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Ian Alexander Moore

Loyola Marymount University, Ian.Moore@lmu.edu

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Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Jonas: Briefwechsel 1928–1976

Ian Alexander Moore

Title: Briefwechsel 1928–1976: Mit einem Anhang anderer Zeugnisse

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Reviewed by: Ian Alexander Moore (Loyola Marymount University; Faculty Member, St. John's College)



Rudolf Bultmann
Hans Jonas

Briefwechsel
1928–1976

Mit einem Anhang
anderer Zeugnisse

Mohr Siebeck

This volume contains letters, spanning nearly fifty years, between the Protestant theologian Rudolf Bultmann and the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas. It also includes a helpful editor's introduction and a nine-part appendix, containing, among other documents, Martin Heidegger's and Bultmann's previously unpublished evaluations of Jonas's 1928 dissertation on Gnosticism, as well as Jonas's brief, previously unpublished correspondence with Heidegger.

In the first substantive letter (13 July 1929), which is more of a book proposal than a letter properly speaking (Jonas called it a *Briefmonstrum*, an "epistolary monster;" 7), Jonas attempts phenomenologically to derive a universal truth about humanity from St. Paul's famous description of his struggle to fulfill the Law in Romans 7:7–25. The existential, hence not specifically Christian structure of Paul's statements consists, according to

Jonas, in the tension between a free, primordial self-willing (*volo me velle*) and its inevitable lapse into the objectification of the universe and, correlatively, of the self (*cogito me velle*). Here we have *Entmythologisierung* (“demythologization”) *avant la lettre*.

But, it should be noted, we are not far before the letter: the very next year, in his first book, Jonas would introduce the language of demythologization, which would become one of the defining and most controversial features of Bultmann’s theology, into the scholarly world. This important, but still-untranslated book, titled *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem: Ein philosophischer Beitrag zur Genesis der christlich-abendländischen Freiheitsidee* (*Augustine and the Pauline Problem of Freedom: A Philosophical Contribution to the Genesis of the Christian-Western Idea of Freedom*), builds on Jonas’s “epistolary monster.” Bultmann published it in 1930 in his prestigious series “Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments” (“Research on the Religion and Literature of the Old and New Testament”).^[1]

Although, apart from a few largely perfunctory letters, the extant correspondence does not resume in earnest until 1952, Jonas and Bultmann remained in contact in the interim. For example, in a later memorial tribute to Bultmann (included in the appendix to the correspondence), Jonas relates that Bultmann was the only teacher whom he had visited before emigrating from Germany in 1933 in response to the SA troops’ harassment and persecution of Jews. Bultmann, moreover, would also be one of the first teachers Jonas would visit when he returned to Germany fifteen years later as a soldier in the victorious Allied forces. It is worth reproducing Jonas’s recollections here, as they attest not only to his intellectual respect for his teacher (which he also had for Heidegger, for instance), but above all to his respect for Bultmann’s character and ethical bearing (which, to his great dismay, he found tragically lacking in Heidegger). After reading this, it should come as little surprise that Jonas kept a picture of Bultmann by his desk in New York (108), or that, in 1934, Bultmann was bold enough to write a preface for the publication of the first volume of his Jewish student’s work on Gnosticism and even to confess an intellectual debt to Jonas (117–18; see also XIX–XX, 143).^[2] As Jonas tells it:

It was in the summer of 1933, here in Marburg. [...] I related what I had just read in the newspaper, but he [Bultmann] not yet, namely, that the German Association of the Blind had expelled its Jewish members. My horror carried me into eloquence: In the face of eternal night (so I exclaimed) the most unifying tie there can be among suffering men, this betrayal of the solidarity of a common fate—and I stopped, for my eye fell on Bultmann and I saw that a deathly pallor had spread over his face, and in his eyes was such agony that the words died in my mouth. In that moment I knew that in matters of elementary humanity one could simply rely on Bultmann, [...] that no insanity of the time could dim the steadiness of his inner light.

Of their next meeting, amid the ruins of war, Jonas recalls:

barely done with the hurried exchange of first welcomes, scarcely over the emotion of this unexpected reunion—we were both still standing—he said something for which I recount this highly personal story. I had come by military transport from Göttingen and held under my arm a book which the publisher Ruprecht had asked me to take to Bultmann, as civilian mail services had not yet been restored. Bultmann pointed at this parcel and asked, “May I hope that this is the second volume of the ‘Gnosis?’” At that, there entered into my soul too, still rent by the Unspeakable I had just learned about in my erstwhile home—the fate of my mother and of the untold others—for the first time something like peace again: at beholding the constancy of thought and loving interest across the ruin of a world. Suddenly I knew: one can resume and continue that for which one needs faith in man. Countless times I have relived this scene. It became the bridge over the abyss; it connected the “after” with the “before” which grief and wrath and bitterness threatened to blot out, and perhaps more than anything else it helped, with its unique combination of fidelity and soberness, to make my life whole again. (125–26; see also 99, 118–19)^[3]

The next major highlight of the correspondence pertains to Jonas’s text “Immortality and the Modern Temper;” which he delivered as the annual Ingersoll lecture at Harvard University in 1961.^[4] Jonas sent a copy of the lecture, which attempts to explain what sense immortality could have in today’s disenchanting world, to Bultmann in January 1962. In his prefatory letter, Jonas explains that he felt compelled to go in the opposite direction of his erstwhile mentor: whereas the don of demythologization strives, as Jonas had earlier in his

career (see especially 115–116), to uncover the true, existential content of myth behind its fantastical garb, Jonas thinks that myth, in the manner of Plato, is the best we have to go on when it comes to questions such as the meaning of immortality and the meaning of God after Auschwitz. Of his lecture, Jonas writes—and here I quote and translate at length, since it is uncertain if and when the correspondence will be translated in its entirety—

It was a daring attempt at a metaphysical statement. When developing it, I saw myself compelled to have recourse to myth—to a self-invented myth. This was not intended as a general method of metaphysics, but as a personal form of symbolic answer to a question that I could not answer in any other way but whose right to an answer was undeniable.

[Es wurde ein gewagter Versuch zu einer metaphysischen Aussage, in deren Entfaltung ich mich genötigt sah, zum Mythos—einem selbsterdachten—Zuflucht zu nehmen. Das war nicht als generelle Methode der Metaphysik gedacht, sondern als persönliche Form der symbolischen Antwort auf eine für mich nicht anders beantwortbare, aber in ihrem Recht auf Antwort unabweisbare Frage.]

It is not enough, Jonas continues, to refer to the authentically *human* content of mythological form, as Bultmann would have it.^[5] Myth itself can, and must, also be deployed—consciously and with full recognition of its inherent inadequacy—in service of *being as such*:

when, in a seriously non-dualist fashion, the authentic reality of the human points back to the authentic reality of the universe [...] and when it is necessary to speak also of this—of the totality of being and its ground—without there being any identifiable terminology for it, then we are directed to the path of the objectifying, indicative symbol; then a momentary, as it were experimental mythologization, a mythologization that holds itself in suspense, can again come closer precisely to the mystery. And here the revocability of the anthropomorphic symbol would have to wait to be replaced by other, for their part likewise revocable symbols, not, however, for a subsequent demythologization, which would have to relinquish what was to be signified only in the symbol.

[wo, ernsthaft undualistisch, die eigentliche Wirklichkeit des Menschen auf die eigentliche Wirklichkeit des Universums zurückweist [...] und also auch davon—vom All des Seins und seinem Grunde—gesprochen werden muss, ohne dass es die ausweisbare Begrifflichkeit dafür gibt, da sind wir auf den Weg des objektivierend andeutenden Symbols gewiesen und da kann vielleicht eine momentane, gleichsam experimentelle, sich selber in der Schwebelage haltende Mythologisierung gerade dem Geheimnis wieder näher kommen. Und hier würde die Widerruflichkeit des anthropomorphen Symbols auf Ersetzung durch andere, ihrerseits ebenso widerrufliche Symbole zu warten haben, nicht aber auf eine nachkommende Entmythologisierung, die preisgeben müsste, was nur im Symbol zu bedeuten war.] (51–52)

In his myth, which he would later develop in such essays as “The Concept of God After Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice” and “Matter, Mind, and Creation: Cosmological Evidence and Cosmogonic Speculation,”^[6] Jonas imagines a god who, in the beginning, divested itself of its power and gave itself wholly over to the becoming of the cosmos. It now falls to the radical freedom of the human being to reshape the face of God, whether by restoring it to its former glory through good deeds, or by creating a disfigured perversion of it through evil deeds.

Jonas received countless replies to his lecture, none, however, more profound and impressive (see 63, 77) than that found in Bultmann’s letter from 31 July 1962. Indeed, Jonas would later publish an edited version of Bultmann’s response, together with his own subsequent reply to Bultmann, in his book *Zwischen Nichts und Ewigkeit: Drei Aufsätze zur Lehre vom Menschen (Between Nothing and Eternity: Three Essays on Anthropology)*.^[7] Jonas even claims in a letter from 1963 that, without their epistolary exchange, “my immortality-essay would seem very incomplete to me” (“Ohne es käme mir jedenfalls mein Unsterblichkeitsaufsatz jetzt sehr unvollständig vor”) (77). Here Jonas refers to the essay as his “fragmentary and searching philosophical manifesto” (“mein fragmentarisches und versuchendes philosophisches Manifest”) (78).

Bultmann, in his response to “Immortality and the Modern Temper,” makes several objections, chief of which is that Jonas’s perspective on God’s relation to the universe is, first, aesthetic and, second, external to the existential situation of the being that, in Heidegger’s language, is in each case mine. Jonas contests the first, since he aims not at the final reconciliation of oppositions, but at the triumph of good over evil through the free choice of human beings. His view is ultimately ethical, not aesthetic. Regarding the second, Jonas concedes that it is necessary to take an external perspective if one wishes to interpret the whole. Today, there is little interest in such speculation. But Jonas takes it to be imperative:

For precisely this is now my conviction: that ethics must be grounded in ontology, that is, the law of human comportment must be derived from the nature of the whole; and this is so because self-understanding follows from understanding the whole (thus “from without”)—namely when the whole is understood in such a way that it comes about that the human being is there for the whole, and not the whole for the human being.

[Denn eben dies ist nun meine Überzeugung, dass die Ethik auf der Ontologie gegründet sein muss, das heisst: das Gesetz menschlichen Verhaltens aus der Natur des Ganzen abgeleitet werden muss; und dies, weil das Selbstverständnis aus dem Verständnis des Ganzen folgt (also “von aussen”)—dann nämlich, wenn das Ganze so verstanden ist, dass sich ergibt, dass der Mensch für das Ganze da ist, und nicht das Ganze für den Menschen.] (67)^[8]

Bultmann also invites a consideration of the relation between Jonas’s myth of the fate of God and Heidegger’s idea of the destiny of being (*Seins-Geschick*). Jonas ignores this invitation in his rejoinder to Bultmann, although he will later take it up in his famous critique of Heidegger, “Heidegger and Theology,” first delivered before a group of theologians at Drew University in 1964.^[9] (Jonas describes the event on 84).

Despite Jonas’s often scathing critique of Heidegger’s thought and person,^[10] it is interesting to note that, in a letter to Bultmann from July 1969, Jonas relates that he had met with Heidegger and had “finally reconciled [*endlich ... ausgesöhnt*] with him” (92). Moreover, in 1972, Heidegger supported Jonas’s efforts to receive reparations from the German government for the difficulties inflicted on his academic career under National Socialism. At Jonas’s request, Heidegger promptly wrote the following official explanation of Jonas’s circumstances at the time, testifying to his respect and admiration for his one-time student:

I, Martin Heidegger, was a full professor of philosophy at the Philipps-University in Marburg between 1923 and 1929. / Hans Jonas, who graduated with his doctorate *summa cum laude* under my directorship in 1928, was one of the most gifted students at the university and predestined to be a university lecturer. Before I left Marburg, Dr. Jonas had discussed with me the basic conception of the work he intended as a habilitation thesis on the position of Gnosticism in the entire thought of late antiquity. The finished work was published in 1934 as a book under the title “Gnosticism and the Spirit of Late Antiquity” (1st part). I read it. There is and there was no doubt for me that this work was outstandingly qualified to be a habilitation thesis. If I had still had something to do with this work as a habilitation thesis, I would have warmly recommended it without reservation.

[Ich, Martin Heidegger; war von 1923 bis 1929 Ordinarius für Philosophie an der Philipps-Universität in Marburg. / Hans Jonas, der bei mir 1928 summa cum laude promovierte, war einer der begabtesten Studenten der Universität und prädestiniert zum Dozenten. Die Grundkonzeption seiner als Habilitationsschrift gedachten Arbeit über die Stellung der Gnosis im Gesamtdenken der Spätantike hatte Dr. Jonas mit mir noch vor meinem Weggang von Marburg besprochen. Die fertige Arbeit ist 1934 als Buch unter dem Titel “Gnosis und spätantiker Geist” (1. Teil) erschienen. Ich habe es gelsen. Es besteht und bestand für mich kein Zweifel, dass diese Arbeit als Habilitationsschrift in hervorragendem Masse qualifiziert war. Hätte ich noch mit dieser Arbeit als Habilitationsschrift zu tun gehabt, so hätte ich sie ohne Einschränkung aufs wärmste empfohlen.] (122)

Other noteworthy moments in the correspondence with Bultmann include Jonas’s description of his research in 1952, which, he says, is directed entirely at “an ontology in which ‘life’ and thus also the human being

obtain their place in nature” (“Alle meine theoretischen Bemühungen gehen um eine Ontologie, in der das ‘Leben’ und damit auch der Mensch seinen Platz in der Natur erhält”) (18); Jonas’s critique of Eric Voegelin’s sweepingly pejorative use of the term “Gnosticism,” and his conclusion that Voegelin himself “is the modern gnostic” (32–34); Bultmann’s claim, made in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to convince Jonas to assume a professorship at Marburg University, that “you are the only one who has the strength today to take up and continue the great tradition that has developed in the history of philosophizing in Marburg” (“Sie sind der Einzige, der heute die Kraft hat, die große Tradition aufzunehmen und fortzuführen, die in der Geschichte des Philosophierens in Marburg erwachsen ist”) (44); and a debate on authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*), in which Jonas relates it to his pursuit of an ethics grounded in ontology, whereas Bultmann sees it, with Heidegger, in opposition to the life of *das Man* (“the they”) and as outside the sphere of the ethical (72–76).

Fortunately, some of the most important correspondence is already available in English. Jonas’s own translation of the aforementioned “epistolary monster” is available, with additions and emendations, under the title “The Abyss of the Will: Philosophical Meditation on the Seventh Chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans.”^[11] The two main letters about “Immortality and the Modern Temper” are in Bultmann and Jonas, “Exchange on Hans Jonas’ Essay on Immortality.”^[12] Furthermore, the seventh document in the appendix, a memorial tribute to Bultmann, exists in a translation by Jonas himself as “Is Faith Still Possible?: Memories of Rudolf Bultmann and Reflections on the Philosophical Aspects of His Work.”^[13] The final part of the appendix is a republication, in English, of Jonas’s 1984 tribute to Bultmann on the centenary of the latter’s birth.^[14]

^[1] Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930. For the second edition (1965), Jonas changed the subtitle to *Eine philosophische Studie zum pelagianischen Streit* (*A Philosophical Study on the Pelagian Controversy*) and appended a revised version of the “epistolary monster.” Jonas speaks of “a demythologized consciousness” (“*ein entmythologisiertes Bewußtsein*”) in the first appendix “Über die hermeneutische Struktur des Dogmas” (“On the Hermeneutic Structure of Dogma”), which appeared in both editions. See p. 82 of the second for the reference. For discussion, see pp. 14–17 of James M. Robinson’s introduction to the second edition, as well as *Hans Jonas-Handbuch: Leben–Werk–Wirkung*, ed. Michael Bongardt et al. (Berlin: Metzler, 2021), 78 (contribution by Udo Lenzig).

^[2] It is noteworthy that, in his controversial 1941 lecture “Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung,” Bultmann twice refers to Jonas’s works. See Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology: The Mythological Element in the Message of the New Testament and the Problem of Its Re-Interpretation,” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 12n1, 16. See Bultmann’s discussion of the lecture on pp. 21–22 of the correspondence.

^[3] Translation in Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 146–47. See also Hans Jonas, *Memoirs*, trans. Krishna Winston (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 74, 144–45.

^[4] In, for example, Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, chapter 5.

^[5] Jonas quotes from Bultmann’s recently published “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung,” in *Il problema della demitizzazione*, ed. Enrico Castelli (Padua: CEDAM, 1961): 19–26. In English as “On the Problem of Demythologizing,” trans. Schubert M. Ogden, *The Journal of Religion* 42, no. 2 (1962): 96–102.

^[6] In *Mortality and Morality*, chapters 6 and 8.

^[7] Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963, 63–72.

^[8] Translation in Rudolf Bultmann and Hans Jonas, “Exchange on Hans Jonas’ Essay on Immortality,” trans. Ian Alexander Moore, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 40, no. 2 (2020): 491–506 (quote on p. 503).

^[9] See Hans Jonas, “Heidegger and Theology,” in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), Tenth Essay. For more on this point, and Jonas’s relation to Heidegger more broadly, see Ralf Elm’s contribution in *Hans Jonas-Handbuch*, 28–34.

^[10] For the latter, see especially Hans Jonas’s 1963 lecture “Husserl und Heidegger,” in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Hans Jonas*, vol. III/2, ed. Dietrich Böhler et al. (Darmstadt: WBG, 2013), 205–224. For discussion, see Ian Alexander Moore’s contribution in *Hans Jonas-Handbuch*, 172–75.

^[11] In Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays* (New York: Atropos, 2010), chapter 18. Also, with the subtitle as sole title, in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Future of Our Religious Past: Essays in Honour of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), chapter 15.

^[12] Op. cit.

^[13] In Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, chapter 7.

^[14] Also in Edward C. Hobbes, ed., *Bultmann, Retrospect and Prospect: The Centenary Symposium at Wellesley* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985): 1–4.

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