the Jewish agricultural settlements and the educators in the schools were aware, said Meyer, "that the decisive question for the existence of a people is a sound peasantry." On the other hand, the immigrant city of Tel Aviv made an "unpleasant impression" on Meyer. Here the defects of the diaspora simply continued. Each of the immigrants, mainly from Eastern Europe, tried to open a "store" as quickly as possible, and the ladies who were "overdressed" and richly made-up on the Sabbath reminded him of Lodz or Warsaw. "No nation can be built up like this," was how he summarized his impressions of Tel Aviv.⁵¹

Conclusion

The way ancient Judaism and the Jewish diaspora are presented in German historiography of the nineteenth century depends mainly on two factors: the attitude towards religion in general and the political judgement on the "Jewish question" and antisemitism. As long as Christianity appeared as the fulfillment of ancient history—think e.g. of Droysen—ancient Judaism kept its particular importance because of the Jews as the chosen people. Consequently, the Jewish diaspora was seen as a necessary preparation for Christianity. By the interpenetration of Greek and Jewish ideas in the diaspora, in particular of Greek polytheism and Jewish monotheism, the ground was prepared for the triumph of Christianity. Historians who, like Mommsen and Meyer, had a more secular orientation, could no longer agree with this theological interpretation. From their point of view, the triumph of

⁴⁹ Meyer's statement in *Deutscher Geist und Judenhass: Ein Werk des Volkskraftbundes* (Berlin 1920) 83.

⁵⁰ See C. Hoffmann, "Classical Scholarship, Modern Anti-Semitism and the Zionist Project: The Historian Eduard Meyer in Palestine (1926)," *Studies in Zionism* 13.2 (1992) 133–46.

⁵¹ Hoffmann (previous note) 144.

Christianity was rather a decline from the heights of classical culture. They based their view of history on the modern ideal of a secularly enlightened national state. Therefore, they disapproved of the development as it took place among post-exilic Jewry, placing religion over the state, nation and politics. Assessing the Jewish diaspora, Mommsen and Meyer no longer followed religious, but national and political thoughts. Their attitude towards the contemporary "Jewish question" and contemporary Jewry played a decisive role. Mommsen and Meyer analyzed the Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman cities according to their own nineteenth-century standards. However, their views on the Jewish diaspora differed. Mommsen's view was influenced by the liberal concept of the emancipation of the Jews. The "Jewish question" could only be solved by the Jews' complete assimilation to the dominant culture. Consequently, he approved of the acculturated Jewry of ancient Alexandria as culturally important representatives of Hellenism. Meyer, on the other hand, was influenced by chauvinistic and antisemitic ideas. He criticised the Jews' acculturation as superficial and opportunistic. He stressed the so-called differences in character between the Jews and the peoples among whom they lived, and this made them outsiders. Although Meyer did not consider himself an antisemite, by stressing the Jews' otherness he supported those political forces that tried to rescind emancipation and used antisemitism as a political tool.

Thus, the historiography of ancient Judaism reflects the political development of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany: Liberalism declined and its place was taken by nationalistic and partially antisemitic ideologies. The model of a liberal, integrationist nation-state, including minorities and previously disadvantaged classes, had been replaced since the founding of the Reich in 1871 by a more narrow definition of national identity. It aimed to create unity through exclusion, defining "German nature" in opposition to all kinds of enemies. This self-definition by branding the enemy only rarely went as far as the irrational, racist world view of the radical antisemites. But the three exclusionary campaigns of the 1870s (against Catholics, Social Democrats and Jews) had firmly established the "internal enemy" as a constitutive element of this form of nationalism, which became typical of the right-wing "German nationalist" camp. This change in political and national self-understanding is also reflected in Mommsen's and Meyer's assessments of the Jewish diaspora in antiquity. Whereas Mommsen still clung to the ideal of Jewish integration and assimilation, Meyer in the final analysis advocated ethnic separatism and dissimilation. In his view, intercultural exchange destroys the essence of the German nation. It was these ethnocentric views which finally paved the way for the radical antisemitic and racial politics of the Nazis.