

Zev Golan. *God, Man and Nietzsche*. New York, Lincoln, Shanghai, iUniverse, Inc., 2007.

*Reviewed by Horst Hutter, Concordia University*

This is a very strongly argued book that establishes illuminating connections between kabbalistic interpretations of Jewish scriptures and Jewish history and key philosophers of recent European history. Presenting his argument as an “encounter between philosophy and religion,” the author establishes an overall connection between Nietzsche’s epiphany of the eternal recurrence and the eternal occurrence that became manifest in Abraham’s encounter with God on Mount Moriah. In this defining first chapter, Judaism is seen to advocate a continuous presencing of the infinite and eternal in every moment of a finite human life. In obeying the commands of the Torah and in structuring daily life around rituals, man occasions God to become present in history and thereby permits eternity to enter the succession of temporal moments. Similarly, the meditative practice of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence is able to suffuse every finite moment with deep eternity, such that every now becomes a forever. In both visions, so Golan argues, humans are radically finite but act as helpers of the eternal God. Every human act, whether in worship or in sin, becomes a willing for the eternal God to manifest his love eternally. Once something occurs, it occurs forever, and all that the eternal perceives is perceived for all eternity. “Man passes, but as he once stands before God, so he stands forever” (p.14).

The author is aware of the very different starting points of philosophy, which for the Greeks begins in wonder, and Judaism, which begins in fear of the Lord. Both responses to finite existence are paths to understanding, an understanding that needs to be expressed in a practice of living so as to become wisdom. Like the Jewish religion, Nietzsche’s philosophy is not just a set of doctrines that are unrelated to a practice of living. Both philosophy and religion, rightly understood, are to be evaluated by orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. In this regard, the author’s interpretation of Nietzsche is far superior to the standard interpretations in terms of empty propositionalisms.

Basing himself on the religious vision of the Lurianic Kabbalah, Golan establishes most interesting links between Luria and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Maimonides, Niels Bohr and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Schelling and the biblical Job. The point of these connections is to affirm a man-God identity, but one in which God is not the omnipotent creator of both good and evil, a vision which avoids the insoluble conflict between divine omnipotence and divine justice. Following Luria, the Ein Sof, in creating the world through the process of externalization called ZimZum, is not responsible for the existence of evil and requires human help to combat it. The creation of the world is in a way a disaster, and evil is real, but it is not something that is necessary for the “greater perfection of the whole.” Both God and humans suffer from evil and humans are called upon to help God bear and overcome

suffering. Thus the facile and embarrassingly frequent theology, in accordance with which the disharmony of evil parts is necessary for the harmony of the whole, is soundly rejected. In Golan's words, "They say disharmony is the condition of harmony; perhaps this is very advantageous and pleasing for music lovers, but not, of course, for those who are condemned to give expression by their fate to the idea of disharmony" (p.25).

The author frequently quotes Zohar to the effect that "Israel, Torah and God are one." Similarly, human freedom is "inscribed on the tablets of the law." Thus, the question of freedom of willing and how it may be combined with divine foreknowledge is resolved in terms of a judicious accounting of psycho-politics that leaves both room for the rule of necessity over all historical events and for human free choice. Since the Ein Sof is not omnipotent, the old theological problem of how to combine human freedom with the existence of God does not even arise. While there is no such thing as a free will, human choices are free within limitations. The author quotes Leo Baeck from *This People Israel* (p.169): "Life fulfills itself when it understands what is sent to it and accepts the opportunity to attain the possibility, which it possesses. A life goes astray, when it does not find the possibilities that are innate to it." One might remark that this vision is entirely in accord with both Nietzsche's and with ancient Greek philosophers' teachings. Human happiness, human virtue and a successful life depend on following a law as a rule of living, and thus to do certain things and avoid certain other things. Thereby a command-obedience structure, in Nietzsche's term a "dividualism," is created in the human soul which enables free choice and which, if directed at the "good" or God, enable humans to combat and restrain "evil" tendencies in themselves. Religious and communal rituals in this process have the function of making it possible for human beings to be able to follow the law and thus to master their "devils." Communal religious practices permit the ranging of psychic forces into lines of willing. Thereby both individual personalities and group identities are constituted and reinforced. As the author affirms repeatedly, the law given to Moses and the ancient Hebrews on Mount Sinai, the Halakic impulse, as it were, is that which defines the history of Judaism and of man, both psychologically and politically.

The title of the book is God, Man and Nietzsche. I assume that this means not just the national God of Jews, but also the universal maker of heaven and earth. As such, this Supreme Being would also seem to be the God of Christians and Muslims, and, given the universalistic claims made by theologians in all three Abrahamic cults for the divinity, God would be the God of all human beings, regardless of race, creed or national origin. He or She would seem also to be the God of Chinese, Bushmen and Afghans. As such, the divinity is not the property of any one group or movement, something that the author affirms. He mentions the problem of apophysis, namely that next to nothing can be known or definitely affirmed about the divinity, and that it borders on blasphemy and hubris to claim God as a private property. Rather, it behooves finite human groups and individuals to see themselves as properties of

God. In this regard, it would seem important to point out (something the author does not do) that, insofar as all human beings need a law to become more than animals, it is not just the Halakah from Mount Sinai that serves this purpose. All other human law codes and moral systems, despite their greatly different contents, similarly are instruments for civilizing human animals. Thus, the Islamic Shariah is in this the equivalent of the Jewish Halakah, as are the various law codes developed pursuant to specifically Christian scriptures by the theologians in the traditions of Christianity. Indeed, the ancient pagan law codes and moral systems, based, for instance, on Plato's *Laws* or the Twelve Tables of Rome, would seem to have fulfilled a similar function of civilizing individuals and groups.

The ideological background of the author's reasoning appears to be a form of religious Zionism. Thus, he strongly advances the belief that the Holocaust spelled the end of Jewish exile. In his own words, "The exile came to an end with the Holocaust. The Jews returned to history with the re-establishment of Israel" (p.112). Similarly, "The voice of God is less ethereal, less shaky. His voice is again the commanding voice of the God of history. He can be found ... once again on the heights of Moriah" (p.135). It is difficult to understand the meaning of these sentences, for they seem to make the universal divinity of all humans into a national war god. For how can it be argued that God ever was absent from either history or from a specific location on the planet earth, all of which he created and all events of which he witnessed, even if he is only the Ein Sof and not the omnipotent master of history? Has not God been present in Jerusalem all the time during the period of Jewish exile and during the Holocaust, horrible as these events have been? The desire to rebuild the temple a second time on the original site of the first temple makes perfect sense as a political project of contemporary Zionists. But the Mountain is also the home of the Al-Aksa mosque, the third-holiest site of Islam. The question needs to be faced, if Allah is a God different from Yahweh, and if the two Gods are on a war footing with one another. If this is the case, what happens to monotheism? Can the two faces of the one God live peacefully with one another on the same mountaintop in Jerusalem? Can the Christian face also join them? Perhaps a good motto would be: Ubi Deus, Ibi Jerusalem.

Similarly, the author argues, "Exilic Judaism is non-historical in character and nature. The Jews returned to history with the re-establishment of Israel. These events (read: the return and the Holocaust) made historical epochs; they literally returned the Jews and God to history" (p.112). It is difficult to understand how the author, after invoking Schelling and to some extent Hegel, can adopt such a monochromatic and non-dialectical perspective. Also, for the author, non-participation in Jewish ritual is "a choice to sin ... defines the biblical punishment of Karet, being cut off" (p.114). All persons who have opted for this, and it would seem to be a goodly number, are for Golan not only sinners, but, so it appears, are also non-historical. It does not seem to be possible to be secular Jewish and secular Zionist or non-Zionist, while still accepting the historical necessity for the existence of the state of Israel and

being willing to act in its defense. It is difficult to accept the view that important Jewish figures such as Spinoza, Cohen, Marx, Trotsky and Ernst Bloch are cast out as sinners, and are, moreover, non-historical. The latter is especially hard to accept concerning Karl Marx.

Overall, the book is a very learned and passionately argued exposition of an extremely one-sided perspective. The author affirms that every word of the written bible admits of a great many interpretations, which is only reasonable in view of the fact that the Jewish sacred scriptures are not written today, but were written a long time ago by people who lived in very different kinds of societies from ours. Moreover, these scriptures seem to have been re-written and re-edited several times in their history to fit different temporal circumstances. Such considerations might lead one to the conclusion that a literal reading would seem to be a very unhelpful approach to the interpretation of the foundational myths of a heroic people. The author invokes Nietzsche as his major philosopher, one of whose central teachings concerns the highly ambiguous nature of all human language. Writing and speaking both reveal and conceal at the same time, and every word may both convey a “truth” and may simultaneously be a “lie.” The evident lack of attention to this important insight of Nietzsche, as applied to any reading of the Bible inspired by his teaching, seems to be a major omission in this book. A resolute engagement with Nietzsche’s critique of linguistic literalism might have made the author’s perspective less one-sided, and it might have made the emotional urgency of his cause more refined and hence more plausible.

A further surprising omission of the author is his lack of any attention to the many important things that Nietzsche has said about the concept of redemption. This is especially surprising, since eternal recurrence is the major philosopheme of Nietzsche considered in the book, and Nietzsche sees eternal recurrence as *the* tool by which humans could redeem the world from the desire for revenge. In the words of Nietzsche/Zarathustra: “to redeem that which has passed away and to re-create all ‘It was’ into a ‘Thus I willed it’- that alone should I call redemption!” In the context of this important chapter of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, redemption is then further defined as release from revenge. Such release, however, is possible only through the propagation of friendships that do not initiate new cycles of enmity and of vengeance. The desire for revenge deriving from the natural psychic tendency to feel ill will against time and its ‘it was’ can be rectified by building a better future. The question is how the narrowing of the universal God to a national God can cure the ill will against the past and the strong pressure to continue to impose the shape of the past onto the future, including its enmities (cf. *Zarathustra*, II, 20).

The concluding chapter of the book, an interesting effort, investigates the question whether Nietzsche was philo-semitic or merely an anti-anti-Semite, as had been alleged. Golan offers a statistical analysis of Nietzsche’s published writings and concludes that positive references to Judaism vastly outnumber negative ones. The

negative ones, moreover, are usually in the context of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity. Overall, this is a book worth reading.

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