



## 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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**For further  
reading:**

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