

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, Jewish studies has evolved into a thriving discipline that explores every facet of Jewish history, culture, and religion. Despite the astounding growth of the field, one crucial subject still has not found its place within Jewish studies: theology. The reluctance of scholars to establish Jewish theology as an academic subject mirrors not only the long-standing debates about the place of theology within the University, but also the contested role of theology within Jewish religious life. As for the larger disciplinary questions, it seems the battle between religious studies and theology has peaked and there are signs that theology is recovering its position within academia. Even if this optimistic reading about the future of academic theology is correct, there is little reason to believe that *Jewish* theology will benefit from the fragile truce between religious studies and theology. The forces within both Judaism and Jewish studies that have marginalized theology are so numerous and powerful, unless they are either confronted or circumvented theology will remain a tangential subject within the academic study of Judaism. For many scholars, this is well and good, either because they think theology has not been an integral part of the Jewish tradition or because they fear that the study of Jewish theology will diminish Jewish studies' hard-won academic credentials. The claim that

Judaism does not engage in theology is tendentious and relies upon the truisms that Judaism does not have a single universally accepted theology and that Jewish thought about God does not possess the same features as other theological traditions. Such arguments conceal the fact that Jewish practitioners have endeavored at every stage of the tradition to set forth their best understanding of God and the divine-human relationship. Those who would deny theology's place in Jewish studies on academic grounds are equally misguided. If the goal of Jewish studies is to deploy the analytic tools of the academy to better understand Jewish history, culture, and religion, it makes little sense to bracket on principle a central cognitive component. Furthermore, we can hardly hope to give a full and accurate account of the vicissitudes of Jewish history or the dynamics of Jewish life and practice without taking into consideration the matter of Jewish beliefs.

In *Contemplative Nation*, I seek to reframe the debate about the role of theology in Judaism and Jewish studies by proposing a new model for understanding Jewish theological language. Scholars of Judaism often begin their analysis of Jewish theological reflection with a conception of theology as inherently systematic and dogmatic, a view that is the product of facile comparisons to other theological traditions. If Jewish theology, and particularly rabbinic theology, does not possess these features, then things do not bode well for Jewish theology. Held up to these criteria, Jewish theology is either an underdeveloped speculative discourse or a homiletic discourse that guides the laity but which does not aim to get things right about God and the divine-human relationship. For theology to find its place within Jewish studies, it is imperative that scholars of Judaism abandon this hackneyed conception of theology. It is the purpose of this book to provide an alternative understanding, one that better suits the conditions of theological reflection in the Jewish tradition.<sup>1</sup> The dichotomy that sees Jewish theology as either flawed speculation or inconsequential homiletics misses that Jewish theology is not an abstract form of speculation divorced from matters of practice; rather, Jewish theological claims arise out of the very reading, reflective, and experiential practices that constitute the Jewish religious life. Identifying Jewish theology as either a speculative or a homiletic discourse has the additional negative consequences of attributing a single function and form to Jewish theological language. A central feature of my model of

Jewish theology is that theological claims serve multiple functions within Judaism and that Jewish theological language takes many linguistic and cognitive forms. By developing an account of Jewish theology that grounds theological reflection in practice and identifies the diverse functions and forms of Jewish theological language, I hope to defend Jewish theology from the spurious criticisms that have pushed it to the margins of Jewish studies. Additionally, insofar as my account of Jewish theology is philosophical in nature, it is also my hope that the project will provide support and resources for those engaged in more overtly constructive work.

### *Jewish Theology at the Margins*

The metaphor of theology at the margins of Judaism and Jewish studies is, like most metaphors, apt in certain respects but distortive in others. Where the metaphor fails is in the impression it gives that Jewish theology is moribund. This is far from the truth. On the constructive side, post-Holocaust theology, feminist theology, exegetical theology, and covenantal theology have all been productive areas of research in recent decades. From the historical perspective, biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic theology have also captured the attention of scholars. Given this intensive engagement with Jewish theology by a handful of scholars, it is perplexing that Jewish theology could remain marginalized; yet I am hardly the first person to note the troubled status of theology within Judaism. Arthur Cohen, himself an important Jewish theologian, observed in his contribution to a collection of essays from 1966 entitled *Varieties of Jewish Belief*: “It must be understood that refusal to think about theological questions within Judaism is no longer possible. Not only is it not possible, it is dangerously irresponsible. With pathetically few exceptions, there is no Jewish theology in the world today; there is no Jewish theological thinking; where it is found, among our younger thinkers here and abroad, it is regarded with suspicion and contempt.”<sup>2</sup> More than a decade later it would seem that Cohen’s *cri de coeur* had gone unheeded, as Jacob Neusner could make a similar assertion: “For a long time we were told that, in any event, Judaism has no theology, and it certainly has no dogmas. While the dogma of dogmaless Judaism has passed away with the generation to whom it seemed an urgent and compelling proposition, it has left discourse about and within Judaism in disarray. There is a poverty of philo-

sophical clarity and decisive expression amid a superfluity of conviction, too much believing, too little perspicacious construction.”<sup>3</sup> Whereas Cohen bemoans the dearth of Jewish theology, Neusner contends that contemporary Judaism is producing the wrong kind of theology. Jewish theologians, as he sees it, are quick to assert what they believe, but their work lacks intellectual rigor. On the positive side, using Solomon Schechter’s ironic phrase of “the dogma of dogmaless Judaism,” Neusner expresses confidence that Jewish studies is overcoming its fervid rejection of theology.

Unfortunately, Neusner’s optimism that Jewish studies had relinquished its opposition to theology did not prove to be correct.<sup>4</sup> A common attitude among professors is that the only purpose textbooks serve is to introduce students to topics that are too tedious for the professors to introduce themselves. In fact, textbooks and reference works are a significant indicator of what researchers in a field are likely to accept as consensus opinion. In a contribution to the *Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, David Ford notes the following views on Jewish theology inside and outside the academy:

The term “theology” is often considered suspect among Jewish thinkers. This is partly because theology is sometimes seen as being about the inner life of God, which has not usually been a Jewish concern. Partly it has been a reaction of a minority against oppressive and dominant confessional theology: it has not been safe for Jews to condone public or university theological talk, since Christians (or others) could use it to seek domination or proselytize. Partly, too, theology has been seen as abstractive, intellectualizing and even dogmatizing (in the bad sense) instead of practice-oriented discussion about community-specific behavior. Perhaps the most acceptable term is Jewish religious thought.<sup>5</sup>

While one could challenge the details of Ford’s account, what he gets right is the ongoing concern about the place of theology in Judaism, including discomfort with the word *theology* itself. Ford sees Jewish theology as so beleaguered that he suggests abandoning the term for the more neutral *religious thought*.<sup>6</sup> As this entire book is a defense of Jewish theology, I will not mount a counterargument here about the merits of the term *theology*. It should be apparent enough that the two terms are hardly synonymous. Whereas *theology* picks out discourse about God and the divine-human relationship, *religious thought* ranges over a far more amorphous semantic field pertaining to any aspect of the religious life. What does merit reflection at the start of this project

is the ease with which Ford dismisses Jewish theology in his effort to introduce Jewish views on God. How is it that theology has become a dispensable term in Jewish studies with some holding that the term engenders confusion rather than clarity? While a comprehensive account of theology in Judaism remains a desideratum, it is possible to identify the principal factors that have suppressed theology's contribution to the Jewish tradition. Undertaking a brief sketch of these factors is useful for more than just background purposes. The tangle of forces opposing theology will make clear that constructing a new model for understanding Jewish theological language represents the most expedient and productive solution and is surely preferable to a direct attack on the hydra that seeks to extinguish Jewish theology.

The challenges facing Jewish theology begin with the word *theology* itself.<sup>7</sup> Taking theology in its most rudimentary sense as discourse about God, rabbinic Judaism has no synonymous word or phrase. The lack of a semantic equivalent to the word theology in rabbinic Hebrew or Aramaic does not, however, pose an insurmountable problem. When I first met my wife, a native Czech speaker, she would say things about her hand when she clearly meant her arm. I did not infer from this that Czechs do not have arms; rather, a process of discovery revealed that typically Czechs use a single word to refer to the combined unit of the hand and arm.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, just because rabbinic Judaism does not have a term to pick out its discourse about God, one would be foolish to conclude, on that basis, that the rabbis did not engage in theological reflection. This raises the question of how rabbinic Judaism construes its discursive forms; here, the matter becomes more complicated. Rabbinic Judaism divides its discourse into two principal categories: halakhah, which deals with matters of law and practice, and aggadah, a grab-bag term for all other forms of discourse including theology, ethics, pedagogical narratives about the rabbis, and much more.<sup>9</sup> From the perspective of Jewish theology, this bifurcation of rabbinic discourse is unfortunate. Not only does rabbinic Judaism not have a term for theology, but its reflections about God and the divine-human relationship are set in opposition to the privileged legal discourse. Further concealing the important contribution of theology to rabbinic thought and practice is the fact that the rabbis' theological discourse is conflated with all other non-legal forms of expression. As some of these other forms of nonlegal discourse

have their roots in folk literature or narrative genres that are equal parts entertainment and pedagogy, rabbinic theology sacrifices its intellectual and religious seriousness by association.

Certainly, part of what motivates the rabbis to divide their discourse along legal and nonlegal lines is their genuine concern about matters of law and practice. What also makes the division seem natural is the fact that the rabbis' theological discourse is not held together by systematic or dogmatic interests. Had the rabbis organized their theological reflection around specific topics or had they been more committed to a soteriological conception of belief, one can imagine that they would have found more nuanced ways to differentiate their forms of discourse. Regardless of how things might have been different, what is incontrovertible is the fact that rabbinic thought about God is not systematic or dogmatic. Ismar Schorsch explains this lack of systematic thinking in Jewish thought by appealing to the role of exegesis in Judaism: "The traditional form of Jewish thinking, as shaped in the rabbinic period, tended to be exegetical; commentary became the quintessentially Jewish genre of intellectual expression. A sacred text called for explication, application, and renewal, and *midrash* evolved into a mode of cognition, an expression of piety, and a vehicle for revitalization. But textually oriented thinking is essentially concrete, circumscribed, and episodic. Its very specificity induces a minimal level of abstraction and a bewildering absence of systematic analysis."<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the lack of systematic thinking in rabbinic thought is not limited to theology. As scholars have noted, there is little meta-halakhic reasoning in rabbinic literature.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, it is only with theology that the rabbis' indifference to systematic thought comes to serve rhetorical ends. For instance Solomon Schechter, one of the great scholars of rabbinic Judaism, notes that the rabbis "show a carelessness and sluggishness in the application of theological principles."<sup>12</sup> Further on in his magnum opus, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, Schechter asserts: "The fact is that the Rabbis were a simple, naive people, filled with a childlike scriptural faith, neither wanting nor bearing much analysis and interpretation."<sup>13</sup> These are biting criticisms coming from a founding father of the field of rabbinics and a historian who sought to overturn the "great dogma of dogmalessness" that had pervaded liberal Judaism and Jewish studies since Mendelssohn.<sup>14</sup> Why do scholars willfully hold Judaism

to a model of theology that fails to capture the features of Jewish thought about God? Certainly, one critical factor is these scholars' discomfort with the anthropomorphic and parabolic nature of rabbinic theology.<sup>15</sup> How can a committed rationalist embrace a body of theological literature in which God weeps, gets things wrong, and is bested by humans?

Fortunately, for those who struggle with the systematic and dogmatic shortcomings of rabbinic theology, there is a ready solution at hand: rabbinic theology is homiletic. David Weiss Halivni gives a concise formulation of the homiletic approach when he states, "Rabbinic theology is not categorical nor easily categorized, and is more prone to homiletical discourse than to carefully groomed, neatly disciplined speculation. Rabbinic theology is often packaged and shrouded in aggadah, within a folkloric context, functioning more as hortatory and pedagogic than as speculative literature."<sup>16</sup> Identifying the rabbis' theological discourse as homiletic absolves the rabbis from having created and transmitted a body of theological literature that is at odds with contemporary theological sensibilities. On this interpretation, the rabbis were not personally committed to their theological claims; instead, their theological assertions were meant to form and guide the laity. This approach to rabbinic theology faces significant hermeneutic and historical challenges. As outlined by Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the principal hermeneutic tasks is to allow the text to assert its claim to truth.<sup>17</sup> Reducing the rabbis' theological reflection to homily recasts their truth claims as edifying discourse. According to Gadamer, the hermeneutic process entails a complex negotiation between what is "familiar" and what is "strange" in the traditionary text.<sup>18</sup> Labeling rabbinic theology as homiletic severs the tension that is fundamental to hermeneutic understanding; it makes what is "strange" in rabbinic discourse "familiar" and in doing so it closes off the possibility of hearing what the rabbis sought to convey through their theological reflection.

In addition to the hermeneutic challenges, there are also historical considerations that undermine the homiletic account of rabbinic theology. Part of what makes the homiletic account compelling is the fact that Judaism has preserved numerous midrashic collections organized around the liturgical reading of the Torah. Furthermore, the principal textual forms within the homiletic midrashim, the *petiḥah* and the *ḥatimah*, appear to be sermons that lead into or expound upon the reading of the Torah. While scholars of

Judaism were once convinced that these texts could disclose the spiritual and intellectual life of the ancient synagogue, a slow process of cognitive attrition has steadily eaten away at this formerly secure knowledge. One significant factor is uncertainty about what role, if any, the rabbis played in the ancient synagogue. As Shaye Cohen argues, synagogal epigraphs do not provide evidence for the rabbis' status as synagogue leaders.<sup>19</sup> Further undermining the proposition that rabbinic theology was intended for the laity is the fact that recent scholarship contends that the early rabbinic community was relatively small, insular, and not in a position of social authority.<sup>20</sup> More damning than the archaeological and sociological arguments is the fact that close textual analysis has cast doubt on whether the sermons in the homiletic midrashim are indeed sermons. Upon close inspection of *Leviticus Rabbah*, Richard Sarason comes to the conclusion that the midrashic text is better identified as a scholastic compilation than a collection of rabbinic sermons.<sup>21</sup> Taken together, these arguments lead Günter Stemmerger to admit that "today we know much less about the rabbinic *derashah* [sermon] than we used to believe."<sup>22</sup>

If compelling hermeneutic and historical arguments speak against the homiletic interpretation of rabbinic theology, why do scholars continue to adopt this approach? A partial answer lies in the fact that the association between aggadah and homiletic discourse has its roots in the rabbinic tradition itself. Binary distinctions often create conflict and the bifurcation of rabbinic discourse between halakhah and aggadah is a prime example of this dynamic. For instance two traditions preserved together in *Song of Songs Rabbah* state:

"For I am sick with love" (Song 2:5): Despite the fact that I am sick, I am God's beloved. It is taught that when a person is healthy one eats whatever is brought out. As soon as a person is sick, one requests to eat all sorts of delicacies. Rabbi Yitzhak said, "In the past the Torah was generally known and thus people sought to hear a word of mishnah and a word of talmud, but now that the Torah is not generally known people seek to hear a word of scripture and a word of aggadah." Rabbi Levi says, "In the past a *perutah* [small coin] could be found and thus a person desired to hear a word of mishnah, halakhah, and talmud, but now since a *perutah* cannot be found, and especially since they are sick from servitude, people seek to hear only words of blessing and comfort."<sup>23</sup>



It is often the case that rabbinic texts that pit aggadah and halakhah against each other are rhetorically complex and could be read in support of either discursive form.<sup>24</sup> In the comments above, interest in aggadah rises either because people have become less educated about Jewish belief and practice or because aggadah ameliorates the suffering of social ills. While it is possible to read the text as suggesting that aggadah is the true spiritual medicine and the epitome of the Jewish tradition, it seems that the comments are attempting to convey that under optimal conditions aggadah is only a small part of the proper regimen. Traditions such as these are not repudiations of aggadah, but they do contribute to the view that aggadah is a homiletic or edifying form of discourse and not a means for discovering the truth about God and the divine-human relationship. Curiously, even though there are rabbinic comments which say just that—"if you desire to know the One Who Spoke and the World Was, study aggadah for from it you will come to know the One Who Spoke and the World Was and you will cleave to God's ways"—the idea that aggadah is homiletic has effectively supplanted the notion that aggadah is a theoretical discourse that orients one properly to God.<sup>25</sup>

That the homiletic interpretation of aggadah has come to hold sway is as much the result of the reception history of aggadah in later Jewish tradition as the result of the initial struggle between halakhah and aggadah. Here it is only necessary to mention in broad brush strokes the events that have contributed to the marginalization of aggadah, and by extension theology, within Judaism. While modern perspectives on aggadah coalesced around the homiletic interpretation, in the Middle Ages attitudes toward aggadah varied widely even among those who agreed that this portion of the rabbis' work was problematic. In the introduction to his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides discusses midrash, the rabbinic genre of scriptural interpretation to which aggadah is closely associated. Maimonides sees three interpretive possibilities regarding midrash, not all of them praiseworthy:

Now it was to the vulgar that we wanted to explain the import of the *Midrashim* and the external meanings of prophecy. We also saw that if an ignoramus among the multitude of Rabbanites should engage in speculation on these *Midrashim*, he would find nothing difficult in them, inasmuch as a rash fool, devoid of any knowledge of the nature of being, does not find impossibilities hard to accept. If, however, a perfect man of virtue should engage in speculation on them, he cannot escape one of two courses: either he can take the

speeches in question in their external sense and, in so doing, think ill of their author and regard him as an ignoramus—in this there is nothing that would upset the foundations of belief; or he can attribute to them an inner meaning, thereby extricating himself from his predicament and being able to think well of the author whether or not the inner meaning of the saying is clear to him.<sup>26</sup>

While Maimonides speaks of midrash, it seems evident that his criticisms of midrash are intended for aggadah. For Maimonides, the plain-sense of midrash is non-sense and no thinking person could embrace it at that level. Indeed, one who does exercise his or her intellectual powers is free to disavow midrash altogether; the “foundations of belief” are not dependent on this part of the tradition. A third option exists, the one Maimonides will pursue: that midrash does possess profound truths but only if one can uncover its “inner meaning.” In order to uphold this esoteric view of midrash, Maimonides argues that all of the rabbis’ comments about God are parabolic and function as “poetic conceits” that make no presumption to actually interpret Scripture.<sup>27</sup> While Maimonides will occasionally endeavor to coax meaning out of midrash when doing so can give support to his philosophical positions, imputing esotericism to midrash is no less an act of textual violence than conceiving aggadah as principally homiletic. Both interpretive moves are propelled by the belief that the rabbis could not possibly have meant what they said.<sup>28</sup>

The philosophical approach to aggadah, as exemplified by Maimonides, undercut aggadah’s status as a legitimate and central part of the tradition. Effectively unmooring aggadah, philosophy opened the way for even more dismissive attitudes toward aggadah that did not bother with preserving its esoteric claim to truth. Such a perspective proved useful to Ibn Kammūnah in thirteenth-century Baghdad when he sought to reconcile the rabbinic and Karaite communities in his *Treatise on the Differences Between the Rabbanites and the Karaites*. One of the Karaites’ fundamental objections to rabbinic Judaism was a rejection of the exegetical techniques that are constitutive of midrash and aggadah.<sup>29</sup> Apparently, aggadah was one of the areas in which Ibn Kammūnah was willing to make substantial concessions in order to bring harmony to the Jewish community:

Some aggadic tales may be such as the disciples had heard from their masters, and not having understood their intent, have carefully transmitted them just

as they had heard them. These tales having thus come down to us, we think little of them, because we do not know the intention of their authors. Where all this involves no (legal) permissions and prohibitions, it is (obviously) of no importance to us. As for many, if not most or even all, midrashic stories which the Sages have recited in interpreting Scriptural verses, they partake of poetic anecdotes and oratorical facetiae; the Sages certainly did not mean (to imply) that things were really as they described them.<sup>30</sup>

Ibn Kammūnah, motivated by the judgments of reason and pressing social needs, chose to diminish the status of aggadah for what he believed was a higher goal. Many have claimed that Ibn Kammūnah's contemporary, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides), made a similar choice when he was compelled to publicly defend the Jewish faith in the Barcelona Disputation of 1263. Although recent scholarship has argued persuasively that Nahmanides' polemical arguments throughout the debate conceal his serious interest in and engagement with the aggadic tradition, his claim that the midrashim consist of sermons that do not compel belief reinforced the homiletic interpretation of aggadah for generations to come.<sup>31</sup> When later Jewish thinkers, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, faced similar circumstances of a dramatic shift in the intellectual horizon, combined with pressing social conditions, they too would find ways to weaken the claims of aggadah for the sake of a greater good.<sup>32</sup> The work of eighteenth-century philosopher Moses Mendelssohn and the emergence of the scientific study of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) in the nineteenth century testify to that fact.

I have already had the opportunity to mention Mendelssohn's name in the context of Solomon Schechter's phrase the "great dogma of dogmalessness," which Schechter claims has characterized liberal Judaism and Jewish studies since Mendelssohn.<sup>33</sup> Schechter argues (I believe rightfully) that it is a misrepresentation of Mendelssohn's thought to make him bear the responsibility of introducing the modern notion that Judaism has no cognitive requirements. Inaccurate or not, Mendelssohn has been widely interpreted as supporting such a view and it is not difficult to see why that is so. It is Mendelssohn's polemical work, *Jerusalem; or, On Religious Power and Judaism*, occasioned by public challenges to defend his commitment to Judaism and his understanding of revelation, that supports the view that

Judaism makes no demands on belief. Defending the claim that Judaism is fully compatible with the truths of reason, Mendelssohn writes:

It is true that I recognize no eternal truths other than those that are not merely comprehensible to human reason but can also be demonstrated and verified by human powers. Yet Mr. Mörschel is misled by an incorrect conception of Judaism when he supposes that I cannot maintain this without departing from the religion of my fathers. On the contrary, I consider this an essential point of the Jewish religion and believe that this doctrine constitutes a characteristic difference between it and the Christian one. To say it briefly: I believe that Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a divine legislation—laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity. Propositions and prescriptions of this kind were revealed to them by Moses in a miraculous and supernatural manner, but no doctrinal opinions, no saving truths, no universal propositions of reason. These the Eternal reveals to us and to all other men, at all times, through nature and thing, but never through word and script.<sup>34</sup>

Mendelssohn goes on to offer a forceful argument that it would impugn God's goodness to believe that God had revealed knowledge necessary for salvation to part of the human population but not to all. Rejecting the notion of such an imperfect God, Mendelssohn contends that all of the eternal truths necessary for "salvation and felicity" can be acquired through the use of reason.<sup>35</sup> The argument that Judaism does not require anything that contradicts reason paved the way for presentations of Judaism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which theology was limited to its edifying function.

From the Middle Ages through the Enlightenment, it was principally philosophical accounts of Judaism that sought to reinterpret aggadic theology or, failing that, to minimize its significance. In the nineteenth century, Jewish theology confronted a new and more ambiguous intellectual force—*Wissenschaft*—the study of Judaism according to the historical and critical principles of academic scholarship. The tools of academic research can be wielded for divergent purposes and recent studies of nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* reveal a wide range of theological, political, and intellectual interests among *Wissenschaft* scholars. Some scholars saw aca-

demetic research as a vehicle for religious reform or political emancipation, while others engaged in scholarship as a means of defending and preserving the Jewish tradition.<sup>36</sup> Given the diverse motivations behind these scholars' work, generalizations about *Wissenschaft des Judentums* are hazardous. Gershom Scholem, a critic of much nineteenth-century scholarship, says the following about the place of theology within *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: "We need not waste words on the theological emptiness of this Science of Judaism, on its barrenness in the religious sense. . . . And this may be readily understood: the historical critique which is the living soul of the Science of Judaism could only fulfill its mission through a secular, essentially anti-theological mood."<sup>37</sup> Scholem captures with this comment a prominent feature of much *Wissenschaft* (and later) scholarship: the conscientious adoption of a neutral position on religious commitment and theological truth claims that fails to live up to the elusive ideal of objectivity. In contrast to Scholem's critique, other accounts of *Wissenschaft* emphasize the existence of a strong theological agenda in nineteenth-century research. Ismar Schorsch, for instance, argues that "the founders of *Wissenschaft* knew that it had been theological contempt which had exiled the adherents of Judaism to the periphery of the body politic, and only a radical change in the Christian appreciation of Judaism would eventually secure complete political integration. As Zunz often intoned with controlled vehemence, political status was ultimately a consequence of the level of intellectual respect for Judaism."<sup>38</sup> Despite the apparent contradiction between Scholem's and Schorsch's readings of *Wissenschaft*, a dialectic connects their observations. The desire to reframe Christian perceptions of Judaism as well as Jewish self-understanding was part of the impetus for a purely historical approach to Judaism that either rationalized Jewish theology or pushed it to the margins.

While theology within Jewish studies faces a set of challenges specific to the Jewish tradition, it is also the case that scholarly reticence about Jewish theological language mirrors general attitudes about theology within modern and postmodern philosophy. I would venture to say that most scholars who have sought to diminish the role of theology within Judaism did so, not for ideological or political purposes, but because a less theologized tradition is the only version they found philosophically compelling. *Wissenschaft* scholars were firmly embedded in their larger cultural hori-

zation and thus they drew their philosophical resources from German idealism. As is well known, traditional theological language fared poorly under both Kant and Hegel. It would have been highly unusual for scholars who were the least bit acculturated to ignore the philosophical problems surrounding theological language. I propose as a contemporary parallel the academically trained scholar who renounces evolutionary theory. Stacking the cards against theology within Jewish studies is the fact that scholars of Judaism have a doubled commitment to continental philosophy. Not only did German idealism shape *Wissenschaft* in the nineteenth century; scholars of Judaism since then have more deeply engaged continental philosophy than analytic philosophy. This preference for continental philosophy has a profound significance for Jewish theology, as continental philosophers from Heidegger on have argued for the abandonment of what they call onto-theology, the grounding of being in God. The shaping of modern Jewish thought by the philosophical and theological prejudices of continental philosophy is most evident in the research on Franz Rosenzweig. Contemporary scholars have read Rosenzweig through the eyes of Levinas, Heidegger, and Gadamer, without acknowledging that these philosophers hold views on theological and metaphysical language that are in direct opposition to the main lines of Rosenzweig's project. Conflating Rosenzweig with later developments in continental thought has much in common with the homiletical interpretation of aggadah: it neutralizes what is foreign and uncomfortable in Rosenzweig's philosophy—his philosophical and theological arguments about God—by compelling him to adopt contemporary views about ethics, theology, or metaphysics. Focusing my comments on Rosenzweig may give the false impression that the philosophical problems surrounding contemporary Jewish theology are tensions within liberal-minded academic theology. One only has to note the resistance to theology in the work of Orthodox thinkers like Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Tamar Ross to realize that this is not the case.<sup>39</sup>

Identifying two additional impediments to theology finding its place within Jewish studies will serve as a fitting segue to my outline of the organization and main arguments of *Contemplative Nation*. As numerous scholars have documented and debated, the status of theology within the modern university is rife with problems.<sup>40</sup> Jewish theology not only shares the ten-

sions experienced by the larger field, it encounters additional lines of opposition that are particular to Judaism and Jewish studies. While Christian theology can point to its central place in the medieval university to justify its continued presence in contemporary academia, Jewish theology, obviously, can make no such claim. Furthermore, many would argue that Jewish theology should not make such an appeal as doing so would emphasize Judaism's particularity and thus jeopardize Jewish studies' status as a critical and objective discipline that shares the values of a liberal arts education. While it remains a contentious issue whether constructive theology has a valid contribution to make to university education and research, one goal of this book is to argue that attention to theological language is critical for understanding classical Jewish texts. I will seek to persuade the reader that, inasmuch as Judaism is a fitting subject for academic research, so too, by necessity, is its theology.

The second impediment unique to Jewish theology revolves around the word *Jewish* rather than the word *theology*. The acceptance of Jewish studies within the university has subjected the study of Judaism to the same ever-increasing specialization that drives all academic research. In reality, Jewish studies is an umbrella of subdisciplines that often have little professional or intellectual interaction. Scholars treat theological topics within the study of Hebrew Bible, rabbinics, medieval philosophy, Kabbalah, and modern Jewish thought, but very few thinkers have considered what features Jewish theological reflection might share across these historical and intellectual strata. While most would agree there is no single theology common to all the stages of the Jewish tradition, the segmentation of Jewish studies suggests there is no continuity to Jewish theological reflection at all.<sup>41</sup> From this perspective, there is no reason to advocate for the place of Jewish theology within Jewish studies as there is no such thing as Jewish theology. The study of Christian theology has, to be sure, been subjected to the same drive to specialization. Yet few would deny the possibility of speaking meaningfully of Christian theology. Given the fact that philosophical and methodological problems plague the study of theology at multiple stages of the Jewish tradition, it is my contention that the most effective remedy is to rethink altogether the concept of theology within Judaism. Surely, beliefs about God and the divine-human relationship cannot be as utterly dispens-

able as scholars would have us believe. Something must be wrong with how we are understanding theology and its place within the tradition, and it is my hope that a new model of Jewish theological language can move the discussion forward.

### *The Argument of This Book*

I have borrowed the phrase *contemplative nation* from Philo, the first-century Jewish philosopher from Alexandria.<sup>42</sup> “Israel,” he says “is the mind inclined to the contemplation of God and of the world.”<sup>43</sup> While Philo’s comment is based on an interpretation of the name *Israel* that links it to the vision of God, what lies behind his etymological concern is a philosophical conception of human perfection that culminates in the contemplation of the divine.<sup>44</sup> Since Philo had little impact on the development of classical Jewish thought, for the purposes of this study I am not interested in his efforts to fuse Judaism and ancient philosophy.<sup>45</sup> Given the challenges that theology has faced in the Jewish tradition, what I find striking in Philo’s formulation is the idea that the Jewish people are genuinely concerned with God and the divine-human relationship. As I will argue in the conclusion, I think there are good reasons to affirm Philo’s conception of the Israelites and to extend it to later forms of Judaism. Doing so requires a new model for understanding Jewish theology.

In *Contemplative Nation*, I propose a model of Jewish theology that has two fundamental commitments: (1) that there are multiple forms of Jewish theological language; and (2) that the forms of Jewish theological language arise out of distinct forms of religious practice, such as different ways of religious reading, reflection on divine perfection, and the cultivation of religious experience. All too often critics of theology, Jewish and otherwise, reduce theological language to a single category such as the homiletic, the speculative, or the metaphysical. This flattening of theological reflection is the first step in controlling and negating theology’s claim to truth. It is, in David Tracy’s apt phrase, an effort to turn a varied and transformative discourse into “more of the same.”<sup>46</sup> In my view, Jewish theology will not overcome the forces that seek to attenuate its claim to truth until scholars come to appreciate the diverse sources for Jewish theological reflection and the distinct linguistic forms that bring those reflections to expression. Acknowledging



the different ways that Jewish thinkers think and speak about God is not, by itself, sufficient to put the systematic and dogmatic expectations to rest. What is also necessary is a new account of the role that theological reflection plays in Judaism, one that focuses on the intricate ways in which theology is bound up with practice. In order to highlight the fact that theological claims, on my model, arise out of religious practices and often point back toward them, I will refer to the model as Jewish Theological Practice, or JTP.

In order to construct my model of Jewish theological language, in Chapters 1 and 2 I chart an unusual path through philosophical hermeneutics, Pierre Hadot's work on ancient philosophy, and William Alston's contribution to analytic religious epistemology. Hermeneutics is, for fairly obvious reasons, a good starting point for my search for philosophical resources to support Jewish theology. Hermeneutics is the philosophical discipline that explores the dynamics of interpretation, and Judaism is a scriptural tradition that has consistently relied upon creative rereadings of Scripture in order to preserve and enrich the tradition within ever new historical and cultural settings. If any philosophical discipline is going to illuminate the linguistic and interpretive elements within Judaism, it will most likely be hermeneutics. In Chapter 1, I undertake a critical analysis of the leading hermeneutic theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Gadamer and Ricoeur are familiar names within contemporary Jewish studies, but rarely have their hermeneutic theories been subjected to a critical appraisal that identifies the resources and the shortcomings of deploying their theories in the study of classical Jewish literature.<sup>47</sup> In my readings of Gadamer and Ricoeur, I identify numerous ways in which their hermeneutic theories can advance the study of Jewish theology. Gadamer is particularly helpful on the dynamics of interpretation across great historical distance. This turns out to be useful not only for understanding the interpretive processes within Judaism, it also illuminates the challenges scholars of Judaism have faced in interpreting theological ideas that conflict with contemporary philosophical and theological sensibilities. As for Ricoeur, his most significant contributions to the study of Jewish theology revolve around his analysis of the multiple forms of biblical discourse and his concern for the limits of theological language. Ricoeur argues persuasively that all the forms of biblical discourse, such as narrative, law, prophecy, wisdom, and poetry, reflect a distinct aspect of the

divine-human relationship and that each form of discourse makes a unique theological contribution. While Ricoeur's theory requires significant adaptation in order to apply it to postbiblical Judaism, his attention to the distinct forms of biblical discourse will serve as a model for drawing a more nuanced account of Jewish theology. Despite my appropriation of significant resources from philosophical hermeneutics, in scrutinizing Gadamer's and Ricoeur's theories it becomes evident that they embrace philosophical positions that nullify the possibility of theological truth claims. Adopting a hermeneutic approach to Jewish theological language requires that I buttress their theories by making them more amenable to such claims.

Chapter 2 addresses two related problems. If it is necessary to abandon the systematic and dogmatic approach to theology within Judaism, what can replace this standard conception? And, what account of Jewish theology can embrace the resources of hermeneutic theory while maintaining the possibility of theological truth claims? My effort to address these issues begins with a critical engagement with Pierre Hadot's work on the role of spiritual exercises in ancient philosophy. Hadot argues that unlike the strictly theoretical orientation of much medieval and modern philosophy, ancient philosophy sought to bring about the inner transformation of the philosophical practitioner through a regimen of spiritual exercises. A close and somewhat creative reading of Hadot's work provides me with a model of the relationship between theory and practice that I extend to Jewish theology. In summary, Hadot argues that ancient philosophical discourse had three principal functions: (1) Discourse had the theoretical function of justifying the philosophical way of life. (2) Discourse had a formative function. (3) The production and study of philosophical discourse was a spiritual exercise. Hadot's complex account of the functions of ancient philosophical discourse is useful for Jewish theology for two reasons. First, it provides a model for pushing beyond the reductive claims that Jewish theology only serves the function of speculation or homily. Second, Hadot's analysis of philosophical discourse suggests replacing the systematic and dogmatic conception of theology with an account of theology in which theory and practice are inextricable. Understood on these terms, theological reflection articulates and defends Jewish accounts of God and the divine-human relationship, forms Jewish practitioners, and is itself a form of practice. Arriving

at a new understanding of the theoretical and practical functions of Jewish theology is pivotal in my effort to secure the place of theology within Jewish studies. Nonetheless, by itself, a better account of the functions of Jewish theology does not provide the resources to overcome the philosophical and theological prejudices of hermeneutic theory. In order to arrive at a hermeneutic position that is open to the possibility of theological truth claims, I must address the matter of epistemology directly.

By drawing on William Alston's work on religious epistemology, I am able to strengthen the important resources for Jewish theology within philosophical hermeneutics and Pierre Hadot's work on ancient philosophy. Synthesizing arguments from Thomas Reid and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alston sets forth an externalist epistemology that contends we have no alternative but to rely upon socially established belief-forming practices, which he calls doxastic practices. Alston argues that our doxastic practices are comprised of multiple belief-forming mechanisms that can be individuated according to the types of inputs the mechanisms use to formulate beliefs as well as the content of the beliefs that the mechanisms produce. Along these lines, Jewish theology is a doxastic practice that produces beliefs about God and that is comprised of belief-forming mechanisms like exegetical and hermeneutic engagement with Scripture, claims based on divine perfection, and claims that arise out of religious experience. Following Alston, I see each of these four sources as having a distinct input for its beliefs, for example, exegetical problems within Scripture are the constituents (the input) upon which exegetical claims about God are based, and so on. At the same time, what unites these multiple sources of belief-formation is that they are all ways of producing beliefs about God. Alston argues that the different belief-forming mechanisms provide mutual support as well as a background system for distinguishing true and false beliefs. In my view, it lends credibility to Jewish theology to acknowledge the multiple forms of reason and experience that constitute Judaism's theological discourse, and it also addresses a long-standing problem of how Judaism evaluates its theological beliefs to argue that the belief-forming mechanisms produce and share an evaluative system.

Given the hurdles that face the study of theology at multiple stages of the Jewish tradition, it is my belief that a general reassessment of theology

within Judaism is in order. To that end, I am proposing a model of Jewish theology that, I claim, is applicable across the tradition. How is it possible to prove that this is in fact the case? To support my argument, I have selected two drastically different texts to analyze the utility of JTP: an early rabbinic scriptural commentary and a modern philosophical theology. Although it will not be conclusive evidence of the universal applicability of JTP, I believe it will give strong support to my model if it can accommodate the wildly different cognitive presuppositions and textual forms of *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael* and *The Star of Redemption*. What I intend to demonstrate is that JTP is not only adequate to these texts but that it can resolve long-standing difficulties in the study of rabbinics and modern Jewish thought. As eager as I am to demonstrate the validity of JTP, ultimately what I am advocating is the idea that closer and more careful analysis of theology in rabbinic and modern Jewish thought can produce important insights in those fields of research. To give a foretaste of the results of my study, within rabbinics my model (1) establishes a meaningful distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics; (2) demonstrates the important function of reason in rabbinic theology; and (3) replaces the homiletic account of rabbinic theology with a more robust understanding of the vital theoretical and practical contributions that theology makes in constructing and preserving the rabbinic world view and its way of life. Deploying JTP in a reading of Rosenzweig's *Star* (1) overturns the post-modern and postliberal readings of Rosenzweig as an opponent of metaphysics by demonstrating the critical role that divine perfection plays in his system; (2) restores the "Jewish" character of the work by emphasizing his use of exegetical and hermeneutical forms of theology; and (3) defends the place of personal revelation and religious experience in Rosenzweig's argument. This is just a glimpse of what the reader can anticipate on the other side of my philosophical explorations. First, I must construct my model of Jewish theological language, for which I now turn to the subject of hermeneutics.