



Franz Rosenzweig 1886-1929

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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 [*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 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 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 banquet 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
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Erlösung*.

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**For further
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