



Franz Rosenzweig 1886-1929

| Lux, Rüdiger

A biographical sketch of Rosenzweig, who needs to be re-discovered by Jews and Christians and for the modern Christian-Jewish dialogue.

Franz Rosenzweig 1886–1929

by Rüdiger Lux

Judaism is not the acceptance of a doctrine, of a religion and its rituals. It is the experience of a pre-existent reality, which has its ultimate basis in Israel's "being with the Father", in the election of Israel. There may be times when this reality is obscured by the manifold and colorful reality of the nations among whom the Jew lives. But even hidden, it remains real and mysteriously active, and there may come a time when the blessed

gift, the heavy burden of its confirmation, is bestowed upon those born into it.

Rosenzweig, 11 years old, said to a teacher he wanted "to learn Hebrew properly". At 20 and struggling with Adolf Harnack's liberal Protestant "Theology of Compromise", he tried to account for his Jewishness: "It is the religion of my fathers ... I like to observe some of the customs - without any real reason ... I like to think in the images of the biblical story."

His cousin, Hans Ehrenberg, converted to Christianity and was baptized in 1911. Rosenzweig wrote to his own parents: "We are Christians in all things, we live in a Christian state, go to Christian schools, read Christian books, our whole culture is based on a Christian foundation." He came very close to the brink of the baptismal font. On the evening of July

7, 1913, while discussing baptism with Eugen Rosenstock and his cousins Hans and Rudolf Ehrenberg, Rosenzweig promised to get baptized. However, he made one condition. He was, he said, not a goy, but a Jew, and wanted to take a closer look at the things from which he would be separated by this conversion. He asked his relatives for a time of contemplation and reviewing, a time of a last (or was it the first?) conscious participation in the "Ten High Holy Days from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur. For him these became the "ten days of return" to his roots in Judaism. Later he wrote to his cousin Rudolf saying: "It [conversion to Christianity] seems unnecessary and for me impossible now. I remain a Jew." He expressed his resolve to reject conversion saying: "We agree on what Christ and his Church mean in the world: no-one comes to the Father but through him (Jn 14:6). No one comes to the

Father - but it is different when somebody does not have to come to the Father because he is already with him. And this is so for the people of Israel (not with the individual Jew." The open bracket before "(not ... is confusing and needs to close. Perhaps "... (if not ... Jew)" or even "... Israel and for the individual Jew." ?

The character and path of the synagogue are quite different from those of the church. At times they are in sharp opposition to each other, yet they belong together and stand continually - though antithetically - as united in contradiction to a paganism that is without revelation. By revelation Rosenzweig meant that which guarantees the continuous vocation, the lasting right and continuing commission of church and synagogue. It is this "objective origin" of each, this "fixed orientation",

which at one and the same time distinguishes them and binds them together.

Rosenzweig first studied medicine and then from 1907 to 1910 read history and philosophy. He used the pursuit of German Idealism as the springboard for his own "new thinking". "The thesis Goethe and the antithesis Kant is followed by the synthesis, for which I know no name other than, so I hope, my own." In 1912 he submitted a thesis for his doctor's degree to Prof. Friedrich Meinecke. This was later published in two separate volumes, first as *Hegel und der Staat* (Munich 1920) in which he declared: "I believe my Judaization has made me not a worse, but a better German." In 1926 he published an edition of minor texts *Zweistromland*. Here his German and Jewish backgrounds flow together like two rivers, as they do in German Judaism.

He became widely acknowledged through his works where he maintained that there was only one period in German history "where the professor of philosophy and the philosopher were one and the same", and that was the time of classic German Idealism. However, it was not enough for him to be just a mediator of this great spiritual tradition. He wanted to find his own philosophical answer to life and not make himself comfortable in what he called "the scholars' republic") [Gelehrtenrepublik]. "The professor engages in a business that takes him out of the world into pure science." Contrary to this image he saw in Prof Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) an ideal academic. "Instead of high-wire acrobats doing their daring jumps on the trapeze of thought, I saw a human being. Here one had the indestructible feeling: this man must philosophize,

he has the treasure
in himself which
forces the mighty
word to light."

In 1913
Rosenzweig
studied Judaism
intensely and met
Cohen, who had by
then given up his
Chair of Philosophy
at Marburg
University to teach
Jewish Philosophy
of Religion at the
School for the
Science of Judaism
in Berlin.
Rosenzweig
inherited Cohen's
thinking in
correlation
[

]. He did not use
the word
correlation, but the
much wider
theological term
covenant, all his
thinking led him to
consider the given
relations in which
all things find
themselves rather
than the ideas of
matter itself and
the essence of
things, as had so
many philosophers
before him. All the
philosophy he had
read had been
monistic. The little
word and had not
been discovered by
philosophers —
God and
humanity,
humanity and God,

God and nature,
nature and God.
Rosenzweig
discovered in his
Judaism the and of
the correlations in
which he himself
stood.

The so-called quest
for the historical
Jesus attempted to
free Jesus from all
dogmatic
overlays. This
quest tried to
understand Jesus"
claims in the
context of his true
and full humanity,
but the more his
uniqueness
became based on
his historic
existence, the
stranger and
more distant he
became: he could
not become what
the God-man of
the dogma had
been. The counter
move was to be
expected. After the
first half of the
dogmatic paradox
"true man and
true God" had
been shipwrecked,
one had to build
on the second half,
namely
philosophical
theology instead of
historical theology,
on the Christ idea
instead of the
historical Jesus
idea. As
Rosenzweig asked:
"Or is it necessary
to win back the

courage for the whole of the paradox?"

Rosenzweig saw in Buber's *Reden über das Judentum* a similar dilemma. Buber had tried to develop the idea of an ideal human community from his concept of Hebrew humanism, in which the people of God live among the nations. Rosenzweig saw here the danger of a theological evaporation of the Jewish people into a general idea which is not in any way bound to their concrete existence: "The belief in the Jewish people cannot be based on its historical character alone." Again Rosenzweig uses the *and of Cohen* and encourages philosophers to stand up for the whole paradox, for "the election of the people and the people itself". This *and* speaks of tension and polarity. But only out of this tension, "this highest estrangement, can the eternal meaning of the existence of our peoplehood

proceed, the drive that always renews itself to reconcile the unconditional duality into an unconditional unity." Rosenzweig interprets this tension, this polarity with his concept of revelation because it is not kindled in humanity, but even is opposed to humanity. Therefore it is necessary to have courage to face the whole paradox: "In order to understand the Jewish people as the heart-piece of the faith, one has to think the God who is the bridge between Jews and the rest of humanity."

The Star of Redemption (1985) is Rosenzweig's great book where he systematically set out his philosophical answer to life. Here he describes revelation as "dialogical occurrence of language". The monologue of the old thinking is broken where the world is only an It, a variety of objects, in which God too is an It, and about whom one could

talk and think as an object. The "new thinking" assumes that the I receives itself in the You so that in the challenging call of revelation our eyes and our ears are opened. "The human I is dull and dumb and waits for the redeeming word of God: "Adam, where are you?" To this first loud You comes the first timid I of shame. This relationship moves in the I and the You and again in the I."

The Star of Redemption is divided into three parts: The Elements, The Path and The Form [Gestalt] which may be more fully described as the eternal transcendent world.

"All knowledge of the universe [das All] begins with death, with the fear of death." The sub-title of The Elements is "Against the Philosophers". Philosophers, the old thinking, had tried to quench the cry of death within

themselves by considering their essential existence, by looking for the eternal essence of their being. But Rosenzweig describes this way of thinking as deeply diseased. He does not want to avoid death as an experience of reality, and so does not enquire about essential nature, but real nature. His "new thinking" begins with the experience of the reality of the elements: God, World, Humanity. He does not ask about their essence and in this way can easily jump over the problem of time and death. New thinking is to know, to acknowledge, what God, World and Humanity do or what happens in them in time and reality. These are the factual elements, the ever-existing perimeter [Vorwelt], though not goal, the empirical starting point of his thinking.

In The Path
Rosenzweig
concerns himself
with the
relationship of
elements with each

other. His central point is the concept of revelation as the real biblical miracle of faith from which a theology, tired of miracles, has tried to distance itself. So his sub-title here is "Against the Theologians". Here he develops the concept of revelation in the great triad of past, present and future. In creation God is revealed in acts which are always already there before I am. In the present God is revealed strictly speaking [im engeren Sinn] by meeting us as the living word, as claim and offer of love. In the future God promises revelation as redemption. The person then experiences revelation as a dynamic relationship, the path where God moves from creation through revelation to redemption.

This great world drama is told in three tenses, actually "told" only in the book of the past. In the book of the present the

"telling" is taken over by the direct dialogue [Wechselrede]. And in the book of the future the language of the chorus rules supreme, because the individual can only grasp the things of the future in as far as that person is able to say We. Now thinking is replaced by speaking. "Thinking is timeless ... speaking is bound to time and nourished by time." In Rosenzweig the dialogical philosopher becomes the "speaking thinker" [Sprachdenker].

In The Form he poses the questions: Does all that happened in the past culminate only in the present, in the moment of perception? Is there nothing that gives direction and character to this stream? Is there nothing left but the unredeemed instant? For this final part Rosenzweig chooses as his subtitle, "Against the Tyrants". The present kingdoms

have no remaining form, because the redemptive future shines already into the present. Rosenzweig saw this anticipation of the eternal kingdom realized in the communities of synagogue and church, in their alternation of everyday life and day of rest, their liturgy and their festive year cycle. Both synagogue and church have their basis in the revelation of God's name: "I am there and I will be there." (Ex 3:14).

In this last part of his book he enquires about truth, this innermost chamber of revelation, of the name of God. Yet this truth has to be "different from the truth of the philosophers ... it has to be truth for everybody." Truth has to become our truth. "Truth is no longer what is true, but becomes that which has been proved [bewährt] to be true." This is the continuous task of synagogue and church, to prove the one truth of God, truth which is given to

them only as
divided earthly
truth. And they do
this in prayer and
commandment,
with which they
keep the thirst for
the eternal
kingdom of
redemption
unquenched in the
midst of the
unredeemed
kingdoms of this
world. Each prays
and lives
according to truth
as each receives
and understands.

The Star of
Redemption does
not lead us out of
this world beyond
reality. Rather it
concludes with the
stepping out into
the world with the
task of proving the
truth in the world.
"About death ...",
are the first words
of the book.
Rosenzweig starts
out with a reality
that is experienced
very personally.
"Into life ...", are his
last words. The
truth of revelation
leads into the
reality of life when
it is proved
[bewährt]. After
completing The
Star of Redemption
Rosenzweig felt
that he now had to
personally face up
to proving the
truth and not avoid
reality by

continuing to write books any longer.

In 1920 Rosenzweig founded Das Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus [The Free Jewish House of Teaching]. Anybody was admitted without exam or testimonial. It was open to Jews and non-Jews and not committed to any sect within Judaism, but to Judaism as a whole. Study was not meant to consist of writing or reading books only. Rosenzweig wanted a new kind of learning, what he called "a learning in the opposite direction". By this he meant "a learning, no longer out of the Torah into life, but out of life, out of a world that does not know about the law, back into the Torah ... This is the signature of the present time ... Those of us for whom being Jewish has again become the central fact of our lives ... we all know that we have to sacrifice everything for Judaism, yet we cannot sacrifice

anything of
Judaism. To give up
nothing, to deny
nothing, and then
to lead everything
back to our
Jewishness."

In teaching,
monologue had to
give way to
dialogue, the
written word was
to be less
important than the
living exchange.
The bossy teacher
would not walk
among the
students
anymore, the
teacher must now
turn and throw off
the mandarin robe
— only then would
the academic lion
of oratory [der
Vortragslöwe] no
longer roar among
plateachers. "The
lectern has too
often been
misused as a bad
pulpit." Not the
expert, but the
person turning to
Judaism becomes a
teacher. Among
other prominent
people engaged to
teach at the
Lehrhaus was
Martin Buber,
whom Rosenzweig
sometimes fondly
called "Rabbi
Martin of
Heppenheim".

the Lehrhaus embraced the whole spectrum of Jewish life: philosophy and politics, law and ethics, art and metaphysics, the experience of God in everyday life and the experience of personal liberation, letter writing and the laying of a banqueting table. When one looks at the programs and curricula and tries to sense this living learning and learning life, one cannot help but dream and wish for things to happen also among Christians. In view of so much estranged Christian behavior [Christlichkeit] one wonders if a Free Christian Lehrhaus could not be the place for a renewed community of learning — a house of teaching, not committed to just one theological or denominational stance, but ecumenically open, without preconditions, where teachers are not experts but fellow learners?

In January 1922
Rosenzweig

became ill with a quickly progressing paralysis. The Lehrhaus continued to 1930. In 1933 Martin Buber opened it again.

The last gift we received from Rosenzweig was his participation, with Martin Buber, in the translation of the Hebrew Bible into modern German. For more than four years, he worked from his vemeat this translation. The hermeneutic principle they used came very close to that used by Martin Luther: "Scripture is poison [Schrift ist Gift], so too the holy one. Only when it is translated back into oral use, the spoken word" [Mündlichkeit] can my stomach tolerate it." When Rosenzweig died on December 10, 1929, they had reached Isaiah 53, the fourth song of the servant of God.

Daily, Rosenzweig had written and received letters. He did not finish his last letter: "... and now it comes, the

point of all points,
which the Lord
really gave me in
my sleep: the
points of all points,
for which it ...".
Here broke the
thread of his life.

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All quotations are
a translation from
the author's
German original,
especially those
from *Der Stern
der Erlösung*.

Rüdiger Lux is
Professor for Old
Testament,
Theological Faculty
of the University of
Leipzig, Germany.

**For further
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