Wilhelm Marr’s A Mirror to the Jews

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

On June 22, 1862, Wilhelm Marr published the first edition of his work, “Der Judenspiegel” (“A Mirror to the Jews”) (editions 1-4, 56 pp), with the second through fourth editions appearing within a few weeks. The fifth edition, which will be quoted from here unless otherwise noted, was published in the same year, however with a “different Foreword” and now comprising 58 pages. In this version the two-page Afterword of the earlier editions, as well as the two-page “Addendum,” were dropped. In them Marr explains why he at first hesitated to publish the work and what then prompted him to do so. The book was self-published (printed by Pontt und Döhren). Marr identified his motive for altering the Introduction to the fifth edition as his response to “the guttersnipe ways in which the majority of Hamburg’s leading Jews reacted against my person rather than my writing,”[1] thus compelling him to remove the earlier introduction’s “conciliatory conclusion”[2] and, instead, mounting a counter-critique against the false judgments of his work.

In 1862 Marr had, at first intended to support Reform Judaism in its controversy with Jewish Orthodoxy with a pro-emancipation piece. The harsh criticism of his June 13, 1862 letter to the “Courier on the Weser” prompted him to hastily rework a manuscript that had been put aside, resulting in the many inconsistencies that Marr himself later described as “immature.” Now he attacked not only the Orthodox but also the Reform Jews as reactionary. The title page carried an epigraph from Heinrich Heine’s topical poem of 1843, “Das neue Israelitische Hospital in Hamburg” (The new Jewish hospital in Hamburg) in which the talk is of Judaism as “a thousand year-old malady” but which also gives expression, in the form of a question, to the hope that “perhaps one day the grandchild [will] recover and be reasonable and happy,”[3]—striking the theme of [Marr’s] book.

Choosing as his title “Judenspiegel,” (“Mirror to the Jews”) Wilhelm Marr was literally saying that a mirror ought to be held up to the Jews. He thus placed himself in the tradition of anti-Jewish works, such as Johannes Pfefferkorn’s Judenspiegel of 1507, part of his dispute with Johann Reuchlin, and Hartwig von Hundt-Radowsky’s incendiary pamphlet of 1819, “A Mirror to the Jews: A Picture of Infamy from Ancient and Modern Times” [Judenspiegel. Ein Schand- und Sittengemälde aus alter und neuer Zeit].

Marr’s earlier works had radically critiqued reactionary German conditions while advocating general social emancipation. The causes of his turn against Orthodoxy as well as acculturated Reform Jews emerged directly from his advocacy of radical democratization and his critique of religion, which, in his view, must lead to the complete dissolution of religious or national minorities. In Hamburg where Marr belonged to the radical-democratic camp, Jewish emancipation and the “Jewish Question” became points of controversy in the political rivalry between “liberals” and “radicals” after 1848. Gabriel Riesser, the liberal champion of
Jewish emancipation, and the “radical” Marr were involved in this controversy, with Marr fully supporting the aims of the Reform Jews. The dispute culminated in a disagreement concerning the introduction of civil marriage, with Riesser, in the name of freedom of conscience and religion, as well as the protection of minorities, protesting obligatory civil marriage. Marr took this as proof that even liberal Jews cared only about Jewish welfare and exclusiveness. In this dissension over the goals and scope of the emancipation process lay the core conflict: for Marr, the freedom of the individual came before all else and, accordingly, ought to dissolve all group loyalties. Ultimately, the emancipation of the Jews signified their “self-emancipation from Judaism”. Marr accused Riesser and the Reform Jews of betrayal because they had forsaken radical political reforms to become reactionaries. His “Judenspiegel” was to serve the purpose of holding a mirror up to the Jews so they could see their disloyalty.

Marr’s demands

In contrast to the later antisemitic political movement Marr in no way demanded that emancipation be rescinded. On the contrary, emancipation did not go far enough. He urged that further steps be taken toward the total assimilation of the Jews, for example, the introduction of civil marriage (assimilation “of the flesh” through “mixed marriages”), the state-takeover of the Jewish welfare system, reform of the right of inheritance, and dissolution of the Jewish [5] community structure. Marr’s model for this program was the United States where the Jews shed their idiosyncrasies because the state recognized them as “citizens” but not as Jews. His own program would therefore be “short and clear: One Nation, one State”[6] (Addendum, p. 56, emphasis in the original). Marr criticized the, in his view, half-hearted emancipation policies of the German states, calling them “hypocritical lies” because they recognized “Jewry without reciprocity.” He thought it an error that the state had enabled, through the granting of universal suffrage, that Jews could enter state service, without having “demanded guarantees from them,”[7] that is, without their actual emancipation from Judaism. As long as that process remained incomplete, it was Marr’s opinion, the Jews could not make any such guarantees, “because they placed the Jewish state higher than all others.”[8] He tied to this claim the widely held view that Judaism functioned as a form of theocracy, “in which religious faith is identical with a Jewish state constitution and system of law enforcement.”[9] The full emancipation of Jews therefore presupposed their emancipation from Judaism. This, in his view, could be accomplished only through the privatization of the Jewish religion by means of the dissolution of the religious community’s organizational structure. Marr saw the ultimate goal of Jewish emancipation as “the integration and disappearance of the Jews into the form and character of the state majority”[10], the state certainly would have to be ideologically neutral. Upon their total assimilation, Jews qua Jews would finally vanish.

In the Introduction to editions 1 through 4 of “Der Judenspiegel” Marr declares that: “preaching Jew-hatred could not be further from our purpose.” Rather, he wanted to help “the Jews reach their full human potential,” something that could “happen in no other way—it has to be said—except through the downfall of Judaism, a phenomenon that negates everything purely human and noble”[11]. Unlike Christianity which rests upon a cultural-historical idea, Judaism, for Marr, is nothing more than a “morbid phenomenon without any inner connection to the cultural history of mankind”[12]. In this Introduction he praises a number of honorable Hamburg Jewish men who let the Jewish community see the consequences of “rightly understood emancipation,” in that “they seek the formal self-abandonment of Judaism’s exceptional
position in the state." In his eyes, these men thereby ceased "being Jews."[13] To this still weak initiative he attributed a "deeply moral significance"[14] because it forwarded a necessary historical process. But possibly because these Jewish men were not fully aware of the scope of their demands, they may have protested against "Der Judenspiegel". He himself asserted in the Afterword (editions 1-4) that his standpoint was "too liberating to be suspected of religious hatred."[15]

Marr’s critique of Judaism

Marr’s attack in "Der Judenspiegel" targeted "Jewish particularism," the "evil abscess of exclusivity"[16], the historical justification for which he contested, since he saw the Jews, as a "mixed race,"[17] having been neither a "racially pure primal people" nor a "consolidated nation."[18] To substantiate these assertions, he dedicated the greatest part of his book[19] to a "brief historical sketch," depending for the most part on the Old Testament to describe in "lurid colors" the political, national, moral, and religious character of Jewry since the patriarchs. He imputed to them treason, war, robbery, and carnage as their main occupations, as well as the aversion to work and lust after money. He went about demonstrating that the Jews were from the beginning a wandering, treacherous, thieving, servile people and a nation that had never known peace, calm, culture, and civilization. Up until the present day, there clung to them objectionable, outlandish characteristics which Marr held responsible for the antipathy toward Jews[20]. On the basis of this historical continuity, Marr posed and then answered his own question: "have the Jews in their totality reached the stage of maturity that would warrant their emancipation and particularly their political equality of status?" His answer was a clear "No"[21]. He justified this answer with the claim that Judaism was designed to be too "specifically national and Jewish" and that therefore the Jews formed "an alien element in the state."[22] Marr further demanded that Judaism not only be dissolved as a "religious-denominational sect," but that it also be subject to criticism "as a race, a civil and social entity"[23]. "Judaism must cease to exist, if humanity is to commence"[24]. He directs the same demand to the Christian state; it, too, must emancipate itself and become ideologically neutral[25]. In the Introduction to the first four editions of "Der Judenspiegel," Marr refers to the fact that Christianity has already been subjected to the kind of criticism that now ought to be applied to Judaism[26]. He declares as well "the openly confessed tendency of this book" to be the struggle against "religious, social, and political Judaism"[27], which for him, however, did not signify a struggle against Jews: "the Jews, after all, were simply a sad but necessary consequence, a product, of Judaism"[28].

At the conclusion of his book, Marr concedes all civil rights to the Jews, however would exclude them from all state offices. To be allowed to hold these offices, he demands of the Jews, as well as all other nationalities, "that they completely germanize themselves."[29] A Jew who gives himself over to this without reservation "is our friend." He who as a Jew is not ready to do this is "not eligible for equality of status [in state service]"[30]. The Afterword of editions 1 through 4 closes with the demand: "The Jews must adapt to us, we do not have to adapt to them"[31].

Reactions and consequences

His uncompromising radicalism, his June 13, 1862 letter in the "Courier on the Weser," ten days before publication of "Der Judenspiegel," which brought harsh criticism down on him, and finally the publication of
“Der Judenspiegel” itself, with its many demeaning and hateful observations about Jews—all these had drastic consequences for Marr. He was satirized in a poem and publicly caricatured as a “Jew-Eater” by Julius Stettenheim. His democratic party colleagues distanced themselves from him. He lost his seat in a new election for the Hamburg city council, forcing him out of politics and limiting his activity to journalism and political commentary. Moreover, the appearance of “Der Judenspiegel” evoked no great resonance and was not taken all that seriously, but rather as some sort of “farce”. Despite its anti-Jewish accusations, it was ultimately just an offshoot of the democratic Young Hegelian stance on Jewish emancipation with its assertively radical demands for assimilation. Seventeen years later Marr repeated his negative descriptions of Jews from “Der Judenspiegel” in his “Victory of Jewry over Germandom,” one of the foundational texts of modern antisemitism. However, now the objective of a possible Jewish emancipation was abandoned. For him and for other antisemites the full legal equality of Jews had, in the intervening years, facilitated a Jewish domination over the Germans that in 1879 Marr already represented as a fact that could no longer be undone.

Select Bibliography


Selected English Titles


Notes

[5] religious
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