

BOOK REVIEW

A. Goshen-Gottstein (ed.) Religious Truth: Towards a Jewish Theology of Religions

(London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2020a). Pp. 205. £24.95. ISBN 9781786942289.

A. Goshen-Gottstein (ed.) Judaism's Challenge: Election, Divine Love and Human Enmity

(Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020b). Pp. 209. £18.54. ISBN 9781644691496.

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Alon Goshen-Gottstein is an academic, a Rabbi, and a leader in the field of interreligious dialogue. The two books reviewed below (henceforth Goshen-Gottstein 2020a and 2020b respectively) are part of a projected three-part series that he has edited. Each book contains contributions from a diverse array of Jewish scholars, arranged around a theme. The three themes represent what Goshen-Gottstein takes to be three of the key issues that 'a Jewish theology of religions must tackle' (2020b: ix).

Jewish theologians need to do some preliminary work within their own tradition in order to make space for a meaningful interaction with the traditions of others. Accordingly, the three themes, around which Goshen-Gottstein has commissioned and curated the scholarly contributions of his colleagues, are these: (1) truth, (2) the doctrine of the election, and (3, in the projected third volume) idolatry.

The volume on truth is designed to help Jewish theologians (and other interested parties) recognize to what extent Jewish theology is able to relate to other religions as bearers of important truths.

The second volume explores to what extent the doctrine of the election closes the door upon Jews taking an active interest in the world beyond their own community. Perhaps the exclusivism of Jewish theology shuts down the possibility for meaningful interreligious dialogue. Alternatively, perhaps the doctrine itself can only make sense against the backdrop of an underlying universalism. After all, the election was supposed to be a vehicle through which *all* of the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

Judaism traditionally takes a very dim view of idolatry and idolaters – to such an extent that its legal codes severely limit the sort of interactions that Jews are supposed to have with idolaters. Clearly, Jewish theologians will need a working understanding of what idolatry is, and why it was deemed to be so problematic, in order to navigate the contemporary landscape of world religions. Are there *any* religions surviving today which fall

under the Jewish conception of idolatry, and if so, which religions, and what are the consequences of such a categorization? These issues will presumably form the backbone of the third volume in the series (forthcoming with Academic Studies Press).

Despite the criticisms of one of the books that I will come to shortly, both of the books that are already on the market contain high-quality scholarship well worth engaging with, and one of the two books, as I hope to make clear, achieves a whole other level of excellence.

In his contribution to the volume on truth, Jerome Yehuda Gellman boldly asserts the following five theses (2020a: 29):

1. God exists.
2. God has a distinctive, loving relationship to the Jewish people.
3. The Jewish religion has a divine sanction.
4. A Jew ought to adhere to the Jewish religion.
5. Every other religion has at least one false core belief or lacks a crucial religious truth present in the Jewish religion.

Note that Gellman asserts these sentences under a literal interpretation, and he takes them to be objectively true. The truth that he takes these assertions to bear, like the notion of truth appealed to in assertion 5, is a bog-standard realist conception of truth. A sentence is true iff it accurately describes some obtaining state of affairs in the world. Moreover, these states of affairs obtain independently of Gellman, and me, and you.

What Gellman then goes on to demonstrate, is that these assertions are compatible with a wide variety of claims that make room for meaningful and sincere interreligious dialogue. The truth of assertion 5, for example, doesn't entail that no other religion has true things to teach us. The truth of assertion 2 doesn't entail that God doesn't love and care for people beyond the Jewish community. Moreover, even when the core beliefs of a religion are false, those false beliefs may give rise to rituals and lifestyles with aims that instantiate a measure of what Gellman calls 'telic truth'. He writes (*ibid.*, 31): 'An aim of religious practice has telic truth to the degree to which that aim is laudatory and to the degree to which that practice has what it takes to advance that aim, and ultimately to fulfil that aim.' The recognition of telic truth in the practices and lifestyles of other religions allows a person, even with Gellman's firm convictions, to write (*ibid.*):

Recognizing telic truth is not solely a matter of judging an aim by its correlative teachings. It is, significantly, a matter of witnessing the lives of exemplars who personify the success of that telic thinking. They can give us a better understanding of that telic truth than do writings or sermons. The way these exemplars live, the way they move and speak, the way they react to situations and to the failures of those around them, and more, all give us insights into what the telic teaching means and what it is after in results.

This already allows for a much more profound variety of interfaith dialogue than the mere comparison of doctrines. It allows a person belonging to one religion to appreciate (perhaps even ineffable) truths that are embodied in the lives of people belonging to another faith. Indeed, Gellman writes (*ibid.*), 'To ignore or reject telic truth in other religions is to miss what is true and not deniable.' Gellman's own beliefs haven't closed him off to the wisdom, beauty, and truth to be found in the religions of other people.

Furthermore, to believe in the literal truth of Gellman's five assertions needn't undermine one's epistemic humility. To believe those assertions isn't to believe that one

believes them infallibly. To believe them isn't to be closed off to the possibility of changing one's mind, or being corrected.

Given what Gellman demonstrates so well, the following seems hard to deny: even though there have been many different conceptions, in the Jewish tradition, of what religious truth is, and how religious language works, there's no reason to think that the notion of truth is particularly *threatening* to the prospects of interreligious dialogue. That is to say, there's no reason to think that the notion of truth really *does* belong among the notions that require preliminary investigation, or revision, before Jewish theologians can meaningfully engage in interreligious dialogue.

Gellman adopts a straightforward correspondence theory of truth, and a straightforward cognitivism about religious language. This amounts to the most traditional and conservative viewpoint available. That he can do so, whilst being open to such substantive engagement with other religions, suggests to me that any initial fears we may have had that the notion of objective truth was somehow going to get in the way of meaningful, sincere, reciprocal, and humble interreligious dialogue, were misplaced to begin with. This is a credit to Gellman's essay, but it rather undermines, perhaps, the urgency of the rest of the book. By contrast, nobody can honestly deny that the notion of the *election*, and Jewish particularity, admit of interpretations, plausibly faithful to the primary sources, that really *would* pose an obstacle to interreligious dialogue. In other words, the second book is – overall – better motivated than the first – in terms of Goshen-Gottstein's overall project.

This observation doesn't undermine the fact that the book on religious truth contains a number of engaging and worthwhile chapters in addition to Gellman's. Cass Fisher's contribution raises a fascinating suggestion. The degree to which a Jewish theology promotes the notion of Divine perfection, he suggests, corresponds to the extent to which that theology is likely to be wedded to universalistic concerns. Conversely, the extent to which a Jewish theology downplays, or even denies, doctrines of Divine perfection corresponds to the extent to which that theology is likely to adopt a somewhat chauvinistic attitude to those beyond the community. Why should it be, if indeed it's true, that those phenomena are so correlated? Fisher's observation is important and deserves further attention. Finally, Tamar Ross's erudite and philosophically sophisticated exploration of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's attitudes towards language and truth is a scholarly *tour de force*.

However, there are elements of the book on religious truth that will leave philosophers, especially those trained in the analytic tradition, disappointed. In his introduction to the volume, Goshen-Gottstein seems adamant in his desire to categorize each of the book's contributions in terms of either a correspondence or a coherence theory of truth, as if those were the only two options in logical space. Sometimes, it felt as if he were trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. I'm the first to admit that there are philosophical and spiritual questions for which analytic philosophy may well be the wrong sort of tool. But equally, there are some philosophical questions that don't respond kindly to the probing of scholars who don't have the requisite analytical expertise. When the book turned to such questions, it was often frustrating, unless we were in the hands of one of the few scholars in the collection who could claim to be academic philosophers.

For example, Avraham Yitzchak (Arthur) Green is a leading authority on the intellectual history of Hassidism. His contribution to the volume is illuminating. But, to the extent that he is committed to articulating his *own* extreme form of monism, and reading that monism into the primary sources, without marking the distinction that contemporary analytic philosophers would mark between existence-monism and priority-monism, he risks walking straight into a number of philosophical minefields that could easily have been avoided. He commits himself, and his historical subjects, to the most problematic form of monism available, seemingly unaware of the more attractive nearby

alternatives (for an exploration of the distinction between existence- and priority-monism, see Jonathan Schaffer's 'Monism: The Priority of the Whole', *Philosophical Review* 119 (2010), 31–76).

It's also somewhat disappointing that a collection on Jewish attitudes to religious truth nowhere cites or engages with perhaps the most influential (and perhaps most controversial) attempt in the twenty-first century (thus far) to articulate a form of religious pluralism within the confines of traditional Jewish theology; namely, *The Dignity of Difference*, by the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks.

Despite its faults, *Religious Truth* is a good book. The volume dedicated to the doctrine of the election is, however, a much *better* book. The issue it addresses really is in urgent need of exploration before a Jewish theology can embrace interreligious dialogue. Moreover, the scholarly work that needs to be done doesn't require a training in the rigours of analytical philosophy. It requires, instead, a high level of expertise in the relevant Jewish texts and traditions, and the sensitivity of soul that allows a person to cherish her own tradition, and identity, while making room for the importance of other traditions, and other identities. The contributors whom Goshen-Gottstein pulled together for this volume couldn't have been better qualified for the task.

Each chapter engages with thorny issues and potentially problematic texts with intellectual honesty, integrity, and philosophical depth. The collection as a whole presents multiple ways in which the faithful Jew can make sense of the doctrine of chosenness whilst affirming the equal value of all people; multiple ways in which the Jew can make sense of her vocation and how that vocation might contribute to and complement the lives and vocations of others.

The contributions of Reuven Kimelman and Menachem Katz beautifully demonstrate ways in which some of the most challenging primary sources in the Jewish tradition – be they scriptural or liturgical – have often been read with too little subtlety; that these texts, properly understood, are often less jarring to modern sensibilities than they may seem to be. Anybody troubled by the seemingly genocidal elements of the Hebrew Bible is strongly advised to consult Kimelman's contribution to this volume. Other contributions, like that of Or Rose, admirably demonstrate what it might mean to celebrate and engage profoundly with certain strands of the Jewish tradition without being blind to their shortcomings. I happen to share Rose's love of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, and I share his distress at those passages that give voice to an ugly xenophobia.

Goshen-Gottstein is to be congratulated for bringing these contributions together, for his insightful introduction, his own excellent chapter on the multiple possible meanings of Israel being a Kingdom of Priests, and his very helpful summary at the end of the book. There wasn't a single weak chapter in the entire volume. The only flaw to point to is that there isn't a single female contributor to the volume. I know that there are underlying problems with diversity in academia, and it can be difficult sometimes for editors to address this in tightly focused thematic collections, but it certainly highlights another respect in which Jewish theology needs to get its house in order. Despite this fact, *Judaism's Challenge* will be of immense interest to anybody wanting to find contemporary meaning, compatible with our modern and liberal sensibilities, in the doctrine of election, and Jewish chosenness. Academic Studies Press have also made it mouth-wateringly affordable, so there's little excuse to miss out.