

# Immanuel Wolf, “On the Concept of a Science of Judaism” (1823)

## Abstract

Immanuel Wolf (a.k.a. Immanuel Wohlwill, 1799–1847) writes of the need to present an image of Judaism in its entirety, including literary perspectives, historical accounts, and statistical information. Such a science, he argues, would be impartial, and would connect Jewish history and culture to a European (and wider human) culture that had falsely regarded it as foreign. Wolf’s programmatic statement appears in the first issue of the journal of the *Association for the Scientific Study of Judaism* [*Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Judenthums*], founded by Leopold Zunz, Eduard Gans, Isaac Marcus Jost, and Moses Moser.

## Source

[...]

Judaism as presented here, as a single whole, based on its own intrinsic principle and embodied, on the one hand, in an extensive literature, and, on the other, in the particular life and activities of a large number of people, can be and must be treated scientifically. Until now, however, it has never been described scientifically in its entirety from a wholly independent point of view. What Jewish scholars achieved along these lines in earlier times was mostly theological in character. History, in particular, was almost completely neglected by them. At the same time, Christian scholars, no matter how great their merit in the literary development of individual aspects of Judaism, have almost always studied Judaism merely for the purpose of obtaining a historical understanding of Christian theology, even if it was not their intention to cast Judaism itself in a hateful light, or, as they put it – to refute it. And even several of the more important learned works in this field have also proceeded from a general, literary point of view and interest, and emerged not merely as a vehicle or propaedeutics of Christian theology, which is, of course, difficult to separate from Jewish theology: still, these accomplishments always apply only to individual aspects of the whole. But if Judaism as such, and all it contains, is to be made into the object of a science, and if a Science of Judaism is to be thus established, then it goes without saying that we are talking about a very different method of treatment. But any object, no matter what type, that in its nature is of interest to the human spirit, and that is rich in content in its diverse configuration and development, can become the object of a special science. The content of this special science is then the systematic development and representation of its object in its fullest scope,<sup>[1]</sup> for its own sake, not for an ulterior purpose. If we apply this to the Science of Judaism, then it entails the following:

- 1) The Science of Judaism comprehends Judaism in its entire scope.
- 2) It develops Judaism in keeping with its conception, and presents it systematically, always relating individual features back to the fundamental principle of the whole.
- 3) It treats its object as such and for its own sake, not for an extraneous purpose, or with a particular intention: It begins without any preconceived opinion and is unconcerned with the final result. Its intention is not to cast its subject in a favorable or an unfavorable light vis-à-vis the prevailing opinions; rather, it shows the object as it is. Science is sufficient unto itself; it is inherently an essential need of the human spirit. It therefore requires no utility beyond itself. But for all that, it remains no less true that every science exerts the most profound

---

influence not only on other sciences but also on life, which is something that will be easy to demonstrate for the Science of Judaism, as well.

Just as every science divides into several parts according to the essential differences of its subject, so shall it be with our science as well. However, in accordance with the above-mentioned twofold division of its object, it will initially split into two main divisions:

I. The study of Judaism in its historical and literary documentation.

II. The statistical study of Judaism in relationship to present-day Jews in all countries of the world.

Even so, Judaism must be presented, first, historically, as it developed and took shape gradually over time; but then philosophically, according to its inner nature and conceptions. Both manners of presentation must be preceded by a philological understanding of the literature of Judaism. We thus end up with: 1) a philology of Judaism, 2) a history of Judaism, and 3) a philosophy of Judaism.

1. The philology of Judaism is the hermeneutical-critical understanding of the entire literature of the Jews, wherein is laid down the particular world of the Jews, their characteristic way of life and thought. To the extent that this literature is clad in different languages, addresses different

subjects, and belongs to different periods of time, philology will also have to utilize different methods.

2. The history of Judaism is the systematic presentation of Judaism as it developed in time and took shape in all aspects. There are, in particular, three of these aspects: the religious, the political, and the literary, though these are everywhere most intimately intertwined; depicted as a whole they produce the general history, but depicted individually they produce the history of religion, of politics, and of literature.

In accordance with the manifold aspects in which the spiritual principle of Judaism has manifested itself over the course of time, or in accordance with the various stages at which the idea constituting the formative life of the whole has appeared, that history will be divided into several periods.<sup>[2]</sup>

3. The philosophy of Judaism. This has as its subject the conception of Judaism as such, which it must develop according to its intrinsic reason and depict in its truth. It teaches us to comprehend the idea of God as it was gradually revealed within Judaism. It further demonstrates the connection between the external historical conditions and the internal movements of the living idea. – While history deals only with what has happened, with the past, philosophy extends also to the situation of the idea in the present, in the Judaism of today. – However, the history of the past is immediately followed, in relation to No. II, by Judaism in the living form in which it still lies before us, that is, in the general statistical position of the Jews in every country, with special consideration of their religious and political condition.

[...]

Yet Judaism is not merely of historical interest, it is not a past principle persevered merely in the pages of history; it lives on, it is still recognized by an integrating and not insignificant (numerically speaking) portion of humanity, even of European humanity. And yet the position of these living witnesses of antiquity among the peoples of Europe is still being debated. Here, as in many other places, the institutions of the Middle Ages have lost their meaning. The situation of humanity has changed but has not yet been settled. On the condition of the Jews, as well, no universally valid principle has yet been found; and if there is ever to be a just decision about

---

this issue, it can surely happen in no other way but the scientific one. The scientific study of Judaism must decide on the worth or unworthiness of the Jews, their fitness or unfitness to be held in the same esteem and be given the same status as other citizens. It alone teaches knowledge of the inner character of Judaism, to separate what is essential from what is accidental, the original from the accretions. Science alone is elevated above partisanship, above the passions and prejudices of everyday life; for its goal is the truth. But I am talking about true science, the free, the eternal, "the high, the heavenly goddess;" not the so-called science, the pseudo-science, which consists only of empty reasoning, of an arbitrary compilation of individual opinions, which include also the preconceived ones of self-interest, imperiousness, envy, and vanity; which always only makes assertions without developing them, which draws on the authority of notions that prevail among the masses, instead of grounding itself on the inner conception of its subject. True science does not engage with such an enemy, for the latter vanishes before the former like the night before the dawning day.

What remains is to say a few words about one vantage point from which the establishment of a Science of Judaism appears as a necessity of our time. This is the inner world of the Jews themselves. This world, too, has been disturbed in manifold ways and its inner core has been shaken by the unstoppable progress of the spirit and its attendant changes in the life of the peoples. Everywhere there are manifestations that the fundamental principle of Judaism is once again in a process of internal fermentation, that it is striving to develop into a form that accords with the spirit of the time. However, that development can take place in keeping with the times only on the path of science. For the standpoint of science is the most characteristic one of our time. Since the creation of a Science of Judaism is an essential need of the Jews themselves, it is clear, even though the realm of the sciences belongs to all of humanity, that Jewish men are preferentially called to engage in it. The Jews, in turn, must prove themselves as robust collaborators in the common work of humanity; they must lift themselves and their principle to the level of science, for that is the stance of the European world. This stance must eliminate the condition of otherness in which Jews and Judaism have stood thus far in relation to the outside world. And if a single bond is ever to connect the entire human race, then it is the bond of science, the bond of pure reason, the bond of truth.

#### NOTES

[1] \* However, the individual aspects of a subject, because of their richness, can often be treated scientifically on their own; but it is the nature of a complete science that it exhaustively describes all the parts of its subject in their interrelationship.

[2] \* However, the science must pick up on the very significant accomplishments of thorough scholars in both older and more recent times in the fields of history and philology; but however fruitful this work was, and however necessary it may be to provide an overview of the available materials, assembling it here would go too far; still, the science must review it critically and process it in accordance with its point of view.

Source: Immanuel Wolf, "Ueber den Begriff einer Wissenschaft des Judenthums," *Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judenthums* (1823), Heft 1, pp. 16–20, 22–24.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

---

Recommended Citation: Immanuel Wolf, "On the Concept of a Science of Judaism" (1823), published in:  
German History Intersections,  
<<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-27>> [April 20, 2024].