

George Y. Kohler, *Kabbalah Research in the Wissenschaft des Judentums (1820–1880): The Foundation of an Academic Discipline*, Europäisch-jüdische Studien Beiträge, Band 47 (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), ISBN: 978-3-11-062037-5, 99,95 € / \$114.99 / £91.00, viii + 272 pp.

While venerated as the founding fathers of academic Jewish studies, the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* have been criticized for various types of ideological bias, apologetics, and essentialism. George Y. Kohler's study takes on one of the lines of critique of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* laid out by its twentieth-century successors, that the *Wissenschaft* school shunned the research of Kabbalah and did so for ideological reasons. Eager to achieve the acceptance of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in academe, these scholars supposedly dismissed Kabbalah out of fears that engagement in something as esoteric or irrational would prove embarrassing in the eyes of their gentile peers and negatively influence their project. In this book, Kohler examines the scholarly output of the *Wissenschaft* circle to debunk this claim, and show that, if anything, the opposite is true: the *Wissenschaft* circle was deeply invested in the Kabbalah and deserves full credit for founding its research as an academic discipline. However, the book's goal is not only the revindication of the *Wissenschaft* scholars; an examination of their approach to Kabbalah, as Kohler argues, allows for a better understanding of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and its scholarly agenda.

The book focuses on the first generation of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars, spanning from the 1820s to 1880s, the seminal years for the movement. Over the course of its nineteen chapters, arranged chronologically, the book reassesses the Kabbalah scholarship of better-known scholars such as Abraham Geiger or Heinrich Graetz, but also sheds light on more obscure figures, such as Moritz Freystadt or Ludwig Phillipson. In addition to scholarly books by those authors, it also examines translations, reviews, and correspondence penned by the *Wissenschaft* scholars. In the final chapter, the book surveys the treatment of Kabbalah in various textbooks written in the spirit of the *Wissenschaft* in the 1870s and 1880s. All of this aims to demonstrate that the research of Kabbalah was very much part and parcel of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums'* discourse, as Kohler duly reminds the reader in the conclusion of almost each and every chapter. Kabbalah research was neither neglected by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, nor was an interest of individual authors within the movement. It was an important part of the intellectual exchange, persuasively documented in the book, which took place among the scholarly elite of the *Wissenschaft* and was communicated to the broader audience in schools and cultural societies run in the spirit of the *Wissenschaft*.

This, of course, does not mean that all these scholars were Kabbalah enthusiasts themselves. Many of them, as Kohler notes, held negative views concerning the religious value or historical impact of the Kabbalah on Judaism. An important aspect of Kohler's book is the contextualization of this critique. Firstly, contrary to the common claim, the scholars of the *Wissenschaft* did not seem to be afraid of bringing the Kabbalah under the scrutiny of the gentile gaze of the German academe. Whether they considered Kabbalah beneficial or detrimental, a homegrown Jewish product or a foreign import—they continued to discuss it openly in their works. The aversion to Kabbalah on the part of many protagonists of the book, as Kohler argues, was based on the methodological and theological premises of the *Wissenschaft* project and not on the emancipatory ambitions of its participants. Although they may have rejected Kabbalah as unbecoming of their vision of Judaism, which they construed as a project ruled by scientific criteria, they did not censor it out because it might shame them in the eyes of their gentile peers. This is the broader argument of this volume concerning the *Wissenschaft* project and its methodological integrity. Secondly, the picture of the *Wissenschaft's* scornful attitude towards Kabbalah has been colored by misunderstanding on the part of its critics; such was the case with Graetz. Kohler demonstrates that a thorough critical study of Jewish mysticism was Graetz's explicit desideratum. Moreover, Kohler has devoted a portion of the chapters on Graetz to showing that the often-repeated quotes from Graetz's oeuvre displaying his alleged hostility to Kabbalah are, as trivial as it sounds, cases of mistranslation.

Mistranslations are rather minor issues; the major issue that transpires from Kohler's book is anxiety of influence (even if this term does not appear explicitly). Kohler argues that the negative image of the *Wissenschaft's* engagement in Kabbalah research was intentionally misconstrued by later scholars who advanced the research trends developed by the *Wissenschaft* and benefited from its findings, but were reluctant to give it its due credit. The most consequential is the case of Gershom Scholem, who, as Kohler alleges, suppressed the *Wissenschaft's* research as he was creating the myth of himself as the founder of the academic discipline of Kabbalah study. Kohler's daring critique of the historiography of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, albeit fascinating, remains the most problematic part of his book. The book would have benefitted from a more meticulous treatment of Scholem's critique, especially considering that it seeks the rectification of the Scholemian school's bias.

Meanwhile, the allegations against Scholem and, to a much lesser extent, his successors that are raised in the introduction and referred to occasionally in the text and footnotes are not followed through. The book does a very good job on contextualizing the *Wissenschaft's* discourse. Granting similar favors to

the book's anti-hero and considering other political and ideological motives that may have been behind his "conspiracy theory" (11) on the *Wissenschaft* would be beneficial. A short discussion in the epilogue would have sufficed. Unfortunately, the epilogue (there is no separate conclusion section in the book) only deals with later developments in the *Wissenschaft* movement and does not revisit the problems raised in the introduction.

Despite these drawbacks, the book is a detailed presentation of the chronological development of Kabbalah research in the *Wissenschaft des Judentum* that offers a fresh view on the history of the movement and provides an important correction to the historiography of the Kabbalah scholarship in particular, and Jewish studies in general. The book would interest both scholars working on the *Wissenschaft* and students of the history of Jewish studies. Its thought-provoking critique of the Scholemian school will, hopefully, inspire future research of the politics of Kabbalah research in the twentieth century.

Wojciech Tworek