Comment on Kaiser, Christ and Canaan: the religion of Israel in Protestant Germany, 1871–1918, by Paul Michael Kurtz, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2018

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Paul Michael Kurtz’s excellent recent book is a very noteworthy addition to Mohr Siebeck’s highly respected Forschungen zum Alten Testament series. Its range of coverage and interest, though, is considerably broader than that classification might suggest. Kurtz’s substantial, fluent, and carefully researched text offers rich insights into the concerns, tensions and resonances of German Protestant biblical scholarship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, explored through the prism of a contextual analysis of the work of two key scholars in that field: Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) and Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932).

The book is a work of intellectual history, rather than a dual biography. It includes, though, a considerable amount of biographical reflection on both men, who are each carefully situated in their cultural and intellectual context. A core biographical similarity binds together the two men, and thus also Kurz’s volume: Wellhausen and Gunkel were both sons of Protestant pastors in the kingdom of Hannover, and they both pursued flourishing and mobile academic careers in northern Germany. The central concern of the book is how they each approached the Old Testament in historical terms, and how this related to their sense of scholarly, political and religious purpose in the Germany of their own day. The ‘Protestantization of the past’ (14) as Kurtz puts it, is a core theme. The intellectual labours of both men, each in their own way, bound together liberal Protestant conceptions of the biblical past with the values of scholarly authority and academic authority that were in continual formation in the German present.

Wellhausen started his career as a theologian, but later moved to the field of philology. He is best known for his Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels (1878), in which he put forward his classic ‘documentary hypothesis’ of the Pentateuch (or, more precisely, the ‘Hexateuch’: the five books of the Jewish Torah plus Joshua). His work ranged much more widely than this, though, encompassing important studies of early Islam and of the New Testament. Kurtz skilfully draws out the connections between these varied strands of Wellhausen’s work, bringing to the fore the importance in his scriptural thinking of political issues of nationhood and statecraft. Kurtz characterises him, in political terms, as a ‘Bismarckian liberal’ (67). An enthusiast for German unification, he identified in Mohammed and David the same abilities of state-building and Realpolitik that he admired in the German political master of his own era.

Kurtz’s core chapter on Wellhausen’s historical interpretation of the Old Testament is titled ‘The Rise and Fall of a Hebrew Nation’, and approaches Wellhausen’s scholarship very much through this state-focused lens. Wellhausen’s central preoccupation, Kurtz convincingly shows, is with the historical trajectory of the Israelites, from the time of Moses, as a politically constituted nation. The key turning-point in this story, for Wellhausen, was the period of the Babylonian exile, which brought to an end of the political autonomy of Judah. ‘From the exile there returned, not a nation,
but a religious sect’, he wrote. This return marked the start of the era of Judaism, which he bound tightly together with the death, in political terms, of Israel (99). The era of Judaism, for Wellhausen, was a period of degeneration from political strength to weakness, and from intellectual vigour to dogmatism. The roots of authentic Christianity, in his view, lay in the earlier period of the Hebraic Old Testament narrative.

Wellhausen’s approach to the history of ancient Israel both was and wasn’t exceptional. He puts forward an analysis that approximates to a stadial history of the ‘national soul’ of Israel, which exemplifies a developmental shape that he presents as common to all humanity. His historical interpretation of early Islam follows the same broad pattern. The ethical monotheism of the ancient Hebrews, however, given voice most clearly by the prophets, stands outside this quasi-scientific developmental account of human history. It is this unique ethical lineage that is the inheritance of Christianity, the preservation of which he ascribes to ‘the providence of God’ (160).

Hermann Gunkel, Wellhausen’s junior by almost two decades, is yet more closely associated with a historical (as opposed to a philological) approach to the Bible. His work is affiliated, above all, with the ‘history of religions school’ of late nineteenth-century Göttingen. Kurtz underscores the ways in which the intellectual and cultural context of that period incubated the perspctival shifts of the Göttingen movement, and the particularities of Gunkel’s outlook. The challenge of what Suzanne Marchand has called the ‘furor orientalis’—a neo-romantic, orientalist fascination with alternative, non-biblical, Eastern accounts of the ancient past—took many guises. Taken as a whole, though, this wave of interest, and the archaeological and philological development of its scholarly underpinnings, severely destabilised the intellectual status of biblical studies, and its suturing, most recently and eloquently by Wellhausen, of the history of ancient Israel with the fundamental religious spirit of Christianity.

Gunkel’s central concern, Kurtz argues, was to repair that link. His approach to the Old Testament was fundamentally and pervasively shaped by the New. He insistently and carefully situated ancient Israel in the wider history of the ancient Near East, exploring in detail the relationships between Babylonian and Caananite culture—for example in the influence of the ‘Marduk myth’ on the Genesis narrative. This labour of historical integration, however, ultimately served to distil the essential particularity of the ancient Israelites. It was this uniqueness of spirit, which like Wellhausen he saw manifested most distinctly in the prophets, that was his central interest, and which of course pointed the way to Christianity. In his work from the 1890s to the 1920s Gunkel was above all devoted to the historical excavation of this anticipation and essence of Christianity, which he sought to communicate to a broad Christian audience (251). He also communicated an evaluatively split view of Jewish history that strongly resembled Wellhausen’s: Gunkel lauded the ancient Israelites for their loftiness of their ethical monotheism, but regarded the post-exilic history of Judaism as a degeneration from those heights.

Kurtz’s study places Protestantism, as a confessional and also a cultural outlook, at the centre of his approach to these two individuals, and suggests—insofar as we are invited to regard Wellhausen and Gunkel as representative of wider trends in late Imperial Germany—this this interface between Protestantism and German biblical scholarship in this period merits closer attention than it has received hitherto. While the significance and complexity of this intertwinement is convincingly demonstrated for the book’s two subjects, one is left wondering quite how representative they are of the field as a whole, and also if more might have been said about how the possibilities and problematics of the nexus between confessional particularity and academic values of professional objectivity shifted over time. Wellhausen started out as a theologian, but moved to a confessionally unmarked professional position. His rise to prominence broadly coincided with the Kulturkampf of the 1870s: this aspect of the cultural climate is only mentioned in passing by Kurtz, but surely is likely to have some significance in shaping the reception and perhaps the presentation and Wellhausen’s work. Gunkel seems to have sustained a more stable identity as a ‘public Protestant’, speaking from a confessional perspective and to some degree to a confessional audience. The rise of German social science, however, put this easy coexistence of scholarly and confessional identities
under some strain. The demand for ‘value free’ historical and social inquiry was increasingly heard from the 1890s, and was central to the principles underpinning the foundation, in 1908, of the German Sociological Association, led by Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel. Alongside their insistence on objectivity, these ‘founding fathers’ of German sociology—Weber and Sombart in particular—were extremely interested in religion and its history. Did Wellhausen and Gunkel recognise the challenge that these scholars posed to their own academic assumptions, and attempt in any way, even if only parenthetically, to respond to them?

One also wonders what possible impact there might have been on these two scholars of the varied and in some cases prominent Jewish voices in German public and scholarly debate during their lifetimes. In stark contrast to Wellhausen’s and Gunkel’s view that post-exilic Judaism failed to sustain the ethical heights of prophetic Hebraism, German Jewish intellectual leaders had been insisting since the 1840s that this ethical purity was the enduring essence of Judaism, and its protection and propagation the core of the divine ‘mission of Israel’. Reform scholar-rabbis such as Abraham Geiger were particularly closely associated with these arguments: in his Das Judenthum und seine Geschichte (1865) Geiger engaged closely with recent Christian biblical scholarship, and confidently asserted the enduring ethical and messianic significance of Judaism. The work of the popular historian Heinrich Graetz, which reached a very wide audience in the late nineteenth century, was similarly imbued with a belief in Jewish mission and a pugnacious defence of the importance of Jews in German and European history and culture. Wellhausen, Gunkel and their peers in ‘Protestant Germany’ must, surely, have been aware of these thinkers and their work. They did not, though, engage with their arguments in any explicit manner. Were they largely oblivious to these Jewish voices, or did this alternative perspective nonetheless make some mark on their own scholarship and self-presentation?

The fundamentally ‘split’ view of Judaism in Wellhausen and Gunkel—admiring of prophetic Hebraism, and identifying this as the root of authentic Christianity, while taking a largely negative view of post-exilic Judaism and its later rabbinic development—has deep antecedents. Kurtz thoughtfully surveys the long-standing debate over the extent and nature of Wellhausen’s Hegelianism, while lamenting the ‘forests’ worth of trees’ that have been sacrificed to this issue (140). While these controversies over labelling and lineage have perhaps indeed been over-laboured, it seems nonetheless significant to probe the significance for Wellhausen, or indeed for Gunkel, of Hegel’s toweringly influential positioning of Judaism in his account of the prehistory of the ‘German spirit’. The Jews, Hegel noted, were the first to attain a pure understanding of the separation of spirit from nature. He thus cast the ancient Hebrews as of vital philosophical importance at the outset his history of Western thought, associating them with an admirably ‘childlike’ purity in contrast to which the later Jews, to whom he ascribed a ‘slavish’ and ‘oriental’ character, were of little value or interest. The complexities and limits of Wellhausen’s and Gunkel’s efforts to incorporate the biblical narrative into their wider conception of human history might also fruitfully be connected to pioneering eighteenth-century endeavours in essentially the same intellectual project by one of their predecessors at the University of Göttingen, Johann David Michaelis. Like those later scholars, Michaelis was structurally torn between a desire to integrate his subject into the intellectual norms and conceptions of historical change of his era, and a countervailing insistence on a theological uniqueness and essential ahistoricity at the heart of the Old Testament. This fundamental tension, rearticulated in so many different ways and contexts, is a perennial of Christian scholarship on Judaism.

Of the three thematic terms of his book’s title, the first—‘Kaiser’—is the most important binding element in Kurtz’s argument. Authentic religious understanding in the Protestant tradition (‘Christ’) and the Old Testament historical narrative underpinned with philological and archaeological evidence (‘Canaan’) were drawn together by both scholars in broad support of a notion of political peoplehood that fitted the nationalistic mood of the Kaiserreich in the decades leading up to the First World War. This political aspect is most clearly evident in Wellhausen’s work. ‘We must acknowledge’, he wrote, ‘that the nation is more certainly created by God than the Church’, putting forward a historiographical conception of religion as ultimately subordinate to and supportive of
the state in a manner that was, at Kurtz puts it, ‘fit for a Protestant German Empire’ (120-21). Gun- kel’s interests were less explicitly political, but no less intertwined with the Germanic cultural patriotism of the era. Writing in the vein of Herder’s On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry, in the revival of which around the turn of the twentieth century he played a significant role, Gunkel closely associated the poetic and moral purity of the Hebrew prophets with his identification of those same virtues in his pantheon of German Protestant heroes, from Luther to Goethe (272-3).

This outlook also, of course, stands in a much longer tradition of reading the Hebrew Bible as an underwriting text for modern statecraft and national identity. ‘Political theology’ emerged in the seventeenth century as a distinctly Protestant project—not in the fragmented Germany of the time, but in the leading mercantile powers of the era, the Dutch Republic and England, each of whom came to conceive themselves as having in some way inherited from the ancient Hebrews the mantle of divine chosenness. The term ‘political theology’, however, is of German stamp, coined by the conservative jurist Carl Schmitt in 1922. Schmitt, of course, stands some way outside the remit of Kurtz’s study. The question of the possible contact zone between his political thought and the thinking of Wellhausen and Gunkel nonetheless brings into focus two broader questions about their significance and legacy. To what extent were their outlooks exclusively Protestant, and to what extent overlapping or intersecting with the religious politics of some German Catholics (such as Schmitt)? And how did their arguments resonate after the First World War—in the Weimar period and indeed into the Nazi era? (The terminus date of Kurtz’s study is 1918, but Gunkel lived until 1932, and the final edition of his commentary on Psalms, completed and edited by his student Joachim Begrich, was published in 1933.)

One might also ask, despite the obvious disagreements and tensions, whether something might fruitfully be teased out about elements of communality between these leading figures of Protestant biblical scholarship and some of their Jewish academic peers in late Imperial Germany. Wellhausen, Kurtz notes, did not have an easy relationship with the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen, and both men perceived a chasm between them at least as much of scholarly language (philology versus philosophy) as of confession. With respect to their Germanic patriotism, though, the two men were perhaps surprisingly similar. In his Deutschtum und Judentum (1915), written above all to persuade American Jews to oppose the United States’ entry into First World War against Germany, Cohen resonantly linked the spirit of the Hebrew prophets with the values and historical destiny of ‘Germanism’. For Cohen, this German historical spirit did not stand in contrast to the later degeneration of Judaism, but in unique alliance with the enduring Jewish mission to the world. These differences with Wellhausen are most certainly salient—but so too are the points of similarity.

Disclosure statement

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