



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
Aldolf 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
[
Beziehungsdenken].
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 subtitle 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 sub-
title, "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 curriculum at
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 vantage point
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*.

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**For further
reading:**

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