

Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism

Judith Butler

New York: Columbia University Press, 2012

Judith Butler's *Parting Ways* can be read in two complementary ways: as a work of political theory and as an intervention in the political discourse surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Butler's political position is well known and can be seen as the backdrop to this work. She is a consistent critic of Israeli policies concerning the Palestinian issue and what she understands as the Israeli "colonial subjugation" of the Palestinian (19). The concrete political suggestions in *Parting Ways* continue along these lines, e.g. in Butler's claim that the Law of Return—allowing each Jew or descendant of Jews to immigrate to Israel—should be abolished or at least suspended until a similar Palestinian right of return is recognized and guaranteed (209).

These positions are substantiated in this work with theoretical reflections on Jewishness, Zionism, and the political. The enquiry into these categories is made through a discussion of several major Jewish writers, including Emmanuel Levinas (chs 1–2), Walter Benjamin (chs 3–4), Hannah Arendt (chs 5–6) and Primo Levi (ch. 7). These interpretations are accompanied by analysis of works by Edward Said (ch. 1, ch. 8) and Mahmoud Darwish (ch. 8). The bringing together of these writers reflects Butler's indebtedness to two intellectual strands: postcolonial theory and Jewish thought. Out of the many close readings that her work offers, two concepts emerge as viable alternatives to the dominant political discourse: cohabitation and binationalism, which are based primarily on her reading of Levinas, Arendt, and Said.

The main idea Butler draws from Levinas is that from the encounter with the face of the other emerges an ethical responsibility. She perceives this responsibility not merely as a precondition for the political, as it is often understood, but as emerging within the political (57). Butler intentionally reads "Levinas contra Levinas" in order to detach his thought from his Zionism and commitment to the State of Israel. Yet if the ethical indeed emerges within the political as Butler claims, it becomes all the more exigent to address Levinas' Zionism in order to understand the relation between what he considered a great event in modern Jewish history, namely the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, and its ethical implications. Zionism for Levinas is a political idea that is grounded on the ethical and should be judged accordingly. It exemplifies the tension between the work of the state and the work of justice and therefore might contain injustice while at the same time striving, in its ideal form, to minimize the suffering of the other even at the price of sacrificing something of its own. This means that for Levinas there is a possibility of critiquing the State of Israel, while at the same time recognizing its importance and indispensability. This is a position Butler will unequivocally reject, which might explain why she does not deal with this aspect of Levinas' thought.

Based on her understanding of Levinas, Butler locates an affinity between Arendt and Levinas. This affinity is based on the idea of cohabitation in Arendt's work, which is described by Butler as a condition "prior to any possible community or nation or neighborhood" (125). It is a situation one finds oneself in and may not withdraw from, similar to the face of the other in Levinas. Butler makes explicit the political implications of the

concept: Israel and Palestine “are joined inextricably without binding contract, without reciprocal agreement and yet ineluctably” (130). The responsibility toward the other that is evident in cohabitation should lead to a kind of binationalism, which Butler envisions—along with Said—as one state that would not discriminate between its citizens (208). She rejects other, “wretched forms of binationalism,” even such suggestions as that of Martin Buber, whose call for a federated state prior to 1948 Butler finds appealing though insufficient, as it failed to understand the inherent colonialist aspect of the Zionist movement (36). Her version of binationalism is more than two nations living together in one state. It amounts to a complete reevaluation of the experience of exile and diaspora by both Jews and Palestinians, not only as a means of separation but also as a means of alliance, of creating a shared identity beyond the nation.

Parting Ways becomes here an exercise in creating a place beyond the Palestinian/Jew dichotomy, a place that is not yet (224). On the one hand, Butler is calling us to imagine the impossible. On the other hand, her call for vigorous use of the imagination does not go far enough, since she does not give Zionism and Zionist thought the same chance to be imagined anew. *Parting Ways* is explicitly anti-Zionist (2; 9) and in it there is no place for a reevaluation of Zionism. Such an outright rejection of Zionism is problematic for several reasons. First, although at times Butler distinguishes between different kinds of Zionism, e.g. cultural, political, etc., her anti-Zionist position overlooks de facto the different manifestations of this phenomenon. Second, Butler’s argument is, in a curious way, an inversion of a Zionist argument: just as certain strands of Zionism sought to completely negate the diasporic experience (*shlilat ha’galut*), so does Butler completely negate Zionism in favor of the *galut* (exile) and the diasporic (15). If the act of negating Zionism can be considered a violent discourse, its inversion also contains a violent logic to it. Finally, such a position makes Butler’s project unviable as a political alternative. Butler is aware of this last point, but claims that it does “not suffice as a reason to be against it” (30). Yet if the work is indeed meant as intervention in the discourse, such a position diminishes its potential impact, making it a preaching to the choir of the already convinced. Rather than completely rejecting Zionism, I wonder if a more productive approach for Butler’s project would be to reclaim the notion of Zion and embed it with new meanings. Imagining Zion to be an unfulfilled longing that should remain unfulfilled might be a step in this direction.

Such an approach will probably require turning to the theological resources of Judaism, and Butler will be hesitant to take such a step, for she makes sure to distinguish between Jewishness and Judaism (116). Butler envisages Jewishness in terms of a relation to the other and not as ontological essence. Her understanding of it is universalistic and anti-essentialist; she rejects claims for Jewish uniqueness, i.e. she derives moral percepts from Jewish sources but claims that they are not exclusive to it (3). These are sentiments shared by many scholars today, but they go against a strong tendency in Jewish thought. As Franz Rosenzweig—a thinker Butler mentions approvingly several times en passant without offering a detailed account of his complex thought—wrote in “Apologetic Thinking” (1923), the idea of chosenness is almost a dogma in Judaism. It is a self-evident, non-articulated prerequisite of Jewish thought and life.¹ Any serious attempt to deal with the questions of Judaism and Jewishness from the perspective of Jewish thought must come to terms with the idea of election. Butler’s off-hand dismissal of the issue does injustice to a long tradition of thinking about Judaism and Jewishness alike.

Butler's work is a radical rejection of Zionism based on Jewishness and the idea of diaspora. This project encounters two difficulties: when confronted with the major conundrums of Jewish thought (e.g. election and the idea of Zion), and with the harsh political reality. The recent public debates around Butler's position show, however, that despite these problems, and even without our acceptance of its conclusions, *Parting Ways* succeeds in its main task: to intervene in the political discourse and voice a Jewish concern about the State of Israel and its relation to the other.

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Note

1. Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 95–96; see also David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Introduction to "Gnosticism": Ancient Voices, Christian Worlds

Nicola Denzey Lewis

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 305 + xxiv pp.

Students and teachers of gnosticism have up until now been at a disadvantage in lacking a really solid, introductory textbook. This lack is all the more serious because of gnosticism's complex position and presentation. In the ancient world it often was, and at times in the modern world it has been, treated with derision and polemics; on the other hand, many of its defenders in the modern world have taken it up in an uncritical, ahistorical or insufficiently contextualized way. (The gnostics themselves might not have objected to this, but we as scholars certainly do!) Denzey's book focuses on the extant primary sources and uses those sources as a means to understand the range of ideas that fall under the gnostic umbrella. With an ease and clarity that comes from having taught about gnosticism for many years, she presents a nuanced but comprehensible take on the material, delivered in very readable prose.

Denzey does especially good work in using the Nag Hammadi texts to expose readers to a wide range of Christian and related literature of late antiquity. She sheds light on a range of issues that often arise in early Christian writing, including the importance of claims to apostolic authority, canonicity, and the function of ritual. By her exposing the literary and religious contexts within which these writings were transmitted, students are not only given a fuller understanding of the Nag Hammadi writings, but are also encouraged to see them simply as early Christian literature, freeing them from the "gnostic ghetto," as she also works to do, for instance, in her discussion of Valentinianism in its second-century Roman Christian context.

Her book is broken down into twenty chapters. The first four are preliminary, introducing the Nag Hammadi collection, the debates over the meaning of gnosticism, and the Roman empire and the position of Christianity in the second century, the period in which scholars believe that most of the extant gnostic writings were composed. Additionally,