

# Franz Rosenzweig's Account of Revelation in Light of Its Protestant Background

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## ■ Abstract

In the subsection “Grammar of Eros (The Language of Love)” in section 2 of book 2 of *The Star of Redemption*, the beating heart of the work, Franz Rosenzweig offers a peculiar portrait of the event of revelation. What is presented is a dramatization of the encounter between the loving God and the beloved human soul, a developing scene consisting of a series of utterances and experiences, many of which appear unwarranted. Why does Rosenzweig present revelation in this manner? This article seeks to explain the seemingly arbitrary twists and turns in the dramatized “plot” through which Rosenzweig depicts revelation by demonstrating that it follows in its main features the prevalent Protestant understanding of revelation as encompassing not only divine self-disclosure but also the discovery of sin, confession, forgiveness of sin, reconciliation, attainment of selfhood, and redemption, and is framed according to the directives of the Lutheran foundational principle of “at once a sinner and justified (*Simul Justus et Peccator*). In so doing, it exhibits Rosenzweig’s deep embeddedness in the Protestant theological discourse of his time and shows that *The Star* should be understood in light of the contemporary Protestant theology.

## ■ Keywords

revelation, Protestant theology, reconciliation, redemption, modern Jewish thought, Jewish-Christian relations, German Jews

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## ■ Introduction

In the subsection “Grammar of Eros (The Language of Love)” in section 2 of book 2 of *The Star of Redemption*—both structurally and conceptually the heart of the work—Franz Rosenzweig offers a peculiar portrait of the event of revelation.<sup>1</sup> What is presented is a dramatization of the encounter between the loving God and the beloved human soul, a developing scene consisting of a series of utterances and experiences, many of which appear unwarranted. These include God’s commandment, “Love me”; the soul’s experience of shame; the statements “I have sinned” and “I am a sinner”; an admission of love; the experience of joy and bliss; a statement of submission, “I am thine”; God’s response, “I have called thee by name: you art mine”; the soul’s declaration, “my God, my God”; and, finally, the emergence of the ability for prayer. This is an unconventional portrait, full of seemingly arbitrary twists and turns. Why does Rosenzweig present revelation in this manner?

In this essay I offer a close reading of this important section, as I believe a central component of it, indeed *the* central component, has thus far been overlooked by critical scholarship. In order to begin to make do of such a grand claim, I wish first to insist that nothing about this account of revelation should be taken for granted, and that experienced readers of the *The Star* in particular should not let their familiarity with the contours of Rosenzweig’s description of revelation obscure just how peculiar it is. Constructively, my argument is that approaching this section in light of the Protestant theological landscape of the time can explain many of its seemingly unnecessary oddities. Doing so will allow us to see that the dramatized “plot” presented in book 2 of part 2 follows in its main features the prevalent Protestant understanding of revelation as encompassing not only divine self-disclosure but also the discovery of sin, confession, forgiveness of sin, reconciliation, attainment of selfhood, and redemption, and that it is framed according to the directives of the Lutheran foundational principle of “at once a sinner and justified” (*Simul Justus et Peccator*).<sup>2</sup> We shall see, however, that while Rosenzweig’s account of revelation is best understood in light of, and is generally in line with, the contemporary Protestant theology, there are two critical exceptions: Christ plays no role in Rosenzweig’s account; and, in comparison, it is relatively tolerant toward “sin.” Approaching *The Star* through the lens of Protestant theology

<sup>1</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996). I will be drawing primarily on Hallo’s translation: Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (trans. William W. Hallo; Boston: Beacon Press, 1972). Page numbers in parenthesis in the body of the text will henceforth refer to this translation, with occasional emendations.

<sup>2</sup> *The Urzelle*, Rosenzweig’s letter to Rudolph Ehrenberg, which is considered the initial “seed” of the ideas of *The Star*, is revelation-centric but does not deal with forgiveness of sin. Franz Rosenzweig, “‘Urzelle’ des Stern der Erlösung,” in *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, *Zweistromland* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976-1984) 125–38; English translation: “‘Germ Cell’ of The Star of Redemption,” in *Franz Rosenzweig’s ‘The New Thinking’* (ed. and trans. Alan Udoff and Barbara E. Galli; Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999) 45–66.

should not be understood as implying that it is a work of theology rather than a “system of philosophy,” nor does it deny that it draws on Jewish sources.<sup>3</sup> What is argued, rather, is that Rosenzweig’s thinking is deeply informed by the central Protestant theological currents of his time and that this is testified to in a distinct and hitherto unacknowledged way in his account of revelation.<sup>4</sup> This analysis hopes to contribute to our understanding of Rosenzweig in at least three ways. First, it will shed important and new light on the organizing concept of *The Star*; second, it will demonstrate the extent of Rosenzweig’s embeddedness in the contemporary Protestant theological discourse; and third, it will showcase the idiosyncratic way in which Rosenzweig formulates the Jewish-Christian relation.

That there are Christian resonances in *The Star* was identified by some of Rosenzweig’s early readers. Gershom Scholem, in his early assessment of this work, pointed to some Christian overtones in its notion of redemption.<sup>5</sup> When Rosenzweig sent the manuscript of *The Star* to Eugene Rosenstock-Heussy, his close friend referred to it as “your Christian theology.” Indeed, a common tendency in Rosenzweig’s early reception was reading him in juxtaposition with contemporary Protestant trends. The first book-length work on *The Star*, by Elsa Freund, reads Rosenzweig as an exponent of *Existenzphilosophie*, a term that at the time had strong Christian theological resonances.<sup>6</sup> The young Leo Strauss, too, claimed Rosenzweig’s thought is best understood in light of the Christian conceptual horizon.<sup>7</sup> One can only surmise as to why Rosenzweig’s thinking is rarely situated

<sup>3</sup> In “The New Thinking” Rosenzweig admits that while “theological interests” contributed to “the breakthrough of the new thinking” expounded in *The Star*, it is nevertheless “not theological thinking,” at least not in the usual sense. Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking,” *Franz Rosenzweig’s “The New Thinking”* (ed. Udoff and Galli), 88.

<sup>4</sup> In proposing this, I gesture toward an innovative reading of this work, which will be developed fully elsewhere. A theological contextualization of Rosenzweig’s thinking remains a desideratum. Historical contextualizations of Rosenzweig’s thought abound, but they often neutralize the theological charge of his cultural and conceptual world. See, for example, Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Franz Rosenzweig and the Crisis of Historicism,” in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr; Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England 1988) 138–61; David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 68–105. Scholars have uncovered various and at times overlapping sources of influence in *The Star*, include Hegelian, Schellingian, kabbalistic, neo-Kantian, and others. Approaching this work with the background of the Protestant theological scene should be seen as complementing these other readings rather than denying or replacing them.

<sup>5</sup> Gershom Scholem, “On the 1930 Edition of Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*,” republished in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (trans. M. A. Meyer and H. Halkin; New York: Schocken Books, 1971) 323. See also Enrico Lucca and Ynon Wygoda, “A Goy Who Studies Torah: Two Unpublished Sources by Ernst Simon and Gershom Scholem on the Spiritual Legacy of Franz Rosenzweig,” *Naharaim* 12.1–2 (2018) 197–224.

<sup>6</sup> See Else Freund, *Die Existenzphilosophie Franz Rosenzweig. Ein Beitrag zur Analyse seines Werkes: ‘Der Stern der Erlösung’* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1933); Edward Baring, “Anxiety in Translation: Naming Existentialism before Sartre,” *History of European Ideas* 41 (2015) 470–88.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz. Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935). This assessment is repeated in idem, “Preface to the English Translation,” *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

in the context of the broader Protestant theological discourse of its time in more recent scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Be it as it may, the present essay picks up and develops the interpretive trend of approaching his thought in light of its contemporary Protestant theological world—though it does not adopt its generally condemnatory disposition but instead seeks to gain a better understanding of the theoretical layers informing Rosenzweig’s thought.

*The Star* is divided into three parts, each comprising three books, each dealing with the three basic categories—God, Human, and World—and with their interrelations, creation, revelation, and redemption. Ultimately, the structure of the book strives to reflect its content, and the two triangles of God, Human, and World and creation, revelation, and redemption come to form the shape of a star—the Star of David. As noted, book 2 of part 2, dealing with the revelation, is the beating heart of *The Star*, and its subsection “Grammar of Eros (The Language of Love)” will occupy the center of our focus.<sup>9</sup> But first, a concise summary of key elements of part 1 is needed.

*The Star* begins with the shattering of the “All” into three coeval, fundamental, and categorically distinct elements: God, Human, and World. The arc of this work follows the journey from their initial separation to their ultimate relation. In part 1 each of these elements is reduced to its infinitesimal nothingness, and subsequently, in a delicate procedure of negating the specific “Nought” of each element, their reality is gradually reconstructed. In this stage of still incomplete maturation, entrusted to philosophy, the three elements exist in a separated and isolated state: God is concealed and free; the human is mute, defiant, and self-occupied; and the world is “godless,” impervious, and eternal. Rosenzweig uses the prefix “meta” to refer to the elements at this point—the *meta*-physical God, the *meta*-logical world, and the *meta*-ethical human—and depicts them through the world of “paganism” (*Heidentum*): the mythical gods, the plastic world, and the tragic hero of ancient Greece, who is “mute as a marble” and shut off from other humans and God (207). Part 1 ends with each of the three elements unrelated to the others and self-concerned, closed off to anything beyond them. The categories of creation, revelation, redemption that will soon be introduced to describe their relations are still unavailable.

<sup>8</sup> See Benjamin Pollock, *Franz Rosenzweig’s Conversions: World Denial and World Redemption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> The analysis proposed here reads the three parts of *The Star* consecutively, beginning with part 1 and ending with part 3. It does not follow suggestions to read them in a different order. See Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). For a circular reading of *The Star*, see Peter E. Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

This changes in part 2, where the mutual isolation between God and Human breaks down by the irruption of revelation. In Rosenzweig's understanding, revelation is, in its most fundamental sense, the establishment of a relation between God and the singular human. It has no content per se but is divine presence and above all love, or more specifically, the love of the lover to the beloved.<sup>10</sup> In a later section in *The Star*, Rosenzweig uses the Song of Songs to articulate the nature of revelation as love. Basic to this account of revelation is that language and grammatical forms shape human selfhood and the specificity of one's individual identity is relational and dialogical. Self-recognition and true being are grounded in being summoned and singled out by a voice of another, and above all, God's. One's true subjectivity is based on being addressed and responding to the call of one's proper name. In Rosenzweig's words: "Only in the discovery of a Thou is it possible to hear an actual I" (175). Accordingly, the "stubborn I" of the metaethical self (*Selbst*) is still concealed and implanted in the realm of the third person, tragically closed off to any appeal from the outside. Revelation is thus the moment of transition from monologue to dialogue, a transition from the metaethical selfhood of "paganism" to the living "soul" who responds to the divine appeal in revelation.

Rosenzweig expresses the development of true dialogical selfhood through allusions to (fragments of) biblical verses from the book of Genesis: "Let us [make man in our image]," from the story of the creation of Adam, refers to the initial stage in which the possibility of the formation of human identity is presented, but it is expressed monolingually, by God from himself to himself. God's call to Adam after eating from the tree of knowledge—"Where art Thou?"—reflects the initiation of a quest for the whereabouts of the Thou, implying the recognition of its existence, and hence the beginning of the discovery of the particular and relational selfhood of the I, not subsumed by a universal. At this point, the I does not yet respond appropriately to its naming, remaining in a speechless (*stumm*) state of third-person nonindividuality. The Self represented by Adam, who avoids true response (*Antwort*) to God's call and does not evoke his "I" and take responsibility (*Verantwortung*) but rather lays the blame on others, does not break out of the "pagan" metaethical sphere. In Rosenzweig's words, "To God's 'Where art Thou?' the human had still kept silence as defiant and blocked Self" (176). The paradigmatic biblical expression of revelation for Rosenzweig is God's call to Abraham, "Abraham, Abraham": "Now, called by his name, twice, in a supreme definiteness that could not but be heard," Rosenzweig writes, "now he answers, all unlocked, all spread apart, all ready, all-soul: 'Here I am'" (176). This divine summoning of Abraham's proper name and the openness, readiness, and affirmation of selfhood reflected in

<sup>10</sup> On Rosenzweig's account of revelation as love, see Stephane Moses, *System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (trans. Catherine Tihanyi; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992) 98–114, 130–32; Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 70–104; Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, *Better than Wine: Love, Poetry, and Prayer in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

his assertive response—“Here I am”—encapsulates the dialogical relation between the human and God that emerges with revelation.<sup>11</sup>

According to Rosenzweig, an internal dynamic within God, whereby God’s own concealment is negated, brings him to reveal himself and become known. From the human perspective, revelation irrupts unexpectedly, from nowhere, and is not prompted by human action. Rosenzweig employs variations of *das Erschütternde* to describe the piercing, interruptive, and transformative nature of revelation. He portrays revelation as an *Augenblick*, literally, “blink of the eye,” a term infused with theological charge and commonly used in the modern German philosophical and theological tradition to denote the instantaneous event of existential transformation in the elevated present moment infiltrated by eternity.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, revelation occurs in the moment of absolute presentness, outside the temporal distinction of “before” and “after.” The utter presentness of revelation is fundamental to its nature: as noted, revelation is love, and love, Rosenzweig affirms, is forever young and new, always of the present and never of the past. It is therefore important to remember that even as revelation is depicted as an event consisting of various stages and occurrences ordered in sequence, it would be a mistake to conclude that these different stages take place in real succession over a duration of time. These developments in the human–God relationship reflect the internal logic of revelation, but according to that very logic, they all take place in the absolute present, at once.

At this point, Rosenzweig’s rich and idiosyncratic depiction of revelation takes a striking turn. The revelatory encounter between God and the Human is suddenly narrated in a dramatized fashion and presented as a scene consisting of a sequence of statements and experiences enacted by God and the Human (soul), none of which, upon first glance, seem warranted by the nature of the revelatory event.<sup>13</sup> Rosenzweig asserts that the nature of the divine summoning to the individual in revelation is a commandment (*Gebot*) to love God. There is, he explains, nothing to revelation but the commandment of all commandments, the commandment of love: “God’s first word to the soul that unlocks itself to him is ‘Love me!’” (177). This commandment—“Love me!”—“is none other than the voice of love itself” (176). Revelation is “the wholly pure language of love” and is thus “immediate [or unmediated: *unmittelbare*], born of the moment [*augenblicksentsprungene*], and what is more, becoming audible at the moment of its birth” (177).<sup>14</sup> The completely present, immediate, and unmediated nature of revelation means it “makes no

<sup>11</sup> On Rosenzweig’s usage of scripture in this section, see Mara Benjamin, *Rosenzweig’s Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 26–64.

<sup>12</sup> This notion originates in Cor 15:52 and Gal 4:4, referring to the second coming of Christ. Hallo alternates between “moment” and “instance” in his translation of *Augenblick*. On the philosophical usage of this notion, see Koral Ward, *Augenblick: The Concept of the “Decisive Moment” in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Agata Bielik-Robson, “‘The Story Continues . . .’: Schelling and Rosenzweig on Narrative Philosophy,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 80 (2019) 127–42.

<sup>14</sup> Translation amended.

provision for the future” (177). Otherwise, it would no longer be a revelatory imperative of love but a law (*Gesetz*), which “reckons with times, with a future, with duration” (177).

Shaken out of its self-enclosure upon hearing the call, the soul becomes “wholly receptive, as yet only unlocked, only empty, without content, without essence [*Wesen*], pure readiness, pure obedience, all ears” (176). What is the soul’s response? The immediate response to revelation is shame (*die Scham*). Why shame? Because, as Rosenzweig explains, with the sudden experience of love, a veil is lifted over the soul’s past, allowing it to recognize that its entire existence up to the very moment of revelation was Godless and loveless. The soul comes to acknowledge that while in the past it did not know it needed God, it was, in fact, in great need of God’s love. The present moment of love allows the soul to recognize that “back in the past, there was a time before she was beloved, and this time of unbelovedness, of lovelessness, seems to her covered in deepest darkness” (179). With the discovery of its loveless past and unacknowledged neediness of God’s love, the soul becomes ashamed that its former self, before revelation, was unable to overcome its sinful state by virtue of its own efforts, unable “under its own power” to “break this spell in which it was confined” (179).

With the direct summon of love by God, the soul reflects on its past and discovers, to its shame, that it was a period of lovelessness and darkness. This, Rosenzweig continues, leads the soul to respond to God’s command to love with the statement, “I have sinned [*Ich habe gesündigt*]” (179). At this crucial moment it is revealed that the “darkness,” “weakness,” and “lovelessness” characterizing the period prior to revelation was a state of sin. Revelation leads to the experience of self-condemnation: the soul discovers and announces that its entire existence hitherto was a state of sin. In other words, the metaethical self of part 1 is revealed to be a sinning self. Before revelation, the metaethical self did not perceive its state as sinful. Such a recognition springs from the experience of the love in revelation. Only once the soul is loved by God can it acknowledge that prior to its state of being gripped by divine love was a state of *not* being gripped by love. Thus, only from the perspective of revelation in part 2 can the sinfulness of the “pagan” silent hero of part 1 be disclosed *as* sinfulness. Knowledge of sin only comes in the moment, and by means, of revelation. Apparently, sin cannot recognize sin.

It must be noted that Rosenzweig does not state straightforwardly what exactly the sin that is discovered with revelation *is*. It is clear, however, that sin here is not a transgression of the law, or evil doing, or the avoidance of a good deed—none of which were committed by the metaethical self. Rather, what becomes apparent is that sin is precisely the metaethical self-enclosed existence, the very state of lovelessness.<sup>15</sup> The soul discovers the sinfulness of its previous hermetical state

<sup>15</sup> Robert Gibbs describes this aptly: “The introverted self mistook itself for a complete being. Once my complacent self-sufficiency is interrupted, I realize that my own heroism, my own self-sufficiency, was sin”; Gibbs, *Correlations*, 72.



of not being in a communion with God, of the metaethical stubborn pride and defiant existence of a perceived self-sufficiency. Evidently, sin is not so much determined by one's action as it is a state of being, the state characterized by the absence of a relationship with God. For reasons that are not clear upon initial glance, Rosenzweig depicts revelation as the moment of discovery of sin; or stated otherwise, he perceives sin as something that is not known but must be discovered, and its discovery takes place in the moment of revelation.

On the basis of this latter point, a number of further observations can be made. Rosenzweig does not characterize the existence prior to revelation as a mixture of piety and sin. Rather, the soul recognizes that "previously, all is lovelessness," and that this lovelessness and darkness "fills all of the past right up to the moment of the confession [*Bekanntnis*]" (179).<sup>16</sup> The previous existence was sinful in its entirety.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the soul's recognition of its past sinfulness is expressed in a form of a confession: "I have sinned." The term Rosenzweig uses in these passages is *Bekanntnis*, which can be translated as "acknowledgment," as William Hallo has it, or as "confession," as Barbara Galli renders it.<sup>18</sup> Both translations are correct: *Bekanntnis* indicates here the acknowledgment of a new reality, a reality of sin, as well as the admittance and confession of it. Galli's translation is to be preferred, however, because "acknowledgment" downplays, if not altogether obscures, the confessional nature of this moment, while the connotation of recognition and acknowledgment is clearly conveyed in these passages all the same. "Confession" also captures the dialogical and relational import of the event and the fact that the soul is not merely confirming its newly discovered past but repenting for it. It is noteworthy, however, that this confession does not include much of what we perhaps would expect it to include. The soul does not acknowledge, enumerate, or repent for any specific sins. It is not demanded to follow a prescribed penance or perform any order of ritual actions, and it is even not called to correct its evil ways as a condition for its acceptance. There is no recitation of scriptural or liturgical text, and no mention is made of the common Jewish distinction between interpersonal sins and sins toward God. There is, in fact, little that resembles the traditional Jewish account of confession (*viduy*) and repentance (*teshuvah*), as laid out, for example, most classically in Maimonides's "Laws of Repentance."<sup>19</sup> The absence

<sup>16</sup> Translation amended.

<sup>17</sup> For an alternative, "Blumenbergian" analysis of Rosenzweig's metaethical person as a state of Gnosticism, see Agata Bielik-Robson, "Ödipus meets Job: On Neighbourly Relations between Greeks and Jews in Franz Rosenzweig's 'Star of Redemption'," *Rosenzweig Jahrbuch* 7 (2013) 40–68.

<sup>18</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (trans. Barbara E. Galli; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005) 193ff.

<sup>19</sup> Nahum Glatzer's "Index of Jewish Sources," compiled after the publication of *The Star* at the behest of Rosenzweig, sees in the formulation of this confession an allusion to the "Liturgy of the New Year: I have sinned." See Rosenzweig, *The Star*, 428. However, "I have sinned" is a straightforward statement entirely appropriate in the context of a discovery of sin, as it is employed here, and it is, even in a generous reading, an unnecessarily partial and fragmented quote of the Jewish liturgical confession. It is highly likely that this identification reflects Glatzer's desire to



of any Jewish echoes in Rosenzweig's description of confession is accentuated when it is compared with that of his revered teacher, Hermann Cohen, whose account of repentance in *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* draws extensively on past Jewish traditions and primarily on Maimonides.<sup>20</sup> The communal setting of postrevelation religious life will be introduced in later sections of *The Star*, but in revelation the soul's confession is an entirely private matter, confined to its intimate encounter with God. Ultimately, in Rosenzweig's account, the soul's confession includes nothing but the acknowledgment of past sinfulness.

Rosenzweig continues to explain that with the confession "I have sinned," the soul's shame, which sprang from the recognition of the non-recognition of the past sin and lovelessness, disappears. The reason for this is that the very acknowledgment of sin "purifies [*reinigt*] the present from the weakness of the past" (180). Confession erases sin and makes it a matter of the past. As Rosenzweig puts it: "'I have sinned' means I was a sinner [*Ich habe gesündigt, heißt: Ich war Sünder*]." On the face of it, this would be the end of the matter: the soul confesses its sin and is subsequently purified and no longer a sinner. However, in the very next sentence Rosenzweig clarifies that the recognition of the soul's "having sinned" does not mean it is no longer sinful in the present. In fact, it "clears the way for the confession 'I am a sinner' [*Ich bin ein Sünder*]" (180). In other words, the recognition of the sinfulness of the past prepares the ground for the following recognition of the sinfulness of the present. The confession for the sinfulness of the past allows the soul to recognize that, notwithstanding the purification of its past sinfulness, it is *also and still* a sinner in the present.

At the same time, the admission that the soul was not only a sinner in the past but is still a sinner in the present leads to an experiential peak in the moment of revelation. Rosenzweig writes:

this second confession is already the full admission of love. . . . That man has been sinner is abolished in the confession. He had to overcome shame for this confession, but as long as he confessed, shame remained at his side. But now he confesses that he is still a sinner even though he had divested himself of the past shame, and now shame withdraws from him. Indeed, the very fact that his admission dares its way into the present is the sign that it has overcome shame. (180)

The moment of the full confession of the soul's present sinfulness is also the moment of the disappearance of shame. Now shame vanishes for good because the soul recognizes and confesses its present sinfulness, and admitting that it was and still is a sinner makes possible the admission of the exhilarating experience of divine love. After the first confession of the past sin, the soul "harbors doubts as to whether its confession will find acceptance" (180). But the anxiety around these

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read Rosenzweig's account of revelation as imbued with traditional Jewish sources.

<sup>20</sup> See Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (trans. Simon Kaplan; New York: Ungar, 1972) 178–235.

doubts disappears with the second confession. With the admittance of its present sinfulness, the soul knows with utmost immediacy and certainty that it has already been accepted, that its sin has already been forgiven, that it is loved. Indeed, the very fact of revelation itself indicates the acceptance of the soul and the forgiveness of sin, for revelation is, in itself, God's love to the soul:

It becomes certain of the answer by confessing its sinfulness not as transpired "sin," but as a sinfulness yet present, so certain that it no longer needs to hear this out loud. It perceives it in its interior. It is not God that need cleanse it of its sin. Rather it cleanses itself in the presence of his love. It is certain of God's love in the very moment that shame withdraws from it and it surrenders itself in free, present admission—as if God had spoken into its ear that "I forgive" which it longed for earlier when it confessed to him its sins of the past [*vergangene Sünde*]. It no longer needs this formal absolution [*förmlichen Absolvierung*]. It is freed of its burden at the very moment of daring to assume all of it on its shoulders. (180)

Rosenzweig states here that the certainty of the soul's still present sin is at once the certainty of its forgiveness. The last sentence of the above passage is especially instructive: the moment the soul acknowledges its still present sinfulness is the very moment in which the soul is freed of the burden of sin.

At this juncture, a few more observations can be made. First, Rosenzweig inserts into the revelatory encounter with God the sequence of discovery, confessions, and forgiveness of sin. Second, what is offered in *The Star* is a dialectical rather than developmental model of the soul's relation with God. The soul does not undergo a process of improvement or gradual progress toward God. Rather, it is condemned as sinner and confesses for its complete sinfulness, and the soul subsequently, correspondingly, and simultaneously, achieves reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) with God and is completely pardoned, while remaining a complete sinner.<sup>21</sup> The dynamic described here is not simply one in which sinfulness is replaced with purity. Rosenzweig insists that divine love and forgiveness come precisely at the moment in which the soul recognizes that it is, at this very moment, sinful. Indeed, the love of God and forgiveness are experienced only once the soul acknowledges its still-present sinfulness. And yet, the moment of sinfulness is also at once the moment of forgiveness and reconciliation. "Past sins are confessed altogether only for the sake of yet-present sinfulness [*noch gegenwärtigen Sündhaftigkeit*]," Rosenzweig writes, "but to confess the latter is no longer to confess sin—this has passed like the confession itself—no longer to confess the love-void of the past" (181). In other words, Rosenzweig does not present a simple account of a succession,

<sup>21</sup> It is no coincidence that Rosenzweig titled one of the sections of his description of revelation "Die Versöhnung." These section titles were not part of the original edition of *The Star* but were added later by Rosenzweig and Nahum Glatzer, yet this title is instructive. Hallo translates *Versöhnung* as "atonement," but what is described in this section is not merely "atonement" but also the soul's "reconciliation" with God—a common and more suitable rendition of *Versöhnung*—that is, the overcoming of the estrangement from God through atonement and forgiveness of sins.

whereby the soul is at first a sinner and then a saint. Rather, sinfulness remains and is simultaneously made obsolete by divine love and forgiveness. Even the purified soul is not exempt of the consciousness of sin. The state of the soul is dual: both presently in sin and completely absolved of sin, despite its still present sinfulness.

It follows from all this that the soul is accepted and justified *as a sinner*. Rosenzweig makes it very clear that the soul does not cease to be a sinner in the moment of revelation and is reconciled with God as such. Indeed, the soul's sins are not erased before, or as a condition for, being accepted by God. It is only by means of divine love that the soul can be accepted by God, and as noted, it is only by means of the soul's confession of its past and still present sinfulness that it can fully experience the love and forgiveness of God. If we ask why the soul's sin is erased, Rosenzweig's answer is simple: because of God's love to the beloved soul. Why does God love the soul? Here, too, the answer is simple: without reason—"the love of the lover is baseless [*grundlos*]" (201). Forgiveness of sin and reconciliation is not accomplished on the basis of merit but only in and through divine love in revelation. In this respect, the soul does not *deserve* the forgiveness of its sin; all it can do is recognize its sinfulness in the face of God. This is not only because the soul's sin is a state of nonrelation rather than any actual transgression of the law or evil doing, but because the soul's source of vindication is external, namely, God's unfettered love. Rosenzweig also contends that God's groundless love is itself the ground of the soul's love to God, and as the soul is embraced by God's love, it knows that it is loved more than it can ever possibly love back.

The soul is thus forgiven, reconciled with God, and loved, but the drama of revelation is not over yet, because, in addition to all this, the soul is also said to experience redemptive bliss (*Seligkeit*). Rosenzweig writes: "The mouth has to confess its past and still present weakness [*seine vergangene und noch gegenwärtige Schwachheit*] by wishing to acknowledge its already present and future bliss [*schon gegenwärtige und zukünftige Seligkeit*]" (179). Indeed, the acknowledgment of sin coinciding with the intensity of divine love "is already the highest bliss [*höchste Seligkeit*]" for the soul, "for it encompasses the certainty that God loves it" (181). The establishment of a relation with God in revelation and the soul's absolution and reconciliation is tantamount to redemption. Of course, Rosenzweig speaks of the "already present and future bliss," but this redemptive bliss is not the ultimate, final redemption, which is achieved in the future and which is discussed in the final sections of part 3 of *The Star*. It does, however, prefigure it. Indeed, Rosenzweig claims that "the last thing achieved in revelation" (184) is the emergence of the urge to pray, because for him prayer reflects the understanding that the soul and the world are not yet fully redeemed and signals toward the ultimate redemption in the kingdom of God.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For an analysis and bibliography on Rosenzweig and prayer, see Steven Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 79–131.

At this moment of bliss, the soul is carried extrinsically, by God, experiencing the peace and wholesome satisfaction of being loved. This is not a moment of the tragic hero's false sense of self-sufficiency but is a relational dependence on, and submission to, God. For Rosenzweig, the confession of sin that leads to the acknowledgment of love and bliss, liberation from shame, and submission to God is the originating moment of faith: "confession of faith springs from the confession of sin [*aus dem Sündenbekenntnis springt hervor das Glaubensbekenntnis*]" (181). Evidently, faith does not precede the encounter with God but is its result. In its "confident submission" (181), the beloved soul puts its faith and trust (*Treue*) in God and wishes to remain in his presence and love. Prior to this moment, God was unknowable, but now, in revelation, the soul experiences an "overflow of the highest and most perfect" (181) trust and faith in God and gains certainty that God "is." As Rosenzweig puts it: "On this, the zenith of its self-acknowledgment, the soul thus spreads itself wholly before God, freed of all shame. In so doing it is already acknowledging more than just itself, more than its own sinfulness. Its acknowledgment becomes, nay, is already immediately, acknowledgment of God" (181). Expressing the general anti-Islam line that prevails in *The Star*, Rosenzweig contrasts the soul's certainty that the God of its love is truly God with what he calls the Islamic tautology that "God is God." The Islamic declaration, he believes, is a declaration of disbelief that refers to a self-enclosed and concealed God, lacking the relationality of the human and divine natures.<sup>23</sup> In Rosenzweig's view, however, the soul's selfhood is truly attained only when it is relationally responsive, externally dependent, and grounded in faith: "In this belief of the beloved in the lover, the lover first really becomes a human being . . . it attains being, a being visible to itself, only when it is loved" (182).

Thus, the soul's selfhood is fulfilled with the admission of its dependence on God's love and its certainty of God's divinity. Thus, the soul states, "I am thine." These words encapsulate the interrelatedness of the soul's selfhood, dependence, and faith in God. God responds to this statement with an affirmation of the soul's dependence on him through the summoning of revelation: "I have called thee by name: thou art mine." To this, the soul replies with the attribution of divinity to God and the recognition that it "has" a God: "my God, my God." Rosenzweig places the attainment of the soul's true selfhood in revelation as well, and in this respect, it is also the moment of the soul's full creation. Rosenzweig will soon assert that revelation also reveals the created nature of the world, disclosing creation to be a sign or prophecy fulfilled in the miracle of revelation. God, too, attains being in this moment of unconcealment, love, and mutual recognition—though his being will reach its completion with the full redemption of the world.

<sup>23</sup> Much has been written on Rosenzweig and Islam. For a recent analysis and bibliography, see Robert Erlewine, *Judaism and the West: From Hermann Cohen to Joseph Soloveitchik* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016) 52–77.

One final point concerning Rosenzweig's account of revelation should be noted. We have seen that revelation reveals sin in the past and in the present and also absolves it. However, the soul's sin is absolved only in the moment of revelation, only in the moment the soul acknowledges and confesses its sinfulness. In revelation the soul is a "soul," with God, accepted, sinless. But this moment is momentary and fleeting, and to the extent that the soul desires to continue the experience of revelation—to remain with God and to be loved, free of sin, and blissful—it must be repeated. It is not without reason that Rosenzweig frequently speaks of the "ever renewal" of revelation. The logic at work here is that insofar as revelation (and hence also confession, absolution, reconciliation, and redemption) is in the moment, and insofar as the soul is accepted only in and through the communion with a loving and forgiving God, then revelation (and hence also confession, absolution, reconciliation, and redemption) is not once-and-for-all but must be repeated. Otherwise, the soul will lapse back into the metaethical self who is closed off from God and in sin. Because the soul is sanctified through fellowship with God, it must constantly reestablish itself in God's love to remain in the state of bliss and secure its regeneration.<sup>24</sup> "Paganism" is a constant possibility that can only be avoided by the repetition of the moment of revelation, which involves the constant acceptance of divine love, which includes the constant recognition and confession of present sinfulness and the consequent constant forgiveness of sin. Only in this way can the encounter with God serve as a foundation for life.

This appears to be the logic behind Rosenzweig's vision of redemption in *The Star*, which is conceptualized as the repetition and extension of the experience of revelatory divine love in the soul's turn in love to the world and to the neighbor as part of a community of faith, a "We." Through acts of love and prayer, the soul repeats the experience of love in revelation and advances the kingdom, the final and full redemption. This is indicated, inter alia, in Rosenzweig's claim that "Love thy God" and "Love thy neighbor" are one and the same commandment. Rosenzweig develops the idea of two communities of faith, Judaism and Christianity, that perform this redemptive repetition in a split, albeit complementary, manner. Judaism, living out the cycle of its yearly holidays and rituals in a repetition of the present moment of revelation, maintains its redeemed existence of being "already with" God. Christianity, "on the way," in its worldly task, expands the knowledge of God onto the nations through love and mission.<sup>25</sup> "Repetition" and "love," the

<sup>24</sup> Different analyses of Rosenzweig's account of repetition are, for example, Moses, *System and Revelation*, 174; Zachary Braiterman, "Cyclical Motion and the Force of Repetition in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig," in *Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutics of Jewish Texts* (ed. A. Cohen and S. Magid; New York: Seven Bridges, 2002) 215–38; Gilad Sharvit, "History and Eternity: Rosenzweig and Kierkegaard on Repetition," *JSQ* 26 (2019) 162–98; idem, *Dynamic Repetition: History and Messianism in Modern Jewish Thought* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2022); Robert Gibbs, "Lines, Circles, Points: Messianic Epistemology in Cohen, Rosenzweig and Benjamin," *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco* (ed. Peter Schäfer and Mark Cohen; SHR 77; Leiden: Brill, 1998) 363–82.

<sup>25</sup> See Daniel M. Herskowitz, "Empire, Mission, and Messianism: Franz Rosenzweig's Understanding

notions linking part 2 to part 3, derive directly from the specific manner in which Rosenzweig models his account of revelation.

To sum up the analysis so far, revelation for Rosenzweig is not simply or solely an event of God's self-disclosure.<sup>26</sup> It is also the occasion in which the soul discovers its past and still present sinfulness, the moment of two confessions and of the experience of forgiveness of sin and purification in the face of God. It is the moment in which the soul reconciles itself with God and achieves full bond with, submission to, and faith in, God, and it is the moment the soul attains true selfhood. It is likewise, and consequently, also the event in which the soul experiences the bliss of redemption.

It should be repeated here again that none of this should be taken as a given. It is not at all obvious that any of this has a place or role in the moment of revelation, and from the perspective of Jewish tradition, it may be unprecedented. Why does Rosenzweig formulate the moment of revelation as consisting of all these components? Why does he define revelation as love and principally deny its association with law? Why is the discovery and confession of sin part of revelation? Why does Rosenzweig insist that the soul remains a sinner at the very moment in which its sins are absolved and it is overtaken by divine love? Is there an explanation for Rosenzweig's peculiar account of revelation?

■

The key to unlocking the peculiarities in this momentous section in *The Star* can be found if we expand the perspective from which Rosenzweig's thought is commonly approached and read it in light of contemporary developments in German Protestant theology.

Rosenzweig develops the ideas that would appear as *The Star* with the backdrop of a general Protestant environment in which an effort to formulate a coherent Reformation thought for a post-Kantian world was underway. Beginning at the final third of the nineteenth century, an increasing emphasis on the experience of revelation as well as a refocusing on the notion of justification and forgiveness of sin characterized central developments in Protestant theology.<sup>27</sup> Many theologians at the time saw a correlation between the Kantian limitation on natural knowledge of the divine and the Protestant notion of justification in faith and the idea that only revelation in Christ provided knowledge of God. Spearheading this campaign was Albrecht Ritschl, whose general theological orientation dominated German Protestant thought from the 1870s until the first World War. Over against the

of the Relation between Judaism and Christianity," *JAAR* 91 (2023) 633–54.

<sup>26</sup> See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014) 35–89.

<sup>27</sup> German Protestant theology leading up to this period is ably analyzed by Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Gary Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealist Logic of Modern Theology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

prevalent speculative tendencies and emphasis on the incarnation, Ritschl recentered Protestant theology on the sinner's justification and reconciliation in Christ and the subjective experience of forgiveness that took place in the moment of revelation. In the three volumes of his main constructive work, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (1870–1874) and in various other texts, Ritschl offered dogmatic and historical grounding for his conviction that revelation was the sole avenue for knowledge of God and the moment in which atonement, absolution, reconciliation, and redemption took place.<sup>28</sup> Emphasizing both subjective experience and the believer's membership in the church, Ritschl conceptualized revelation as the moment in which the believer is both condemned and redeemed, revealed as a sinner and accepted by God, according to the simultaneous duality of the Lutheran principle of “at once sinner and justified.”

Ritschl's program was both criticized and developed further in different directions by his many followers and detractors. For Wilhelm Herrmann, one of his most influential students, revelation is the moment of communion with God and a breakthrough from “pagan” natural existence, and it is also an event of forgiveness of sins and redemption.<sup>29</sup> In his view, the direct and present experience of the inner life of Jesus Christ reveals his moral perfection and is the very heart of Christian life and its ethical impulse. Herrmann is sometimes credited with founding the Ritschlian school, which held sway over the Protestant theological scene in Germany for almost four decades and which listed among its ranks luminaries such as Adolf von Harnack, Julius Kraftan, and Ferdinand Kattenbusch. But with the devastation of the First World War—the immediate background of *The Star*—a new generation of thinkers began rethinking Protestant theology in opposition to the conceptual framework adumbrated by figures like Ritschl and Herrmann, developing a more theocentric and existential scheme. Now, revelation, forgiveness of sin, and the dialectics of anxiety and salvation received even greater focus than before.<sup>30</sup> For

<sup>28</sup> Albrecht Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (3 vols.; Bonn: A. Marcus, 1870–1874); idem, *Die christliche Vollkommenheit. Ein Vortrag. Theologie und Metaphysik; Zur Verständigung und Abwehr* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1902); David W. Lotz, *Ritschl and Luther: A Fresh Perspective on Albrecht Ritschl's Theology in the Light of His Luther Study* (New York: Abingdon, 1974).

<sup>29</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann, *Schriften zur Geschichte der Theologie* (Munich: Kaiser, 1967); idem, *Der Verkehr des Christen mit Gott. Im Anschluss an Luther dargestellt* (Stuttgart, 1886). In English: Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God: Described on the Basis of Luther's Statements* (trans. Sandys J. Stanyon; 2nd ed. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1920). See also Christophe Chalamet, “Wilhelm Herrmann and the Birth of the Ritschlian School,” *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 15.2 (1994) 263–89.

<sup>30</sup> Rosenzweig mentions Ritschl, somewhat dismissively, in two passages in *The Star*. See Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Rosenzweig and Kant: Two Views of Ritual and Religion,” in *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann* (ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Daniel Swetschinski; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1982) 315–41, 326 n. 68. Rosenzweig did not possess any books by Ritschl in his library. Francesco Barba, *Das Denken Rosenzweigs zwischen Theologie und Philosophie. Eine Herausforderung für das Christentum* (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2013) 237 n. 5. However, it is important to note that the institutional



example, the Berlin church historian Karl Holl, whose extensive work set into motion what is now known as “the Luther Renaissance,” urged contemporary Protestant thought to return to Luther’s original and fundamentally theocentric “religion of conscience” (*Gewissensreligion*).<sup>31</sup> In his famous 1917 anniversary speech, “Was verstand Luther unter Religion?,” Holl declared that “For Luther, forgiveness and the assurance of forgiveness now occupied the central place in Christianity. . . . [F]orgiveness was the key to everything else, the central concern,” but it “has meaning only if a person is and remains a sinner before God.”<sup>32</sup>

The most consequential rebellion against the Ritschlian worldview was executed by the dialectical theology movement, led by Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Eduard Thurneysen, and Emil Brunner, who opposed the historicist perspective and what they saw as the overdetermined role of secular ethics in the Christian message and enacted a vigorous “turn to revelation.” Yet notwithstanding their fierce disagreement with the previous generation’s theology, they agreed that the doctrine of forgiveness of sin, understood according to the principle of “at once a sinner and justified” and located in the moment of revelatory encounter with God, remained at the front line of the theological agenda.

While the specific connotations of each notion of revelation and forgiveness of sin differed among the theologians and schools participating in the charged debates animating the Protestant discourse at the time, some general features remained stable throughout. Merging Kantian assumptions and a renewed piety to what was taken to be Luther’s “authentic” thinking, revelation, alone providing knowledge of God, became the focal point and fountainhead of all theological speculation and doctrines. Basic to the conceptualization of revelation at the time was the conviction that “knowledge” of faith is of an entirely different order than natural or metaphysical knowledge. Revelation interrupts the natural order and is independent of any effort on the part of the human, neither the result of good deeds nor of self-cultivation. It does not convey doctrine or propositional truths and is certainly not “law”; it is, rather, the event of communion in which God freely bestows his presence and essence, which is love.

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influence of Ritschl’s “school” typified during the period between 1900 and 1914, the very years that serve as the backdrop of Rosenzweig’s conceptual formation, and thus Ritschlianism, rather than the specificities of Ritschl’s own work, is the theological context in which Rosenzweig’s thought develops. Indeed, in the introduction to part 2 of *The Star*, Rosenzweig positions himself in the trajectory of post-Kantian Protestant thought, perceiving himself as correcting and advancing on the Ritschlian school. There are other continuities between Ritschl and Rosenzweig, which I plan to pursue elsewhere.

<sup>31</sup> On the “Luther Renaissance,” see Christine Svinth-Værgø Pöder, “Die Lutherrenaissance im Kontext des Reformationsjubiläums. Gericht und Rechtfertigung bei Karl Holl, 1917–1921,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 26 (2013) 191–200; the collection *Lutherrenaissance: Past and Present* (ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Quote taken from Karl Holl, *What Did Luther Understand by Religion?* (ed. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense; trans. Fred W. Mueser and Walter R. Wietzke; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 43, 44.

Following from the prevalent distinction between religious and natural knowledge and the correlated supremacy of revelation is that all other theological categories are anchored in revelation. Only with the establishment of a full and true relationship with God in revelation does the discovery, confession, and forgiveness of sin, as well as justification and reconciliation, occur. Basic to how these categories are understood is the principle that when standing in the face of God (*coram deo*), the believer is declared righteous and justified even while she remains sinful, and as justified, the believer is recreated in Christ and no longer sinful.<sup>33</sup> The true meaning of justification is, in the words of Luther, that “a Christian man is righteous and a sinner at the same time [*simul iustus et peccator*], holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God.”<sup>34</sup> This state is paradoxical and simultaneous: the believer does not straightforwardly transition from a state of sin to a state of purity, nor is justification partial, as if some aspect remains sinful while a different aspect is justified. Such an understanding implies a developmental model according to which Christian life is a long process of gradual spiritual progression, whereby one draws closer or farther from God according to one’s actions. The premise of this developmental model is that salvation is attained when the believer’s virtues and good deeds outnumber its vices and evildoing. It follows from this that the Christian is at all times partly sinner and partly saint. The Lutheran model at the time, on the other hand, is not a developmental one, framed by progression or recession, but a dialectical one, cast according to an either/or structure.<sup>35</sup> Total redemption is dependent on total repentance, and total repentance is only possible if one recognizes and confesses one’s total sinfulness. There is no “weighing, distinguishing, differentiating” between different sins; they are all “lumped together,” making the human being *entirely* sinful—while at the same time being declared *entirely* righteous.<sup>36</sup> Not a favorable balance sheet but the total elimination of one’s sins and complete purity and righteousness is the condition for salvation.

The simultaneity is based on the fact that the human is at all times a sinner, and there is nothing she can do to become worthy of divine love and absolution. When left to one’s own natural inclinations and capacities, the human being is dominated by the all-consuming state of sin. On this account, the believer’s sins are absolved not by its own merit or by virtue of its successfully correcting ways, but through God’s free grace and love through Christ. Righteousness is not the human’s, but Christ’s alone; in view of one’s own self, one remains wholly a sinner. Sin, on this account, is not some kind of action or desire against the eternal law, but is defined

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (trans. Roy A. Harrisville; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 263; Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>34</sup> *Luther’s Works: The American Edition* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; 55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–73) 26:232.

<sup>35</sup> Daphne Hampson, *Christian Contradictions: The Structure of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles*, III.3:36–38.

relationally, as alienation from God or the attempt to live without God, on one's own. Sin here is quintessentially the inclination for egotistical self-will and self-love. Grace and salvation, on the other hand, are the state of communion with God. Indeed, sin, grace, reconciliation, and redemption are best understood not as human properties etched onto a substance but relationally, as states of the individual's relationship with God, who is for us. As such, the moment of forgiveness and justification is also the moment of ultimate bliss and exhilarating joy, for faith in Christ gives life and salvation.

This understanding of Christian life generates an existential dialectic whereby the believer experiences both the joy and faithful trust (*Treue*) of being with God and the guilt and anxiety of the enduring struggle with sin.<sup>37</sup> Whoever has not yet encountered God and achieved faith, that is, whoever has not yet experienced revelation, does not truly recognize the state of sin. The real nature of sin cannot be appreciated from under the dominion of sin.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, atonement and forgiveness of sin is not possible without the recognition that the soul was and still is a sinner. Thus, full confession is only truly possible in light of knowledge of God in revelation, because true recognition of sin and divine love is not available to the unbeliever. Moreover, since the believer's inadequacy is only truly revealed from the vantage point of faith, the initial reaction to divine love and justification is condemnation, shame, and guilt. At this moment, the believer also recognizes that she can never adequately return the love granted to her by God.

Revelation, according to this general understanding, means establishing a relation to divine otherness that generates authentic, redeemed existence. The self is constituted relationally and extrinsically—it is created anew and attains its true identity only through its relationship with God. Since the self is truly formed only when bound to God, there is no continuity of the self outside this relation, and therefore it must constantly establish the connection with God anew through repetition and renewal. Indeed, enduring sinfulness means that the Christian is in constant need of forgiveness. Absolution is not once and for all: the states of “sin” and “faith” are constant possibilities. The believer must constantly and repeatedly reestablish herself in God's love by repeated confession and repentance. To suppose that the human being is no longer in need of forgiveness would imply that Christ's

<sup>37</sup> As Luther put it, “to the extent that I am a Christian, I am righteous, devout and belong to Christ, but to the extent that I look back [*respicio*] to myself and my sin I am miserable and the greatest of sinners. So it is true to say: in Christ there is no sin, and in our Flesh there is no peace and no rest, only perpetual struggle.” Martin Luther, *The Third Disputation against the Antinomians*, quoted in Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith* (trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer; London: T&T Clark, 2001) 216. On the prevalence of the understanding of faith as “trust” in this discourse, see Daniel M. Herskowitz, “Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith* in Its Protestant Context,” *Journal of Religion* 104.1 (2024) 79–100.

<sup>38</sup> Consider, for example, the statement in the *Formula of Concord* 1:9: “The damage [of sin] is so indescribable that it cannot be recognized by our reason but only from God's Word. The damage is such that only God alone can separate human nature and the corruption from one another” (<https://bookofconcord.org/epitome/original-sin/>).

role as a redeemer is only restricted to the past or to occasional moments. But the Christian needs Christ as her redeemer always, and as noted, only the believing Christian is in a position to see just how much Christ is needed for salvation. Thus, the recognition of one's sinfulness leads to a greater understanding of the need for justification and dependence on Christ. It is for this reason that the experience of forgiveness of sin and justification is fundamentally one of "having a God"—a point Luther frequently makes with reference to the first commandment, "I am the Lord, thy God." Acknowledging and confessing one's sinfulness is the only way to be liberated from sin, and it is only after the forgiveness of sins and experience of trust, faith, and dependence, says Luther, that the human truly and fully recognizes God's divinity and is able to praise God: "If you believe, you are righteous, because you attribute to God the glory of being almighty, merciful, truthful, etc. You justify and praise God. In short, you attribute divinity and everything to Him."<sup>39</sup>

As noted, post-Ritschlian Protestant theology featured important variations, developments, and internal debates, but the centrality of revelation and the theme of forgiveness of sin, understood according to the general features surveyed above, held a privileged position. Thus, for example, for Ritschl, "the admission of sinners to fellowship with God in spite of sin" and the establishment of a "confidential relation to God" grounded in God's unmerited love and gracious will were the heart of Protestantism correctly understood.<sup>40</sup> As such, revelation also constitutes a moment of salvation and bliss (*Seligkeit*), which is the present possession of the believer.<sup>41</sup> Herrmann, while both continuing and criticizing the theological program of his mentor, agreed that God, "by His holiness holds the sinner afar off, and yet also reconciles the sinner to Himself in granting him forgiveness by His own act."<sup>42</sup> Revelation reveals the extent and depth of one's sins and the inability to overcome them on the basis of human effort, leading to shame, guilt, and moral powerlessness. Yet the experiences of sinfulness and inadequacy immediately turn into supreme trust, joy, and love, as the believer also and at once experiences complete pardon through the extrinsic righteousness of Christ, a pardon that must be repeated and "be won afresh each time."<sup>43</sup> Revelation is therefore also the moment of personal salvation and eternal bliss (*Seligkeit*). In line with the central concern with issues of subjectivity and selfhood characterizing Protestant theology at the time, the moment of revelation and forgiveness of sin was also conceptualized as the moment of the attainment of full selfhood. Brunner, while objecting to much in the schemes of Ritschl and Herrmann, similarly claimed that in revelation, "when we know ourselves as we really are, as sinners, then we also know Him [Christ] as Mediator. . . . At the very point where we know that we have fallen away from

<sup>39</sup> *Luther's Works* (ed. Pelikan), 26:232.

<sup>40</sup> Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine*, 96.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> Herrmann, *Communion*, 32.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

the Word, there also we know ourselves again in the Word . . . as those who have been reconciled.”<sup>44</sup>

When read in the context of the Protestant discourse of his time, it can be seen that Rosenzweig’s depiction of revelation and forgiveness of sin in book 2 of part 2 of *The Star* echoes many of its features quite impressively. For him, too, revelation is an irruption, unprepared and unmerited by the human being and not generated by the human conceptual apparatus. It is not doctrinal propositions or dogmatic content but divine presence and love. Revelation, in *The Star*, is also the moment of discovery of sin, which as we have seen is not transgression of the law but a state of being, and more precisely the defiant state of self-absorption and perceived self-sufficiency of the “pagan” hero. Indeed, the conception of sin discussed above is strikingly resonant in Rosenzweig: for him, too, sin is discovered only in and through revelation. Sin cannot recognize sin, and thus discovery, confession, and forgiveness of sin all take place in the moment of revelation. In Rosenzweig, too, the soul’s initial response to the discovery of its sinfulness is self-condemnation, shame, and a sense of unworthiness, and he too holds that the state of sin is a totality, not a mixture between piety and sin. We also saw that it follows from Rosenzweig’s depiction that there is nothing the soul does to be liberated from sin beyond recognizing its sinfulness and submitting itself to God. Neither the correction of one’s ways or faith are conditions for forgiveness and communion with God. They are, rather, the result of being accepted by God, by virtue of his groundless love.

Another crucial point of commonality between the main line of Protestant thought and Rosenzweig is that the human is and remains a sinner. God accepts sinners and deems their sin absolute and forgiven out of unmerited love. Likewise, Rosenzweig’s model is dialectical rather than developmental: the human does not gradually move toward God but undergoes a complete revolution in revelation, transitioning from one state to the other. As a result, for Rosenzweig, the human is in a dual state: at once sinner and absolved, still sinful in the present and also already accepted. Also featuring in *The Star*’s portrait is the idea that revelation, as the moment of absolution of sin and communion with God, bears a redemptive charge. Like his Protestant contemporaries, Rosenzweig uses the term *Seligkeit* to connote the bliss experienced with the forgiveness of sin in the revelatory moment of communion with God. This bliss is received in the present, but it is fully realized and completed in the moment of final redemption, anticipating it and generating the practical impetus toward it, which is developed in book 3 of part 2 of *The Star*. This practical impulse is not a dry and soulless “legalism” but the ethical command of love. Rosenzweig also emulates the Protestant logic of repetition according to which the moment of revelation must be constantly renewed in order to sustain a

<sup>44</sup> Translation from Emil Brunner, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith* (trans. Olive Wyon; London: Lutterworth; first published in English in 1934, 8th impression, 1956) 347.

life stamped by God. In line with the contemporary occupation with subjectivity and selfhood, Rosenzweig depicts revelation as the moment in which the soul is carried extrinsically and achieves true selfhood through dependence on God. This is also when the experience of God's divinity and of "having a God" ("My God!") can be most vividly acknowledged and expressed through prayer of praise.

Rosenzweig thus appropriates numerous key elements of the contemporary Protestant version of revelation and forgiveness of sin in *The Star*.<sup>45</sup> And yet, as noted, his depiction differs in at least two critical ways. First, Christ is manifestly absent in his account. For Rosenzweig, the confession and liberation from sin take place in the intimate moment of the soul-God dyad, where Christ has no role and where the idea of justification via imputation of a third party's virtue has no place. This may be the reason Rosenzweig speaks of forgiveness of sin and reconciliation, not of "justification" (*Rechtfertigung*). The fact that Christ is absent from the drama of forgiveness of sins puts Rosenzweig's account at odds with the Christian accounts of forgiveness of sin. Rosenzweig claimed in a 1916 letter to Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy that Judaism is superior to Christianity because it does not need the mediation of a third person, Christ, between the believer and God the father.<sup>46</sup> A variation of this point can be found in the depiction of Jewish and Christian communities in part 3 of *The Star*, where the Jewish community is portrayed as "already with" God while the Christian community is still "on the way." It is possible that an echo of this position resonates in his Christology-less account of revelation as well. However, it should be noted that in "The New Thinking" Rosenzweig insists that the account of revelation in part 2 does not yet mention "the historical forms of revelation" of Judaism and Christianity because it intends to reflect an "Adamic" revelation that each tradition renews "in their distinctiveness."<sup>47</sup> This claim could be buttressed by the fact that Rosenzweig bases his interpretation of revelation on biblical quotes from Genesis that are accepted by both religious communities, thereby signaling to a primary ground for both Christianity and Judaism, prior to their separation, which captures what is essential to and shared by both. A few years earlier Rosenzweig refers to the perspective

<sup>45</sup> It should be made clear that the argument here is not that Luther was Rosenzweig's direct source. The relevant context is the late 19th and early 20th cent., not the 16th cent. Rosenzweig does not mention Luther often in his writings, though during the time leading up to *The Star*, he does discuss Ricarda Huch's book *Luthers Glaube. Briefe an einen Freund* in two enthusiastic 1917 letters to Rudolph Ehrenberg; Rosenzweig to Ehrenberg, 27 January and 23 February 1917, in Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, *Briefe und Tagebücher* (ed. Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann, in collaboration with Bernhard Casper; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979) 341, 351–52. Rosenzweig's most direct grappling with the Reformer comes in the later context of his Bible translation with Martin Buber. See Franz Rosenzweig, "Scripture and Luther," in *Scripture and Translation: Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig* (trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 47–69.

<sup>46</sup> Franz Rosenzweig and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Judaism Despite Christianity* (ed. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy; Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1969) 113.

<sup>47</sup> Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking," 90.

from which his thought springs and to which it strives as “Über-Jewish (and at once Über-Christian).”<sup>48</sup> This may be his perspective in formulating his account of revelation as well. This interpretation is also in line with Rosenzweig’s view that Judaism and Christianity are charged with distinct, albeit complementary, tasks in the effort of bringing the world to the kingdom of God and his understanding that Judaism, in its very existence, reminds Christianity of its biblical origin and redemptive task and protects it from lapsing into “paganism.” If this analysis is correct, then we can see that Rosenzweig’s account of revelation is fashioned by and related to his understanding of the co-legitimacy-in-difference of Judaism and Christianity, but it also illustrates that the way in which he expresses the co-validation of both religions in his account of revelation is itself framed according to a deeply Christianized model and assumptions.

Second, the principle of “at once a sinner and justified” is predicated on the non-eradicability of the original sin, and while Rosenzweig utilizes this principle’s features and structure, he does not share its valuation of sin. He identifies the state of sin with “paganism” and conflates it with the “old” philosophy, but these are not vile, devilish, or even conclusively negative. The overcoming of the metaethical state by revelation is not its elimination but its sublimation, or as Rosenzweig puts it in “The New Thinking,” its “salvation.”<sup>49</sup> Rosenzweig in fact holds that “paganism” (and hence the state of “sin”) is everlasting. The title of part 1 of *The Star* explicitly refers to the “Ever Enduring Proto Cosmos,” which includes, as we have seen, the “pagan” metaethical self, and toward the end of the book he repeats that “Paganism will live on to the eternal end” (421). “Paganism” is for Rosenzweig the basis of our divinely ordained reality, but it is disclosed as such only through revelation. Its danger is in its appeal for exclusivity and totality, that is, in what in *The Star* he calls “its blind and drunken desire to see itself and only itself” (421).<sup>50</sup> In accordance with the logic of renewal and repetition, the two opposing states of “sin” and “faith” are constant options for Rosenzweig: the “pagan” world does not go away but remains the basis of reality as well as the basis of the possibility of the renewal of revelation.<sup>51</sup> The ever-enduring existence of “paganism” is the reason why, and the foundation upon which, Judaism and Christianity exercise their complementary tasks in ushering in the kingdom. Part 1 of *The Star* thus looms in the background of part 3 through the notions of “repetition” and “love” as well.

<sup>48</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, “Paralipomena,” in *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:110.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>50</sup> Rosenzweig expresses this view in “The New Thinking” as well. There he provocatively writes that “paganism” is “the premise of all our reality” and “the elementary contents of experience,” and in this respect, it is “the truth”—“The truth, to be sure, in an elemental, invisible, nonrevealed form.” Only when “paganism” claims absoluteness and denies revelation does “it become a lie”; Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking,” 79, 80.

<sup>51</sup> This view is similarly repeated in “The New Thinking”: “Revelation does not in the least destroy genuine paganism, the paganism of creation. Not at all. It only allows the miracle of return and renewal to happen to it. . . . Revelation as ‘ever renewed’ is the content of the second volume [of *The Star*] just as paganism as ever enduring is the content of the first.” *Ibid.*, 90.



Rosenzweig's tolerance toward "paganism," and hence toward the status of "sin," is linked to his understanding that the relation between theology and philosophy is one of striving toward unity rather than toward a fortification or separation. Philosophy is not to be denied or rejected but "redeemed" by theology, which in turn is in need of philosophy. In these two critical respects, then, Rosenzweig's account of revelation is at variance with the contemporary Protestant account of revelation.

## ■ Conclusion

That Rosenzweig's thought is marked by Protestant theology should not, in truth, be very surprising. In many respects *The Star* is the fruit of Rosenzweig's extensive discussions and debates with a close circle of enthusiastic Lutheran converts, such as Hans Ehrenberg, Rudolf Ehrenberg, and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, who determined many of the presuppositions, frames of reference, and conceptual paradigms of Rosenzweig's intellectual and spiritual world at the time. Rosenstock-Huessy was especially central to Rosenzweig's early considerations to convert and his Lutheran *Offenbarungsglaube* was consequential to the development of Rosenzweig's thinking.<sup>52</sup> In fact, notwithstanding his critique of Christianity, few Jewish thinkers were as inclusive toward it and as open about its influence on their personality and thought as was Rosenzweig. In an often-quoted letter from 1909, the young Franz Rosenzweig wrote to his parents: "We are Christians in every respect. We live in a Christian state, attend Christian schools, read Christian books, in short, our whole 'culture' rests entirely on a Christian foundation; consequently a man who has nothing holding him back needs but a slight push . . . to make him accept Christianity."<sup>53</sup> In his own life, Rosenzweig received a "slight push" but ultimately decided against accepting Christianity.<sup>54</sup> He instead became perhaps the foremost among twentieth-century European Jewish thinkers and labored to revitalize and deepen Jewish existence, learning, and culture in both writing and educational activity before his untimely death. But this does not change the fact that his close

<sup>52</sup> Rosenstock-Huessy's idea of "speech thinking" of "grammatical thinking," expounded in a short 1924 book, *Angewandte Seelenkunde*, which originated as a 1916 letter to Rosenzweig, left a decisive mark on the account of revelation in *The Star*. Cf. Rosenzweig, "New Thinking," 88. In a letter to Rudolf Hallo from 4 February 1923, Rosenzweig writes that "without Eugen I would never have written the *Star of Redemption*"; Rosenzweig and Rosenstock-Huessy, *Judaism Despite Christianity*, 43. On Rosenstock's mark on *The Star*, see Gibbs, *Correlations*. Rosenzweig also adopts the gist of Rosenstock's structure of the stubborn self-sufficiency of "pagan" antiquity being interrupted and revamped by the advent of Christ and the discovery of the divine nature of speech, as expressed in John 1:1, which enabled an address and response to a "you." Cf. Hans van der Heiden, Otto Kroesen, and Henk van Olst, introduction to Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Practical Knowledge of the Soul* (trans. Mark Huessy and Freya von Moltke; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015) xvii–xviii.

<sup>53</sup> Rosenzweig to his parents, letter dated 6 November 1909, in Franz Rosenzweig, *Die "Grilli"-Briefe. Briefe an Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy* (ed. Inken Rühle and Reinhold Mayer; Tübingen: Bilam, 2002) 19.

<sup>54</sup> For a rebuttal of Rosenzweig's famous "near-conversion" story, see Pollock, *Franz Rosenzweig's Conversions*.

familiarity with Christian tradition and culture left such a mark on *The Star* that some of its most central elements are indebted to, and reflected assumptions of, the prevalent Protestant currents of thought of his time. Indeed, the fact that so many of the peculiar and seemingly unwarranted features of his portrait of revelation as a dramatized event of forgiveness of sin and reconciliation can be explained as modeled according to the contemporary Lutheran understanding of revelation calls to expand the conceptual context in which Rosenzweig's thought should be approached and to interrogate the extent and significance of these Christian theological layers in his thought.