

These plain statements show that Jost clearly identified the basic principles of his time's surging nationalism. But he had doubts about the possibility of a symbiosis between Jews and non-Jews in the emerging German nation, and these doubts would intensify following the wave of conservatism during the 1830s with all its anti-Jewish currents.

The later writings of this pioneering historian show a number of developments. German identity politics would undergo a conceptual upheaval after midcentury, but the first signs of it were discernible even before the revolutions of 1848, and they affected the early reconstruction of the Jewish past. Already in his *General History of the Israelite People*, Jost's short second book that appeared in 1832, the biblical period occupies a larger portion of the story, while the Jews are presented as a unit with a tighter historical sequence.¹⁵ From here on, the tone is rather political, though not yet nationalistic, and the Old Testament becomes a more legitimate source in the narrative of "the Israelite people." In the following years Jost's political opinions became more cautious and hesitant, and he also began to retreat from the biblical criticism he had followed in his first book. This change became manifest in the relative length of the eras he assigned to the early Hebrews and later Jews.

Thus, right from the start, there was a close connection between the perception of the Old Testament as a reliable historical source and the attempt to define modern Jewish identity in prenationalist or nationalist terms. The more nationalistic the author, the more he treats the Bible as history—as the birth certificate attesting to the common origin of the "people." Some of the reformists were interested in the Bible for quite different reasons, such as opposition to the Orthodox rabbinical attachment to the Talmud, or in imitation of Protestant fashions. But from Isaak Jost, through some of the intellectuals who joined the second stage of the science of Judaism, to the appearance of the great innovator Heinrich Graetz, the Old Testament came to serve as the point of departure for the first historiographical exploration into the fascinating invention of the "Jewish nation," an invention that would become increasingly important in the second half of the nineteenth century.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS MYTHISTORY

Jost's *History of the Israelites*, the first Jewish history composed in modern times, was not very popular in its day, and it is no accident that the work was never translated into other languages, not even into Hebrew. While it suited

¹⁵ I. M. Jost, *Allgemeine Geschichte des Israelitischen Volkes*, Karlsruhe: D. R. Marx, 1836 (1832).

the outlook of the German-Jewish intellectuals, secular or not, who were involved in the emancipation movement, most of them did not wish to look for their roots in misty antiquity. They saw themselves as German, and insofar as they continued to believe in a providential deity, they described themselves as members of the Mosaic religion and supported the lively Reform current. For most of the literate heirs to the Enlightenment in Central and Western Europe, Judaism was a religious community, certainly not a wandering people or an alien nation.

The rabbis and the traditional religious figures—that is, the “organic” intellectuals of Jewish communities—did not yet have to examine history in order to affirm their identity, which for centuries had been taken for granted.

The first volumes of the *History of the Jews from the Oldest Times to the Present*, by Heinrich Graetz, began to appear in the 1850s. It was very successful, and parts of it were relatively soon translated into Hebrew, as well as into several other languages.¹⁶ This pioneering work, written with impressive literary flair, remained a presence in national Jewish history throughout the twentieth century. It is hard to measure its impact on the rise of future Zionist thought, but there is no question of its significance and centrality. Though this expansive work is short on descriptions of Jewish history in Eastern Europe (Graetz, who was born in Poznań, then part of Germany, and whose mother tongue was Yiddish, refused to have his book translated into his parents’ “shameful dialect”), the early nationalist intellectuals in the Russian empire embraced it enthusiastically. We can still find traces of his bold declarations in all their recorded dreams of the “ancient homeland.”¹⁷ His work fertilized the imagination of writers and poets eagerly seeking new fields of historical memory that were no longer traditional but nonetheless continued to draw on tradition. He also fostered secular, if not quite atheistic, interest in the Old Testament. Later the first Zionist settlers in Palestine used his work as their road map through the long past. In today’s Israel there are schools and streets named after Graetz, and no general historical work about the Jews omits mention of him.

16 Heinrich (Hirsch) Grätz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, Leipzig: O. Leiner, [1853–1876] 1909. Parts of the book were translated into Hebrew back in the 1870s, but the (almost) complete translation was done in the twentieth century. In English, it began to appear in the 1860s, and the complete work appeared in London in the 1890s. I used the following edition, Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Philadelphia: JPS, 1891–98.

17 According to Shmuel Feiner, Graetz’s work became the national history textbook of the Hovevei Zion organization (the Hovevei Zion were the forerunners of the Zionist movement). See *Haskalah and History: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Historical Consciousness*, Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002, 347.

The reason for this massive presence is clear: this was the first work that strove, with consistency and feeling, to invent the Jewish people—the term “people” signifying to some extent the modern term “nation.” Although he was never a complete Zionist, Graetz formed the national mold for the writing of Jewish history. He succeeded in creating, with great virtuosity, a unified narrative that minimized problematic multiplicity and created an unbroken history, branching but always singular. Likewise, his basic periodization—bridging chasms of time, and erasing gaps and breaches in space—would serve future Zionist historians, even when they renovated and reshaped it. Henceforth, for many people, Judaism would no longer be a rich and diverse religious civilization that managed to survive despite all difficulties and temptations in the shadow of giants, and became an ancient people or race that was uprooted from its homeland in Canaan and arrived in its youth at the gates of Berlin. The popular Christian myth about the wandering Jew, reproduced by rabbinical Judaism in the early centuries of the Common Era, had acquired a historian who began to translate it into a prenatal Jewish narrative.

To create a new paradigm of time, it was necessary to demolish the “faulty and harmful” previous one. To begin the construction of a nation, it was necessary to reject those writings that failed to recognize its primary scaffolding. It was for this reason that Graetz accused his predecessor Jost of “tearing holes” in the history of the Jews:

He tore to shreds the heroic drama of thousands of years. Between the old Israelites, the ancestors and contemporaries of the Prophets and Psalmists, and the Jews, the disciples of the rabbis, Jost hollowed out a deep chasm, making a sharp distinction between them, as if the latter were not the descendants of the former, but of entirely different stock.¹⁸

What stock produced so many Jews? The next chapter will address this question. For now, it should be noted that a nationalist history—or, strictly speaking, a prenatalist one, since the platform in this case did not include an unambiguous call for political sovereignty—does not tolerate lacunae or perverse aberrations. Graetz sought to mend the unbearable gash that he claimed Jost, Zunz, Geiger and others had caused by their “blindness,” and that

¹⁸ Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 5, 595. Graetz’s anger against Jost foreshadows Gershom Scholem’s nationalist annoyance with Leopold Zunz and the other historians of the early Science of Judaism, who “have no idea where they are standing, and whether they wish to build up the Jewish nation and the Jewish people, or to help bring them down.” See *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975 (in Hebrew), 388.

prevented them from seeing the ancient kingdom as a legitimate chapter in Jewish history—thereby condemning the Jews to continue seeing themselves as members of a mere religious civilization rather than as an eternal people or tribe (*Volksstamm*).

Graetz's sharp criticism doesn't appear in the early part of this work but toward its end, in the volume about the modern era, which he wrote several years after Jost's death in 1860. When Graetz began publishing his immense oeuvre in 1853, he too, like Basnage and Jost, began the Jewish narrative after the biblical period, and the first volume covered the time of the Mishnah and Talmud, after the fall of the Temple. Shortly afterward, he returned to the period of the Hasmonean kingdom, but only twenty years later—that is, after the rise of the Second Reich and the unification of Germany by Bismarck's Prussia, with nationalism triumphantly increasing throughout Central and Southern Europe—did Graetz's protonationalist position achieve its final, mature form.¹⁹ Only after he had summed up the history of the Jews in his time, and concluded his book with the mid-nineteenth-century present, in a defiant and bitter tone, did Graetz retreat chronologically in order to reconstruct the birth of the “chosen moral people.” It was no accident that what was presented as the first national-historical epic ever written about the Jews should culminate with the biblical era.

For there to be a national consciousness, a modern collective identity, both mythology and teleology are required. The foundation myth was, of course, the textual cosmos of the Old Testament, whose narrative, historical component became a vibrant mythos in the latter half of the nineteenth century, despite the philological criticisms aimed at it.²⁰ For Graetz, the teleology was nurtured by a vague and not yet wholly nationalist assumption that the eternal Jewish people were destined to bring salvation to the world.

The centuries-old Jewish communities never thought of the Old Testament as an independent work that could be read without the interpretation and mediation of the “oral Torah” (the Mishnah and Talmud). It had become, mainly among the Jews of Eastern Europe, a marginal book that could be understood only through the Halakhah (religious law) and of course its authorized commentators. The Mishnah and Talmud were the Jewish texts in regular use; passages from the Torah (the Pentateuch) were introduced, without any narrative continuity, in

19 On the background to this book's writing, see Reuven Michael, *Hirsch (Heinrich) Graetz: The Historian of the Jewish People*, Jerusalem: Bialik, 2003 (in Hebrew), 69–93 and 148–60.

20 For example, *The Love of Zion* (London: Marshall Simpkin, 1887), the first novel written in biblical Hebrew, by Abraham Mapu, published in 1853, clothes the Kingdom of Judah in nationalist-romantic glory.

the form of a weekly section read aloud in the synagogues. The Old Testament as a whole remained the leading work for the Karaites in the distant past and for Protestants in modern times. For most Jews through the centuries, the Bible was holy scripture and thus not really accessible to the mind, just as the Holy Land was barely present in the religious imagination as an actual place on earth.

Mostly products of rabbinical schools, educated Jews who were feeling the effects of the secular age and whose metaphysical faith was beginning to show a few cracks longed for another source to reinforce their uncertain, crumbling identity. The religion of history struck them as an appropriate substitute for religious faith, but for those who, sensibly, could not embrace the national mythologies arising before their eyes—mythologies unfortunately bound up with a pagan or Christian past—the only option was to invent and adhere to a parallel national mythology. This was assisted by the fact that the literary source for this mythology, namely the Old Testament, remained an object of adoration even for confirmed haters of contemporary Jews. And since their putative ancient kingdom in its own homeland presented the strongest evidence that Jews were a people or a nation—not merely a religious community that lived in the shadow of other, hegemonic religions—the awkward crawl toward the Book of Books turned into a determined march in the imagining of a Jewish people.

Like other national movements in nineteenth-century Europe that were searching for a golden age in an invented heroic past (classical Greece, the Roman Republic, the Teutonic or Gallic tribes) so as to show they were not newly emerged entities but had existed since time immemorial, the early buds of Jewish nationalism turned to the mythological kingdom of David, whose radiance and power had been stored across the centuries in the batteries of religious belief.

By the 1870s—after Darwin and *The Origin of Species*—it was not possible to begin a serious history with the story of Creation. Graetz's work, therefore, unlike Josephus's ancient history, opened with the "settlement of Israel in the land and the start of their becoming a people." The early miracles were omitted to make the work more scientific. Reducing the tales of the patriarchs and the Exodus from Egypt to brief summaries was, oddly, supposed to make the work more nationalistic. Graetz describes Abraham the Hebrew succinctly, and Moses in a couple of pages. To him it was mother earth, the ancient national territory—rather than migration, wandering, and the Torah—that bred nations. The land of Canaan, with its "marvelous" flora and fauna and distinctive climate, produced the exceptional character of the Jewish nation, which in infancy took its first bold, precocious steps in that setting. The nature of a people is determined in the very beginning, and thereafter will never change:

And if when this nation was still in its infancy, the spiritual seeds were already burgeoning in its spirit, and its heart felt, though dimly, that it was destined to do great deeds, which would distinguish it from the other peoples and make it superior, and if its teachers and mentors instructed it till that dim feeling grew into a mighty faith—then it was not possible that such a nation in such a setting would not develop special qualities that would never be expunged from its heart.²¹

Having made this statement, Graetz begins to follow the biblical story closely, highlighting in fine literary language the heroic deeds, the military prowess, the sovereignty of the kingdom, and above all the moral vigor of the “childhood of the Jewish nation.” While he voices some cautious reservations about the later books of the Old Testament, he presents the story following the conquest of Canaan as a solid block of unquestionable truth, a position he upheld to his dying day. To him, “the Children of Israel” who cross the river and conquer the land of Canaan, which had been willed to their forefathers, were the descendants of a single primeval clan.

Graetz strives to provide rational explanations for the miracles, but he also demotes them from central narrative to addenda. The prophecies he leaves intact, however, though it was human action that made them decisive. Thus the actions of the heroic judges and the triumph of young David over Goliath, for example, are related in some detail, and the rise of the redheaded young man to power and the consolidation of his kingdom fill many pages. Although David was quite a sinner, God and Graetz forgive the bold king, who became a paragon in Judaism “on account of his great deeds,” which were always done for the people. The kingdom of Solomon also receives a whole chapter, because it was “a vast and mighty realm that could rival the greatest kingdoms on earth.” Graetz estimates its population as some four million; its division into two kingdoms marked the beginning of its decline. The sinful kingdom of Israel caused its own destruction, and eventually the same fate overtook the last kings of Judah.

The story of the sad fate of the children of Israel is bound up with the religious concept of sin, but greater blame is placed on the daughters of Israel: “It is a striking fact that Israelitish women, the appointed priestesses of chastity and morality, displayed a special inclination for the immoral worship of Baal and Astarte.”²² But fortunately, the ancient children of Israel also had prophets, who struggled with all their might to guide the people to a high, sublime morality, a unique ethos known by no other people.

21 Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 1, 7.

22 *Ibid.*, 213. See Heinrich Graetz, *Essays—Memoirs—Letters*, Jerusalem: Bjalik, 1969 (in Hebrew), 131.

Graetz remains faithful to the central narratives and is always full of awe for the Old Testament; when he runs into contradictions in biblical ideology, he sometimes presents the different approaches without trying to reconcile them. For example, parallel with the isolationist policy of Ezra, leader of the returnees from Babylonian exile, Graetz describes the life of Ruth the Moabite, King David's gentile great-grandmother. Skillfully, he reconstructs the moral and political contrasts between the two, and for a moment it seems as if he cannot decide between them. Graetz clearly understood the significance of annulling mixed marriages and expelling gentile women along with their children. He writes:

Ezra held this to be a terrible sin. For the Judean or Israelitish race was in his eyes a holy one, and suffered desecration by mingling with foreign tribes, even though they had abjured idolatry ... That moment was to decide the fate of the Judean people. Ezra, and those who thought as he did, raised a wall of separation between the Judeans and the rest of the world.²³

Graetz does not hesitate to add that this move provoked hatred for the Jews for the first time. This may be the reason for the emphasis he places on the story of Ruth—aware that it was a universalist challenge to the concept of “holy seed,” held by the returnees from Babylonia. Ultimately, however, he throws his full support behind the invention of an exclusive Judaism and the rigid demarcation of its boundaries as laid down by its pioneers, Ezra and Nehemiah.

A romantic conception based on an ethnoreligious foundation had already guided Graetz in the earlier volumes, but not so forcefully. He was, after all, a historian of ideas, and his earlier volumes about the history of the Jews recounted their literary heritage and focused primarily on its moral and religious content. At the same time, the hardening of German nationalist definitions based on origin and race, especially in the formative years after the failure of the national-democratic Spring of the Nations in 1848, stirred new sensitivities among a small group of intellectuals of Jewish descent. Graetz, for all his doubts and hesitations, was one of them. The sharpest senses belonged to Moses Hess, a leftist and a man of intellectual boldness, a former friend of Karl Marx, whose book *Rome and Jerusalem: The Last Nationalist Question* had appeared in 1862.²⁴ This was an unmistakable nationalist manifesto, perhaps the first of its kind in being quite secular. Since his position was fairly decisive in shaping Graetz's Jewish history, we should consider briefly the relations between the two.

²³ Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 1, 367–8.

²⁴ Moses Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem: A Study in Jewish Nationalism*, New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1918.