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# Protestant Bible Scholarship: Antisemitism, Philosemitism and Anti-Judaism

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# Protestant Bible Scholarship: Antisemitism, Philosemitism and Anti-Judaism

*Edited by*

Arjen F. Bakker  
René Bloch  
Yael Fisch  
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# Contents

- Preface VII  
List of Contributors XIII
- 1 Karl Georg Kuhn (1906–1976) – Two Academic Careers in Germany 1  
*Hermann Lichtenberger*
  - 2 Judaism as Religious Cosmopolitanism: Apologetics and  
Appropriation in the *Jüdisches Lexikon* (1927–1930) 24  
*Irene Zwiép*
  - 3 Antisemitism and Early Scholarship on Ancient Antisemitism 41  
*René Bloch*
  - 4 The Rise and Fall of the Notion of “Spätjudentum” in Christian  
Biblical Scholarship 63  
*Konrad Schmid*
  - 5 “Circumcision is Nothing”: A Non-Reformation Reading of the  
Letters of Paul 79  
*Paula Fredriksen*
  - 6 Anti-Judaism and Philo-Judaism in Pauline Studies, Then and Now 106  
*Matthew V. Novenson*
  - 7 The Sibylline Oracles: A Case Study in Ancient and  
Modern Anti-Judaism 125  
*Olivia Stewart Lester*
  - 8 Anti-Judaism, Philosemitism, and Protestant New Testament Studies:  
Perspectives and Questions 149  
*Jörg Frey*

- 9 American Biblical Scholarship and the Post-War Battle against  
Antisemitism 182  
*Steven Weitzman*
- 10 Jewish and Christian Approaches to Biblical Theology 200  
*John Barton*
- Index of Ancient Sources 217  
Index of Names and Modern Authors 220  
Index of Places 229

# Preface

The academy is one of the few places where it is possible to have a conversation about shared heritage across cultural and religious boundaries. At the same time, academic conversation is shaped to a large extent by inherited traditions of scholarship, in which violent forms of discourse are entrenched. In response to the Black Lives Matter movement, fierce debates are taking place in the academy today about the legacies of colonialism and racism in university curricula and their institutional embedding. While ethical self-reflection is a fairly new phenomenon in certain academic disciplines, such as Classics and Theology, other fields of inquiry have internalized similar critique for many decades. Among anthropologists, for example, no one would think to replicate the terminology or conceptual structures that were used by 19th century ethnography to describe ‘primitive’ peoples. The underlying sentiments of Western superiority and triumphalism, and their deployment in colonial rule, have become causes for shame, and rightly so.

In the field of biblical studies, however, despite some important exceptions,<sup>1</sup> there has been little sustained reflection on the ways in which scholarship has engaged, and continues to engage, its most significant Other. This is surprising, since historical-criticism of the Bible, which emerged in the context of protestant Christian theology, is confronted in every aspect of its study with otherness: the Jewish people and their writings. Few constructs have been as enduring, as pluriform, and as socially consequential across centuries as have Christianity’s theological interpretations (and deployments) of “Jews,” of “Judaism” and of the “Old Testament.”

There are good reasons for this. Christianity – or, perhaps more accurately, Christianities – emerged in Mediterranean antiquity from various kinds of early Roman-period Judaism. The core of the Christian canon, Paul’s undisputed letters and the four gospels, are all types of Hellenistic *Jewish* writings. Further, much older texts specific to Jewish tradition, in their Greek voice (the “Septuagint”), were incorporated by the fourth century into the Christian canon as well. Christians today have a dual library of inherited revelation: the

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1 See for example Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Danielle Cohen-Levinas et Antoine Guggenheim, eds., *L’Antijudaïsme à l’épreuve de la philosophie et de la théologie* (Paris: Seuil, 2016); Manfred Gailus und Clemens Vollnhals, eds., *Christlicher Antisemitismus im 20. Jahrhundert. Der Tübinger Theologe und »Judenforscher« Gerhard Kittel* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2019); Armin Lange et al., eds., *Confronting Antisemitism from the Perspectives of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020).



“Old Testament” and the “New Testament.” Thus, as soon as Christians read Christian scriptures, they encounter representations of Judaism and of Jews.

It was in the course of the second century that some forms of gentile Christianity became, quite specifically, *not*-Judaism. As these Christianities shaped and expressed their new identities, their new theological principles, and eventually (after Constantine) their new social policies, they used thinking with “Jews” to do so. Ideas *about* Jews and Judaism became essential to articulating the borders of Christian community and the behaviors of the Christian self. More often than not, a negative construction of the former served to convey idealizations of the latter. In other words, Christian “rhetorical Jews” were not “historical” Jews: they were virtual Jews, a means by which non-Jews made (and make) claims about *themselves*.

By the end of antiquity, “rhetorical Jews” – “Jews” as a short-hand for misreadings of Scripture and for wrong enactments of it – were hardwired into Christian discourses of all sorts. Epistles, commentaries, apocryphal acts, martyr stories, sermons, treatises: this huge literary legacy conveyed teachings *adversus Iudaeos* to medieval Christian Europe. In the Reformation, this legacy shaped Protestant rhetoric against Catholic opponents who, like “the Jews” of Luther’s Pauline commentaries, were (according to these polemics) mired in works-righteousness, dead legalism, and empty ritual. Jews are more than a rhetorical trope, of course. They are also real people; people whose lives have been affected – sometimes positively; much more often, violently and negatively – by the symbolic weight laid upon them by the external accidents of history and by the internal demands of Christian theology.

Modern biblical criticism as an intellectual enterprise was born in the Renaissance. But it was launched socially and spiritually, as well as politically, because of the sixteenth century’s Protestant Reformation. It was the teaching of *sola scriptura* that assumed direct access to the truths of the text, unmediated by traditions of reading and interpretive authority. Through a strict and rigorous engagement with biblical texts, reformed churches claimed the exclusive inheritance of what was accumulated throughout many centuries. The critical study of the Bible that emerged in the wake of the enlightenment built on the Protestant notion of direct textual access.<sup>2</sup> We are confronted today with questions of methodology, which are equally ethical questions. What is the criterion in our field for classifying interpretive claims as true or false? To what extent can we reconstruct ancient history on the basis of a limited

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2 See in particular, the analysis and critique of Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

number of sources, and to what extent can we reconstruct the early history of our texts? Is the academic study of texts a neutral activity? Are there practices of scholarship and interpretation that are violent? These are some of the questions that are considered in this collection of essays.

In “Karl Georg Kuhn (1906–1976) – Two Academic Careers in Germany,” Hermann Lichtenberger looks back at his teacher’s work on ancient Judaism. In anguished retrospection, Lichtenberger traces Kuhn’s glowingly successful career in its two stages, pre- and post-World War II. During the years of flourishing National Socialism, Kuhn was a fervent and vocal antisemite, and an enthused accomplice in Nazi politics. After the war, allowed to return quickly to his university, Kuhn enjoyed long decades as a distinguished academic. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls provided Kuhn with an opportunity to relaunch his research on ancient Jewish sources. His later academic successes effectively and enduringly concealed the virulent antisemitism of his early career.<sup>3</sup>

How did Jewish scholars navigate their understanding of Jewish law in light of the demands of liberal Protestantism? Irene Zwiep, in her contribution, “Judaism as Religious Cosmopolitanism: Apologetics and Appropriation in the *Jüdisches Lexikon* (1927–1930),” investigates this question by analyzing how the authors of this lexicon, working within a cultural context of acculturation and assimilation, sought to rehabilitate Judaism as something both different from Protestant Christianity and yet compatible with it. Presenting contemporary Judaism as a kind of *Kulturprotestantismus*, the *Jüdisches Lexikon*’s authors stressed the inherent humanism of Jewish law.

In “Antisemitism and Early Scholarship on Ancient Antisemitism,” René Bloch shows how the agenda of the work of classicists (such as Mommsen, Zacher, and Stähelin) and theologians (such as Leipoldt) on ancient antisemitism often overlap. Both classicists and theologians viewed ancient Judaism, from its origins through to the rabbinic period, in the Wellhausenian mode as a tale of decline. Simplistic readings of classical texts on Jews and Judaism as evidence of Greco-Roman authors’ shift from pro-Jewish sympathies to anti-Jewish hostility smoothly cohered with Christian interpretations of Judaism as a religion whose promising beginnings gave way to spiritual

3 Berndt Schaller, who sadly passed away in May 2020, has written a monograph on Kuhn and his scholarship. The book is expected to be published posthumously in the near future and was unfortunately not yet available while preparing this volume. See Berndt Schaller, *Christlich-akademische Judentumsforschung im Dienst der NS-Rassenideologie und -Politik: Der Fall des Karl Georg Kuhn* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021).

desuetude, degeneration and decay. Read in this way, the sources of ancient antisemitism served to legitimate these modern scholars' own antisemitism.

Konrad Schmid tracks the history of the polemical designation *Spätjudentum* long before Wellhausen, to its roots in late eighteenth century Germany, whence it traveled as a term of historical description into other European languages. In modern times, Wilhelm Bousset's work deployed *Spätjudentum* as part of an agenda at once antisemitic and anti-Catholic. Linked to the history of the term is the question of Jewish origins: when did Judaism begin? For scholars such as Klaus Koch and Martin Noth, rephrasing the term as "spätisraelitisch," Judaism was always deteriorated, thus always "late."

In "'Circumcision is Nothing': A Non-Reformation Reading of Paul's Letters," Paula Fredriksen interprets Paul's teachings against "circumcision" and about "new creation" historically, showing that in both cases he has only gentiles in mind. She then traces the ways that patristic anti-Judaism was weaponized anew by sixteenth-century Reformers against Catholics, thereby driving a global condemnation of circumcision and of Torah into modern New Testament Study's constructs of an anti-Jewish Paul. The historical apostle, she argues, lived, thought and taught within his native Judaism. His rejection of circumcision for *gentiles* rested upon his conviction that their connection to Abraham was achieved not through flesh but *only* through spirit, as an eschatological act of Christ.

In "Anti-Judaism and Philo-Judaism in Pauline Studies, Then and Now," Matthew Novenson reveals the various agendas implicit in current Pauline Studies. Often, he observes, the Paul whom different scholars present (whether anti-Judaic or philo-Judaic) bears a close resemblance to the theologies of his modern interpreters. The distinction between the views of the first-century Paul and his modern interpreters all but collapses. This erasure of difference, concludes Novenson, seems very much a specifically Protestant phenomenon since, for Catholics, there is much less at stake in how exegesis reconstructs Paul.

Olivia Stewart Lester, in "The Sibylline Oracles: A Case Study in Ancient and Modern Anti-Judaism," takes scholarship on the highly heterogeneous *Oracula Sibyllina* as an example of how biased views on Judaism impact modern scholarly attitudes towards the Jewishness of these pseudepigrapha. As Stewart Lester shows, the Sibylline Oracles are a particularly interesting case in point because the corpus itself includes anti-Jewish additions to originally Jewish texts.

Jörg Frey, in "Anti-Judaism, Philosemitism, and Protestant New Testament Studies: Perspectives and Questions," first sketches the historical development of various Protestant positions towards Jews and Judaism over time (which

were often but not always negative); and then, from a theological perspective, considers some of the anti-Jewish hostility on display in canonical Christian texts. He then reflects on “philosemitism” both within and without scholarly circles, and concludes with a call for handling these negative New Testament passages with honest and ethnical integrity.

In “American Biblical Scholarship and the Post-War Battle against Antisemitism,” Steven Weitzman shows how interfaith biblical scholarship could lay the groundwork for coordinated interfaith action. Taking William Foxwell Albright, a major figure in 20th century American biblical scholarship, as his example, Weitzman shows how Albright, despite his ambivalence about Judaism, eagerly combatted antisemitism and helped to integrate Jewish scholars into American academia.

From a theological point of view, John Barton’s “Jewish and Christian Approaches to Biblical Theology” considers the differences over time between Christian and Jewish readings of the Bible. He contrasts the Christian master narrative of sin, failure and redemption to the Jewish (that is, rabbinic) reading of Torah as a way to live a Jewish life within the soaring ups and the downward swoops of the people of Israel’s continuing history. Barton also lifts up the rabbinic principle *davar aher*, ‘another opinion,’ proposing it as a generative model for Christian theology as well. Christian theology of the church’s Old Testament, long emphasizing and valuing unity and harmony, might very well profit, he suggests, from accommodating differences and varieties of doctrine as well.

This volume is the product of a two-day conference held in Oriel College, Oxford at the Centre for the Study of the Bible. Faculty, invited scholars, students and community members came together to think about the interaction between scholarship and society, about the redemptive and destructive impact that scholarship can have, and about our responsibilities as citizens, scholars, students and teachers. None of us has invented or created the scholarly heritage to which we contribute and which we pass on. Rather, through many years of painstaking study and various forms of renunciation, we have become initiated into a community of learning, which we love and with which we identify in the deepest possible sense. Indeed, our teachers have had a deep influence upon our lives and their teachings have shaped our thinking and perception of the world, and of each other. But our discipline is not innocent. This volume asks of each of us to reflect on our past as scholars, to acknowledge our responsibility to our students, and to prepare the pathway for scholarship that is mindful of its own power and susceptibility to violence and racism. We mark the past in order to help shape a future which is full of hope and generosity, and a future that does not recycle or repeat the hatred of the past.

The editors want to express their gratitude to Oriel College, Oxford, the Centre for the Study of the Bible, and the Knapp foundation for its generous support that enabled the conversation and this volume. We also wish to thank Olivia Stewart Lester for her help in organising the Oxford conference during the initial stages, as well as our wonderful community of undergraduates, post-graduates, and postdoctoral fellows who offered crucial support during the conference, and those who prepared the manuscript for publication:

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