



David Rees

On Scholarship as Visiting Research Assistant from Ludwig-Maximilians-University (LMU) Munich (2004-5)

Email: reesdreesd_at_hotmail.com

Gershom Scholem: The German Years

In the two decades following the death of Gershom Scholem in 1982 several volumes containing selections of his letters and diaries have appeared, offering illuminating insights into the intellectual and personal worlds of the founder of the academic discipline of Jewish mysticism. Together with Scholem's own memoirs and his account of his friendship with Walter Benjamin, these publications trace Scholem's path from the assimilated milieu of German Judaism during the First World War to Jerusalem of 1923, where Scholem's work continued to blossom for a lifetime. Before leaving Germany, Scholem had intended to contribute to a new, vibrant Jewish life in Palestine by teaching high school math; fate, however, brought him instead to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1925. There Scholem taught and continued his research in Jewish mysticism, the field he had already begun to rescue from the hands of quacks and biased or disinterested Jewish historiographers while writing his thesis in Munich on the earliest Kabbalistic work, the book *Bahir*.

Despite Scholem's significance for the study of Judaism and a broader Jewish historical self-awareness, to date nobody has written his biography. While scholars such as David Biale have dealt with aspects of Scholem's thinking and writing, the man himself recedes into the shadow of his own towering work. Most of the existing works on Scholem, moreover, deal mainly with his thinking after his appointment to the Hebrew University. And, while scholars such as Michael Brenner and Steven Aschheim have devoted attention to Scholem in the context of assimilated German Jewry, their works likewise do not deal in depth with Scholem's life in Germany.

The present research will culminate in a biography of Gershom Scholem's German years (1897-1923). Drawing in particular on unpublished letters and diaries, this thesis, to be

submitted for the Magister Artium in Munich, Germany, will trace Scholem's personal and intellectual development in these early formative years. The work seeks both to explore the figure of Gershom Scholem as representative of the paradox of assimilated German Jewish existence and to illuminate the impetus and growth that were his response to that paradox.