

Tamás Turán, *Ignaz Goldziher as a Jewish Orientalist: Traditional Learning, Critical Scholarship, and Personal Piety* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), pp. 298.

by *George Y. Kohler*

The author of this book likes to refer to Goldziher—scholarship as *Goldziherology*, his own work would then be the ultimate coursebook of this science: It is a truly comprehensive intellectual biography of Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921), the Hungarian-Jewish scholar who almost single handedly initiated the modern academic treatment of Islam. Reading through the 300 pages, it seems the book takes into account almost every single line Goldziher has ever written: from his so far almost ignored youthful Hungarian writings to his famous and extensive diary, and of course his vast oeuvre of scholarship on religion. In addition, Turán presents Goldziher the man from every possible angle: the jealous private person and the grumpy public intellectual, the first rate scholar of Islam and Judaism, the Hungarian patriot as well as an almost clichéd member of the German born movement of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Turán has found a wonderful motive describing Goldziher’s life: He was “fleeing from God to God,” from the God of Jewish tradition in his youth to the new, not less spiritual God of the academic pursuit of religion, in parallel: from the God of Judaism to the God of Islam—apparently as a kind of replacement after his disappointment about the contemporary developments in the religion of his fathers, especially in Hungary. And this is probably also the most interesting discovery of the book: Goldziher as a theologian, as a religious devotee himself, is portrayed here as the classic exemplar of the liberal Jew of nineteenth century—featuring all the elements of the first decades of Jewish reform theology: admiration for the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible (Moses, he wrote, was “the grandson of the prophets” p. 103); in this connection: the rediscovery of prophetic Messianism as a this-worldly universal ideal, in which Goldziher intended to raise his children (p. 226); the insisting on the purity of monotheism as a means of de-mythologizing religion (p. 144); a deep appreciation for Biblical criticism, not only as critical philology but as “honest theology” (p. 106); and finally: Judaism as possessing an ethical mission to the civilized world (p. 114). But most importantly, for Goldziher, as it was for his

German role models (first and foremost Abraham Geiger, as Turán shows), as well as for his West European followers and students, *Wissenschaft* was not a *Beruf* (Weber) but a religion, the new academic approach to written sources and lived history was the final stage in the *religious* development of Judaism. This position, today either completely forgotten or aggressively rejected, was the most common feature among liberal Jews around the turn of the 20th century.¹ It seems that Goldziher became the famous scholar of Islam “only” as a result of his departure from traditional Judaism, a telling case for the influence of science on life, and vice versa.

Especially in his welcoming attitude to Biblical criticism Goldziher seems to have been even a true pioneer of the *Wissenschaft* movement, according to Turán’s research presented in the book. Again following Geiger’s first careful steps on this field (and in a way also the more radical approach of Leopold Zunz), Goldziher supported a critical academic approach to the Bible from as early as the 1870s, claiming that ignoring source criticism was in fact the very cause of all the many flaws in modern Jewish education. Religious philosophy, that is, Jewish theology, was for Goldziher not only a central intellectual enterprise of the Middle Ages—it was of at least the same importance during his own time, the modern age. His personal view of religious reforms of Judaism, also elaborated on extensively in the book, is complex and fluctuated between the bottom-up approach of the younger Zacharias Frankel (“only what the community is willing to tolerate”) and the more radical position of Geiger who made academic research the exclusive criterium for the validity of a custom or a ritual, and thus suggested to abandon every law that would not pass this test. Turán discusses this within the framework of Pauline distinction between *dead and living* traditions, albeit ignoring that for both Geiger and Goldziher also the “living” laws of Judaism were laws, whereas Paul seems to have had rather antinomian intentions in the first place (p. 201). While Geiger had declared it the primary function of the oral law of Judaism to revive and regenerate

¹ Max Wiener called *Wissenschaft* “a matter of life and death” for Judaism. Historical research, and in particular, research into the history of its ideas, is not only a means for clarifying the essential content of Judaism, wrote Wiener; it actually plays a substantial role in the development of Judaism, its very subject. Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation* (Philo Verlag: Berlin 1933), 176.

the Bible, Goldziher surprisingly assigned this very function to modern Jewish theology.

While the above mentioned are the main new and original contributions of the book to the research of the thought of Jewish scholars at the turn of the 20th century, Turán does much more, especially in regard to Goldziher's enormous achievement in the study of Islam, the relation of this study to his scholarship of Judaism (are there theological or legalistic parallels?), the views that Goldziher held on education, and finally Goldziher's personal relationship with other Hungarian scholars, less known to the English or German reading public. All this is of course embedded in a detailed account of Goldziher's private life and professional career, both of which were shaped by a great number of difficult experiences and setbacks. One of Goldziher's two sons committed suicide, his own way to a paid professorship was thorny and long, often also because of his own jealousy and stubbornness, as Turán shows convincingly.

This said, it must be admitted that the book is difficult to read. The English is often awkward and hardly comprehensible, obviously as a consequence of the translation from the original Hungarian. The use of (non-citation) quotation marks is so extensive that the reader often gets lost: Is that ironic? Or does it indicate a semantic shift from the use of the phrase in the Goldziher's time? In summary, the abundance of factual material presented in this work is its great strength, it gives the reader the opportunity to construct her own picture of Goldziher's life, work, personality and theology—without necessarily having to agree with the author's often lengthy comments and analyses. This picture of Goldziher, for the present writer, is that of an extraordinarily talented, pathbreaking scholar who was at the same time a difficult person, heavily torn between vanity and a deeply felt moral commitment. A typical liberal Jewish theologian of his era who at the same time took the highly atypical step of trying to overcome his own religious doubts through the study of Islam, which brought him eternal fame.

George Y. Kohler, Bar Ilan University

George Y. Kohler

How to quote this article:

George Y. Kohler, review of *Ignaz Goldziher as a Jewish Orientalist: Traditional Learning, Critical Scholarship, and Personal Piety*, by Tamás Turán, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15804