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Ernest Renan, antisemitism, and scholarly practices

The most famous French Semitic scholar of the nineteenth century is also the man for whose views the adjective “anti-Semitic” was first coined. Ernest Renan (1823-1892) is best known for the national controversy stirred among Catholics by his modernist *Vie de Jésus* (1863), but his academic career really rested on his contributions to Semitic studies, whether on the history of ancient Israel, studies about the Hebrew Bible,¹ the history and comparative grammar of Semitic languages, or West-Semitic epigraphy. Among other works, he wrote *Histoire générale et systèmes comparés des langues sémitiques* (1855) and created the *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum* (from 1867). From his appointment as a professor at the Collège de France (1862) to his election to the Académie française (1878), he received all the honors possible in his country, becoming a national intellectual figure perhaps second only to Victor Hugo. However, Renan’s legacy is tainted by a lingering debate on his racial views. In his *Histoire générale*, he famously contrasted the “Aryans” with the “Semites,” ascribing distinct features to both of these categories in an essentialist and determinist manner. It is in order to criticize such views that the scholar Moritz Steinschneider coined the adjective “anti-Semitic” in 1860.² More recently, as we shall see, many scholars, from Edward Saïd to Pierre-André Taguieff, have regarded Renan as responsible for playing a crucial role in promoting racist and anti-Semitic views. And yet Renan still has many defenders, from Shlomo Sand to Guy Stroumsa, who regard it as absurd to call the French scholar an “anti-Semite.” In this contribution, I will first give a brief overview of Renan’s views on the Semites, then try to explain why historians still have diverging views on whether he was an anti-Semite or not, and finally submit a few reflections on what it was that, in his scholarly practice, contributed to accentuate, if not generate, the most problematic aspects of his work.

Indeed, as far as I can see, investigating the views of our predecessors proves extremely relevant to us, scholars of the early twenty-first century, not because it enables us to judge the flaws in their personalities, but because it helps us to uncover some possible flaws in our own scholarship. This can take at least three forms. First, the shock that often strikes us when reading problematic ideas (e.g., racist views) in the writings of scholars who are not that far removed from us in the past, should make us realize the situatedness of our own work and reflect on what our blind spots could be. Second, tracing the intellectual genealogies of concepts and ideas that still influence us may help us see how contingent they are, and that they are possibly colored by wrong presuppositions. These first two types of potential contributions of the study of research history are well known, and I would like to focus on a third, less explored line of investigation, namely the flawed scholarly practices that may still be prevalent among us. Whereas we may well be blind to them when we reflect directly upon our own endeavors, it may be easier to take a step back and see them at work in the writings of a scholar living in a period for which we possess historical hindsight.

¹ On this aspect of Renan’s work, see Th. Römer, “Renan et l’exégèse historico-critique de la Bible,” in *Ernest Renan: La science, la religion, la République: Colloque annuel 2012* (ed. Henry Laurens; Paris: Odile Jacob, 2013), 145-162.

² The phrase was *antisemitische Vorurteile* (“anti-Semitic prejudices”); see e.g. P.-A. Taguieff, *Sortir de l’antisémitisme? Le philosémitisme en question* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2022), 35.

1. Renan's "Semites"

Before turning to the most problematic aspects of Renan's work, it is appropriate to recall that his contributions are numerous. The fact that religion came to be studied from an academic standpoint in France is largely thanks to him, and he paid a high price for that: he lost his position at the Collège de France almost immediately after his inaugural lecture (1862), for having designated in that lecture Jesus of Nazareth as a mere "incomparable man" and said that he "did not want to contradict those ... who call him God," implying that he himself did not admit Christ's divinity³ (Renan recovered his position only in 1870). This was decades before the law of separation between Church and State (1805), and a historical study of Christianity that would be done independently of Catholic beliefs was still unacceptable to many in France. Renan's influence on French scholarship, and his foundational work for Semitic studies in that country, cannot be overstated.

However, Renan's understanding of the "Semites" was problematic from the start. In *Histoire générale*, Renan posits a stark contrast between, on the one hand, the Aryans, corresponding more or less to the Indo-Europeans, and, on the other hand, the Semites, by which he basically means all the peoples that, to his knowledge,⁴ spoke Semitic languages: not only Jews but also Arabs, Phoenicians, Arameans, etc. From the outset, Renan states his general opinion:

It would be pushing pantheism in history to the extreme, to put all the races on an equal footing and, on the pretext that human nature is always fine, to seek in its diverse combinations the same fulness and the same richness. I would therefore be the first to recognize that the Semitic race, compared to the Indo-European race, truly represents an inferior combination of human nature (*une combinaison inférieure de la nature humaine*).⁵

This is followed, on no fewer than fourteen pages, by an astounding list of stereotypes of the Semites, which are so crude that, today, they almost read as a parody of racists views – except that they were intended to be serious, academic descriptions. As painful as it can be to read them, it seems worth quoting a list of samples in order to give a concrete idea of Renan's views:

Truly Semitic worship has never gone beyond simple patriarchal religion, without mysticism, without subtle theology, almost always, among Bedouins, bordering on incredulity.⁶

The absence of a philosophical or scientific culture among Semites stems, it seems to me, from the lack of scope, the lack of an analytical faculty, that distinguishes them.⁷

³ E. Renan, *De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l'histoire de la civilisation : Discours d'ouverture du cours de langues hébraïque, chaldaïque et syriaque au Collège de France* (Paris : M. Lévy, 1862), 23.

⁴ Renan excluded Assyrians and Babylonians from the "Semites"; in fact, he refused to include Akkadian (designated, at that time, by the term Assyrian) from the family of Semitic languages in spite of a near scholarly consensus on that score. On this striking linguistic mistake, in which Renan persisted for years, see D. Charpin, *En quête de Ninive: Des savants français à la découverte de la Mésopotamie (1842-1975)* (Docet omnia; Paris : Collège de France/Les Belles-Lettres, 2022), 63-69.

⁵ E. Renan, *Histoire générale et systèmes comparés des langues sémitiques* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1863 [first ed. 1855]), 5. Henceforth this book will be referred to as HGLS. To the best of my knowledge, no English translation of that book has ever been published. In this article, the quotations from all French-language sources have been translated by Sarah Richelle, who also revised my English.

⁶ HGLS, 7.

⁷ HGLS, 9.

The poetry of the Semitic peoples is notable for having the same features. There is a complete lack of variety.⁸

... another essential trait of the Semitic mind, I mean a complete absence of creative imagination, and as a result, of fiction.⁹

In general, the sense of nuance is profoundly lacking in the Semitic peoples.¹⁰

Morality itself has always been understood by this race in a very different manner than ours. The Semite scarcely recognizes any duty except towards himself. Pursuing vengeance, claiming what he thinks is due to him, is in his eyes a sort of obligation. On the other hand, asking him to keep his word, to dispense justice impartially, is to ask of him something impossible. Nothing will hold out in these vehement souls against the untamed sense of *me*.¹¹

In the end, “The Semitic root can be recognized almost solely through negative features: it has neither mythology, nor epics, nor science, nor philosophy, nor fiction, nor fine arts, nor civic life; in everything, there is an absence of complexity and of nuance, and an exclusive sentiment of unity.”¹²

The only area where Renan ascribes a significant superiority to the Semites is religion: he believed that, deprived of all ability for complex thinking, they intuitively and immediately perceived the notion of monotheism. Yet even this praise of the Semites for this aspect of their beliefs is accompanied by derogatory statements, because he thought that their special view of God had negative implications:

The intolerance of the Semitic peoples is the necessary consequence of their monotheism ... we find only in the latter [the Indo-European peoples] freedom of thought, the sense of investigation and of individual research.¹³

the Semitic peoples have almost a complete lack of curiosity. Their idea of the power of God is such that nothing surprises them.¹⁴

As already noted, Renan’s views on the Semites were stated in the context of a contrast with the “Aryans.” But more generally, these views developed against a broader background, namely a worldview permeated by racial considerations. Renan considered Semites and Aryans as part of the “Whites,” regarded as superior to all other races. At the end of his book, he concluded with a tripartite division of races: “inferior races”, notably “primitive humanity” in Oceania, “Southern Africa,” and “Northern Asia”; the “first civilized races,” that is, Chinese, Kushites, and Hamites, of which only the Chinese still exist; and the “great noble races, Aryans and Semites.”¹⁵ Note that the Semites about whom he could write long pages of crude stereotypes nevertheless belong to the top tier of human races. Late

⁸ HGLS, 9.

⁹ HGLS, 11.

¹⁰ HGLS, 11.

¹¹ HGLS, 15.

¹² HGLS, 16.

¹³ HGLS, 7.

¹⁴ HGLS, 10.

¹⁵ HGLS, 501-503.

in his life, Renan was still regarding some parts of humanity as superior to others and he defended colonization.¹⁶

Renan was neither the first nor the sole person to entertain and publish such views. The very fact that Renan candidly and quietly published them in a book gives an idea not only of how widespread racist views were in the French society of the time, but also shows that they were deemed acceptable by many. In fact, he recycled the same ideas, and repeated a number of the same stereotypes, in his opening lecture to the Collège de France, a major public event.¹⁷ What would today lead Renan to be prosecuted in a French court was part of a scholarly demonstration he was counting on to be recognized as the French leader in his field. But he was not the inventor of the concepts of “Semites” and “Aryans,” and he was not even the first to contrast them. The intellectual genealogy of these concepts leading back to scholars of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries has been traced by various scholars, and most recently by Guy Stroumsa.¹⁸ More specifically, in an excellent essay,¹⁹ Domenico Paone explores both Renan’s published and unpublished works, his drafts, as well as his private writings and letters; he shows that Renan borrowed several key notions from previous scholars, notably the idea that language is a reflection of the essence of a people, and the dualism between Semites and Aryans.²⁰

Renan’s personal “contribution” was to systematize such ideas in an academic essay backed with an erudite sketch of the history of Semitic languages. Again, it is important to remember that his crude “ethnographic” descriptions appear not in a political pamphlet, but both at the outset of a scholarly treatise, as a sort of anthropological background to the grammatical considerations that follow, and at the end of the same treatise, as a conclusion. Indeed, Renan attempts to show that the features he has described in the first pages of his book can be verified in the Semitic languages, whose phonology, syntax, and lexicon prove, in his view, very simple compared to Indo-European languages.

And this essay proved very influential. It is not necessarily easy to determine whether or to what extent his writings instilled anti-Semitic ideas in persons who did not previously entertained such ideas, or were instrumentalized or co-opted by anti-Semites. What is sure is that his writings gave a ring of respectability to racist and anti-Semitic ideas. According to Taguieff, “all the anti-Semitic ideologies of the last two decades of the 19th century had as their point of reference these pronouncements by the young Renan [in *Histoire générale*], who had become an indisputable scientific authority in the field of classical and comparative philology, notably since his election to the Collège de France.”²¹ As we shall see, Renan later published more positive views on the history of Judaism, which some influential anti-Semites regretted; nevertheless, they were happy to quote his early writings as support for their own views. Thus, for example, Renan was quoted by Edouard Drumont in his anti-Semitic bestseller *La*

¹⁶ O. Le Cour Grandmaison, “Ernest Renan: Penseur de l’impérialisme français et de la république coloniale,” *Droits* 67 (2018): 49-63, esp. 52.

¹⁷ E. Renan, *De la part des peuples sémitiques*.

¹⁸ G. Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism: The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 63-84.

¹⁹ D. Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites: Ernest Renan entre langues et religions* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2023).

²⁰ As for Renan’s tripartite hierarchy of races, it is worth noting that Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) developed a similar tripartition of societies in the framework of his evolutionist view on the development of societies, in his widely influential book that has a telling title, *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Line of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (London, Macmillan and Co, 1877). However, A. Testard argues that Morgan’s views have nothing to do with “race” (A. Testard, “La question de l’évolutionnisme dans l’anthropologie sociale,” *Revue française d’anthropologie* 33 [1992]: 155-187, esp. 160).

²¹ Taguieff, *Sortir de l’antisémitisme?*, 35.

France juive (1886),²² by Jules Soury in his anti-Semitic public engagement “before, during, and after the Dreyfus Affair,”²³ and by George Montandon during World War II (1940) in *Comment reconnaître et expliquer le Juif?*.²⁴

Finally, it is important to note that Renan received much criticism from scholars in France and in Germany, both Jews and non-Jews, who pointed out his generalizations and simplifications, and the lack of documentation behind his descriptions.²⁵ It was possible for a European scholar to think differently at that time. In other words, it would be a mistake to regard the kind of views that appear in Renan’s writings as a mere product of a thought paradigm or *épistémè* that was dominant at his time and that prescribed unconscious boundaries to what could be imagined then. Although racism was widespread among European scholars in the 19th century and fostered colonialism, these scholars were not unanimous in following the general trend. We can draw up an analogy with their stance towards colonialism: for all the connections between orientalism and colonialism aptly described by Edward Said,²⁶ Stroumsa notes that “many Orientalists were far from champions of European colonialism and of its consubstantial racism.”²⁷ A striking example of a scholar opposing colonialism and denouncing the related “crimes of humanity” and “atrocious barbarity” was Anquetil Duperron (1731-1805), who wrote, “It is the Europeans who are the true barbarians.”²⁸ Similarly, not every Orientalist shared Renan’s views.

2. Was Renan an anti-Semite? The historical debate

In light of what precedes, it is not surprising that a number of historians regard Renan as a racist, and even as the foremost theoretician of antisemitism in France. In *The Aryan Myth*, Léon Poliakov noted that Renan was “the chief scientific sponsor of the Aryan myth in France”²⁹ and a proof of the “confusions which had arisen between race, language and religion, between a ‘New Israel’ for Christians and the fantasm of ‘Arya’.”³⁰ More recently, Djamel Kouloughli, a linguist specializing in Arabic, has gathered a collection of damning quotations of Renan’s works to make it clear that he was a racist and an anti-Semite, in an article eloquently entitled “Ernest Renan: a scholarly antisemitism” (*un antisémitisme savant*).³¹ Taguieff, a leading specialist of the history of antisemitism in France, uses the same phrase (“scholarly antisemitism”) and states that “Renan is a veritable racist theoretician.”³²

²² E. Drumont, *La France juive*, vol. 1 (Paris: C. Marpon & E., Flammarion, 1886), 12-13 (he also regrets Renan’s later views, which are more positive about Judaism, 14-16).

²³ P.-A. Taguieff, *La Judéophobie des Modernes: Des Lumières au Jihad mondial* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008), 181.

²⁴ George Montandon in *Comment reconnaître et expliquer le Juif?*

²⁵ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 122ff, notably 124-125, 138 (about Heymann Steinthal in 1860), 211 (about Salomon Reinach), 250 (about Goldhizer in 1893).

²⁶ E. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003 [first. ed. 1978]).

²⁷ Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism*, 68.

²⁸ He was denouncing the crimes of Europeans in America; that and India were the two cases he was discussing. Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil Duperron, *Considérations philosophiques, historiques et géographiques sur les deux mondes (1780-1804)*, *Edizione, Introduzione e Note di G. Abbatista* (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 1993), quoted by Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism*, 90.

²⁹ L. Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (New York: Basic Books, 1974 [first ed. 1971]), 206.

³⁰ Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth*, 207.

³¹ D. Kouloughli, “Ernest Renan: Un antisémitisme savant,” *Histoire, épistémologie, langage* 29/2 (2007): 91-112.

³² P.-A. Taguieff, “Quand on pensait le monde en termes de race: Entretien avec Pierre-André Taguieff,” *L’Histoire* 214 (oct. 1997), online : <https://phdn.org/antisem/taguieff-lemondeentermederaces-1997.html>.

And yet other historians consider it inaccurate or even absurd to call Renan an anti-Semite or a racist. They argue that it would not only be anachronistic to read his discussions on Semites and Aryans in light of later anti-Semitic ideas, but also plainly wrong to associate him with the real anti-Semites of his time. To that end, they point out that he had Jewish friends, was a member of the Société des études juives, and was horrified by the rise of antisemitism in the 1880s. He openly criticized not only the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages³³ but also contemporary anti-Semites.³⁴ He was personally involved in the defense of a Jew who was a victim of false accusation of ritual murder.³⁵ Moreover, in the second half of his career, Renan published increasingly positive views on Judaism. In a famous lecture at the Cercle Saint-Simon in 1883, he praised Judaism. He came to see Deutero-Isaiah as the precursor of the “pure religion” that represented his dream. Stroumsa notes that Renan spoke of “the Jewish miracle” (*le miracle juif*) in his *Prière sur l’Acropole* precisely during the period (the 1880s) when antisemitism developed considerably in Europe; Stroumsa points out “the incongruity of branding its author as anti-Semite.”³⁶ Shlomo Sand also writes that Renan was “far from being anti-Semitic.”³⁷ Although he was quoted by anti-Semites, as we have seen, he was also appreciated by many Jews, hence the perplexing dual reception of his work.³⁸

This is in sharp contrast with the attitude of those ideologues who, confronted with the concrete applications of the theoretical systems they believe in, when these systems take the form of persecution or violence, decide to endorse these applications. A typical example would be Jean-Paul Sartre, certainly the most brilliant French intellectual of his generation, who famously came to see Marxism as the “unsurpassable horizon of our time,” (*horizon indépassable de notre temps*) and approved of Stalin even though he knew of the gulags; Sartre finally became a critic of Stalinism, but soon after embraced Maoism, justifying revolutionary violence.³⁹ In the history of French intellectuals of the twentieth century, Sartre remains the textbook example of a thinker who pursued to the extreme the logic of his theoretical approval of violence. By contrast, Renan backpedaled when he saw the rise of antisemitism and, as Sand eloquently writes, “from the early 1880s he decided to mobilize fully in the attempt to dismantle the theoretical ‘golem’ that he had earlier done more than a little to manufacture.”⁴⁰

That said, there is more here than a realization that the scholarly discourse can be co-opted in the service of the persecution of Jews. The development in Renan’s thinking and attitude towards Judaism was not an intellectual reversal but an inflexion. Historians often point to a relatively sudden change in Renan’s thinking in the early 1880s, but the most subtle analysis is certainly that of Paone, who has traced the complicated development of Renan’s concept of “Semites” over his career. Paone shows that by taking account of some criticisms, and by observing more closely the history of Judaism, Renan was able to gradually free his thinking from some of the most rigid aspects – albeit never entirely, because his “racial” preconceptions and his “linguistic determinism” were still causing him to lag behind the facts.⁴¹

³³ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 204.

³⁴ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 205-206, 215.

³⁵ M. Gasnier, “Ernest Renan acteur et symbole de la lutte contre l’antisémitisme,” in J. Balcou, J. Glasser, and S. Guermès (eds), *Renan en Orient* (Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2022), 199-212, online : <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.160164>.

³⁶ Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism*, 123.

³⁷ S. Sand, “Preface” in E. Renan, *On the Nation and the “Jewish People”*, ed. S. Sand, transl. D. Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2010), vii.

³⁸ R. D. Priest, “Ernest Renan’s Race Problem,” *The Historical Journal* 58 (2013): 315-317.

³⁹ For a biography (fairly sympathetic to the subject), see A. Cohen-Solal, *Sartre 1905-1980* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

⁴⁰ Sand, “The Unclassifiable Renan,” in E. Renan, *On the Nation and the “Jewish People”*, 25.

⁴¹ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 206-207, 245-251, 295.

Renan's writings abound in contradictions because his views evolved during a long career, but also because his set of conceptual tools was unstable and the tools themselves, above all the notion of "race," were ill-defined. This had two contradictory implications: on the one hand, it gave a problematic framework to his historical thinking, marked by an intrication between races, peoples, and languages; on the other hand, it allowed for some flexibility and explains how he was able to improve his views. Renan never had a clear conception of "race" and his views in that regard were fluctuating. Already in the preface to *Histoire Générale*, he forewarned the reader that

The judgments about the different races should always be understood with many limits: the influence of race, whatever immense part one should attribute to it in the movement of human affairs, is counterbalanced by a host of other influences, which sometimes seem to dominate or even entirely smother that of blood. How many Israelites of our days, who are directly descended from the former inhabitants of Palestine, have no part of the Semitic character, and are now only modern men, pulled along and assimilated by that great force, superior to race and destructive of local originality, which we call civilization! All assertions about Semites imply similar reservations. The essential characteristics that I have attributed to this race and to the idioms in which they speak only apply to pure Semites (...).⁴²

Decades later, in his famous lecture "What is a nation?" (1882), Renan considerably qualified the value of the notion of "race," because the mix of populations over time rendered any ethnographic view of race shaky.⁴³ The next year, in another lecture, he argued that over the course of history, "large masses of non-Israelite populations embraced Judaism" and that as a result, it was "dubious" to adopt an ethnographic view of Judaism.⁴⁴

Against this background, Laudyce Rétat argues that what one finds in Renan's thinking is not antisemitism but anti-Judaism – not an opposition to Jews seen as a "race" but to Judaism seen as a religion.⁴⁵ Replying to Taguieff's verdict about Renan's racism and specifically about his antisemitism, she notes that Renan's conception of race excluded "biological determinism"⁴⁶ but concedes that "some form of anti-Judaism underlies" Renan's understanding of the "Semitic race."⁴⁷ What is striking is that this anti-Judaism is not revealed only in some derogatory remarks about specific features of Judaism, such as the Law, regarded as a formalist and rigid system. It is manifested even when Renan is praising some aspects of Judaism. Indeed, what Renan found most remarkable in Judaism (in addition to the monotheism shared, in his view, with other Semitic peoples) was the universalist ideas of some prophets, regarded as an anticipation of Jesus's religious ideas. By contrast, he regarded the focus on the Law in the intervening centuries of the Second Temple period as a temporary regression, in a typically Hegelian view, and with an implicit depreciation of Rabbinic Judaism.⁴⁸ The following sentence, in which Renan is thinking of passages in Deutero-Isaiah, is quite revealing: "the first founder of Christianity was Isaiah."⁴⁹ Yet these views were not just a persistence, in a former seminarist, of supersessionism. Renan, who had long rebelled against the Catholicism of his youth, developed an evolutionary view of the history of humanity, whereby all religions were to disappear in the future, to leave space for a sort of

⁴² HGLS, xv-xvi.

⁴³ E. Renan, "What is a Nation?," in E. Renan, *On the Nation*, 53-56. See also Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 207.

⁴⁴ E. Renan, "Judaism as Race and Religion," in Renan, *On the Nation*, 96.

⁴⁵ L. Rétat, "Ernest Renan: Vers une philosophie du 'Juif moderne'," *Romantisme* 3 (2004): 103-115, esp. 105.

⁴⁶ Rétat, "A propos du prétendu 'racisme' de Renan," 113.

⁴⁷ L. Rétat, "A propos du prétendu 'racisme' de Renan," *Etudes renaniennes* 103 (1997): 113-115, here 115.

⁴⁸ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 217, 223.

⁴⁹ Renan, "Judaism as Race and Religion," 79.

“pure religion” based on secularized universalism and humanism.⁵⁰ He found anticipations of this horizon in some prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible and in the Gospels.

At this juncture, it could be argued that Renan’s views were marked by anti-Judaism but that whether he was an anti-Semite depends on the definition one adopts of antisemitism. Typically, such definitions include part or all of three elements: prejudices, hatred, and negative attitudes toward Jews.⁵¹ Renan clearly did not exhibit the last two elements, and this, together with the improvements with regard to the first in the latter half of his life, explains why some historians qualify or even refute the accusation of antisemitism levelled against Renan.

There exists, however, another explanation, tied to a different way of reading *Histoire générale*. In his famous book *Orientalism*, Edward Said wrote that “Renan’s views of the Oriental Semites belong, of course, less to the realm of popular prejudice and common anti-Semitism than they do to the realm of scientific Oriental philology.”⁵² Based on the preface quoted above, Said observed that Renan spoke of the Semite as “of a prototype, not a real Semitic type with actual existence.”⁵³ While he mentioned Renan’s numerous “anti-Semitic strictures,” he did not write that Renan was an anti-Semite.⁵⁴ Other scholars agree that Renan’s views about the Semite race belong to the realm of theory and should not be mistaken for statements about actual people who would be compared and deemed as inferior or superior. Perrine Simon-Nahum states, “The opposition produced by the pair Aryans/Semites only has meaning for him as a conceptual, “ideal type” tool before the phrase was coined and not as the translation of a scale of civilizations referring to an objective measure of their development.”⁵⁵ If this line of reasoning is correct, accusing Renan of antisemitism would be a category error. Renan’s shocking statements and views were driven by a theoretical, abstract view of the Semites directly stemming from his scholarly interpretation of differences between languages and texts, and his understanding of monotheism. His overall understanding was not aimed at Jews but at the “pure Semites,” an abstraction that did not correspond to contemporary Jews.

That said, a more suspicious reader could interpret the preface of *Histoire Générale* as a disclaimer that does not erase the problems posed by the beginning of the book, and/or claim that Renan was not entirely consistent. It remains quite difficult to read the first pages of *Histoire générale* while maintaining that Renan is not, at least in part, talking about actual people, or basing his descriptions on stereotypes concerning ancient and contemporary people. He was looking for “Semitic features” among “pure

⁵⁰ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 175, 201-202.

⁵¹ According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, anti-Semite means “Characterized by prejudice, hostility, or discrimination towards Jewish people on religious, cultural, or ethnic grounds.” According to the Cambridge Dictionary, an anti-Semite is a person who “hates Jewish people, or is unfair or cruel towards people because they are Jewish.” According to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities” (<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>). Kenneth L. Marcus provides the following definition: “Antisemitism is a set of negative attitudes, ideologies, and practices directed at Jews as Jews, individually or collectively, but based upon and sustained by a persisting and potentially self-fulfilling latent structure of hostile erroneous beliefs and assumptions that flow from the application of double standards toward Jews as a collectivity, manifested culturally in myth, ideology, folklore, and imagery, and urging various forms of restriction, exclusion, and suppression.” (K. L. Marcus, “The Definition of Antisemitism,” in *Global Antisemitism: A Crisis of Modernity*, ed. C. A. Small [Leiden: Brill, 2013], 109)

⁵² Said, *Orientalism*, 149.

⁵³ Said, *Orientalism*, 142.

⁵⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 151.

⁵⁵ P. Simon-Nahum, “L’Orient d’Ernest Renan, de l’étude des langues à l’histoire des religions,” *Revue germanique* 7 (2008): 157-168, online : <http://journals.openedition.org/rgi/406> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/rgi.406>.

Semites,” but he often looked for such features among contemporary Arabs and relied on lamentable European clichés. Thus, Renan was entirely serious when he wrote the following, at a time when Algeria was colonized by France:

The Semites are almost entirely lacking in the capacity to laugh, and the opposite tendency that characterizes the French is, for the Arabs of Algeria, a perpetual subject of astonishment.⁵⁶

In fact, Renan asserted that the “Semitic mind has often been altered” among (notably) Phoenicians and Arameans due to cultural contacts with foreigners, but he added that

“this mind has really manifested itself under two pure forms: the Hebrew form or Mosaicism, and the Arab form or Islamism. Yet we should recognize that the Hebrew form so promptly merged and surpasses so surprisingly on certain points the limits of the particular spirit of a race, that it is really Arabia that must be taken as a measure of the Semitic spirit.”⁵⁷

He went on to comment on the anarchy that had always characterized, in his opinion, Arab societies, and prevented them from being well organized. About the “military inferiority of the Semites,” due to their “incapacity for any discipline or any subordination,” he writes: “The most famous representative of the Semitic race of our days, Abd-el-Kader, is a scholar, a man of religious meditation and strong passions, in no way a soldier.”⁵⁸

In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, he wrote that “The Muslim (the Semitic mind is represented today by Islam) and the European are, in each other’s presence, like two beings from different species, having nothing in common in the way of thinking and feeling.”⁵⁹ The parenthesis in this quotation shows that in his eyes, Islam was a continuation, or a contemporary instantiation, of the Semitic mind, which, in his thinking, translates into the view that Muslims (easily equated by Europeans with Arabs at that time) represent the Semites. In addition, he repeatedly writes that the Semites have never exhibited certain features (such as “nuance,”) that are attested among Aryans, thus implying that he is not only talking about an abstraction but of historical peoples.

Accordingly, Renan was disparaging the Arabs (of all times), not the Jews (presumably not even most of those of Antiquity since they had mixed very early on with other races). One could thus perhaps argue that he was an anti-Semite if and only if “Semite” means “pure Semites,” which seems to include many ancestors of the Jews in a very remote past but neither contemporary Jews nor those of biblical times (because they had soon mixed or interacted with other peoples); in addition, the Semitic race seems best represented by the Arabs. If so, Renan was racist against Arabs but not an anti-Semite in the current sense of the word. If Renan escapes the verdict of antisemitism that way, it is obviously not a very brilliant way. However, one may, again, wonder whether Renan applied his general view consistently. His statements rather suggest that he did find many traces of the “pure” Semitic race among historical Hebrews. After all, to illustrate the fact that Semite philosophy remained rudimentary, he referred to Job and Qoheleth, whose thought culminated in “anti-scientific statements.”⁶⁰ To illustrate the lack of morality among Semites, he mentions David, Solomon, Samuel, and Elijah.⁶¹ Clearly, part of the history of ancient Israel was tainted by the remains of the features he ascribes to the “pure Semites.”

⁵⁶ HGLS, 12-13.

⁵⁷ HGLS, 14.

⁵⁸ HGLS, 14-15.

⁵⁹ E. Renan, *De la part des peuples sémitiques*, 13.

⁶⁰ HGLS, 10.

⁶¹ HGLS, 15-16.

No wonder that Renan's case has puzzled commentators for a century and a half and led to a "conflict of interpretations." To the question "was Renan an anti-Semite?," some historians would unequivocally answer "yes" (e.g. Poliakov, Kouloughli, Taguieff), others would definitely answer "no" (e.g. Rétat, Sand, Stroumsa), and others might reply "it's complicated" (e.g. Said). We have also seen that Rétat prefers speaking of anti-Judaism for Renan. Still others refuse to frame the debate in those terms or at least suggest that it is time to go beyond them and explore the intricate development of Renan's views in its historical and biographical context, not as a way to escape the difficulty or to silence Renan's issues but to better understand the deeper influences behind them (e.g. Priest,⁶² Paone).

Indeed, while it is understandable that historians are fascinated by this situation and fight over whether he should be labelled an anti-Semite, I would argue that it is, in the end, a distraction from the most important phenomenon. In my view, it is the very paradoxical situation just described that makes Renan one of the most interesting cases in the history of the relationship between biblical scholarship and antisemitism. Renan's case is proof that it is unfortunately possible for scholars to foster (if not entertain) anti-Semite views even when they do not entertain hatred towards Jews, in ways that go beyond the supersessionist views that are rampant in their religious milieu; intellectual, scholarly illusions can morph into intellectual "golems" that may contribute to the development of antisemitism. To put it another way, the realm of intellectual ideas can develop on a parallel level to reality and create ideas that are "intellectual monsters"; antisemitism and racism are much more insidious than we would expect, and scholars are liable to a special form of them. Let us assume, for the sake of the argument, that Renan never was an anti-Semite; then it is all the more poignant that his writings served the cause of antisemitism. In other words, the deeper the divide between Renan's actual views and their historical effects, the more his case proves relevant as a warning to those of us who publish on the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel, but do not consider ourselves in the least as anti-Semites. Especially relevant is the fact that Renan's views largely developed around theoretical abstractions such as the "pure Semites," because they point to his methodology and his scholarly practices, to which I now turn.

3. A few reflections on Renan's scholarly practices

Renan's problematic views are not a mere reflection of the essentialist ideas and racial prejudices that were prevalent in Europe in the nineteenth century. Rather, some specificities of his views, and, I suggest, their radical character, were permitted and fostered by a series of aspects of his personal way of practicing scholarship.

First, a strong tendency to *generalization* played an important role in his work. Already in 1845, in a letter to Renan, Léon Billion, a priest, pointed out his "instinct for generalization" (*instinct de généralisation*).⁶³ Said has written that "when we read Renan and Sacy, we readily observe the way cultural generalization had begun to acquire the armor of scientific statement and the ambience of corrective study."⁶⁴ Renan's generalizations were criticized by some of his contemporaries; he actually oversimplified some of the views of his predecessors, and some of his own early views as well. It is thus ironic that he wrote: "In general, the sense of nuance is profoundly lacking in the Semitic peoples."⁶⁵ Relatedly, at the formal level, his scholarly style was characterized by an *assertive tone* that is astounding. His writings contain many sweeping assertions and categorical judgments, which combined with the tendency of nineteenth-century European historians to make value judgments on other cultures. Renan came to realize that it was a problem, noting that his writings should be read as if the word

⁶² Priest, "Ernest Renan's Race Problem," 324-330.

⁶³ Quoted in Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 29.

⁶⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 149 (my emphasis).

⁶⁵ HGLS, p. 11.

“perhaps” was present at every turn.⁶⁶ In this regard, Said has perceptively noted that Renan, who regarded philology as “the exact science of mental objects,” was trying to emulate the style of natural sciences, and “adopted a tone of voice and method of exposition” imitated from natural scientists.⁶⁷ A more down-to-earth factor may have played a role if, as Paone suspects, Renan removed any semblance of doubt and nuance in his description of the Semites in *Histoire générale* in order to “be recognized by his peers as the greatest specialist, if not the founder, of a field in France (the comparative history of Semitic languages).”⁶⁸

Renan’s deeply entrenched penchant for generalization, combined with his eloquent, brilliant, and self-assured prose, enabled him to write sweeping historical descriptions that proved highly appealing to nineteenth-century French readers (and still retain some appeal for their literary character). The rhetorical power of a historiographic narrative simultaneously giving the impression of a masterful and authoritative survey of the historical sources and providing the reader with the satisfying feeling of understanding the subterranean movements of history, proves just irresistible to many. It is worth noting that this is not merely a phenomenon of the past. The same qualities, and the same shortcomings, have been noted in Michel Foucault’s work, who wrote about history as a philosopher holding the pen of a talented writer, with a prose so delightful that two volumes of his collected words have been published in the prestigious series *La Pléiade*,⁶⁹ the equivalent to a literary Pantheon in France (quite obviously, the comparison with Renan stops here, as the intellectual fecundity of Foucault’s ideas proves enormously more enduring than Renan’s).

As seductive and impressive as was Renan’s ability to subsume different aspects of ancient history under general categories, it ran contrary to the requirements of a fine-grained historical description. The same can be said about his ability to extend his historical gaze to various epochs and draw links between them. One might be tempted to argue that all this is clear only with the benefit of hindsight, but contemporaries of Renan did notice such issues. Let us take Renan’s last book, *Histoire du peuple d’Israël*, as an illustration. Julius Wellhausen, in reviewing it, severely criticized Renan’s casual treatment of his sources: the French scholar had not only mistreated Arabic sources, he had also used some texts in Genesis as evidence for the time of the Patriarchs, even though he knew perfectly well that they were written at least a millennium later. Even more striking, Renan had done the same with Job while explicitly acknowledging the difficulty and offering the worst possible defense: “The book of Job would only be written in a thousand years’ time, but already from the antique age where we are [= the Patriarchal age], it must have been conceived of (*il a dû être pensé*).”⁷⁰ By arguing that some religious ideas attested in a book *must have existed* a thousand years before, Renan was not really at his best as a historian. The German scholar went so far as to note that the quality of the writing style which is rightfully admired in Renan’s previous works was lacking in that book, which may be the ultimate criticism for a French scholar. Wellhausen concluded that the book was “not worthy” of Renan and that, in light of its lack of scientificity compared to the works of great French Orientalists, “it is also completely un-French” (“*es ist auch ganz unfranzösisch*”).⁷¹ There is something delightful and of a

⁶⁶ Quoted in Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 291.

⁶⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 132-134, 141. Also “Renan should be characterized, not as speaking *about* philology, but as *speaking philologically* with all the force of an initiate using the encoded language of a new prestigious science none of whose pronouncements about language itself could be construed either directly or naively” (134).

⁶⁸ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 117.

⁶⁹ M. Foucault, *Oeuvres*, 2 vols (La Pléiade; Paris : Gallimard, 2015).

⁷⁰ J. Wellhausen, review of Ernest Renan, *Histoire du peuple hébreu*, vol. 1, *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* (28 January 1888): col. 132.

⁷¹ Wellhausen, review of Ernest Renan, *Histoire du peuple hébreu*, col. 132. Interestingly, the French translation of that review euphemized this sentence: “neither can we say that it is a truly French work” (*on ne peut pas non plus dire qu’il soit une œuvre vraiment française*) (“Le dernier ouvrage de M. Renan jugé par M. Wellhausen,”

“meta” quality in this last perfidious statement, as it shows that ethnicity was never far from the mind, even when scholars were not commenting ancient works but the publications of their contemporaries. In his more detailed and more nuanced review, albeit still highly critical, Theodor Reinach, a polymath historian who was a lawyer, a congressman, and a professor of numismatics at the Collège de France, pointed out the same uncritical use of the Bible, along with many other weaknesses, and quoted with disapproval the same problematic statement about Job.⁷²

In sum, the point is not at all to say that Renan’s views on the dating of biblical texts are, with the benefit of hindsight, outdated. On the contrary, his contemporary critics argued that he knew of hypotheses that are quite similar to today’s but that he failed to integrate them when he wrote historical sketches of the development of Israelite religion. And what prevented him from doing that is arguably his tendency to generalize, subsume, or assume connections across centuries.

Renan’s “instinct for generalization” was also fueled by at least three methodological aspects: the use of the “ideal type,” a preference for dualism, and the primacy given to linguistics as a prism, to the detriment of other fields. We have already noted that Coenen-Huther and Paone have pointed out that Renan thought in terms of the “ideal type,” which is actually a concept developed later by Max Weber to designate an abstract model created by accentuating some features observed in particular subjects; it is a heuristic, conceptual tool for theoretical studies in sociology.⁷³ In creating the categories of “Semites” and projecting onto them plenty of stereotypes, Renan anticipated this tool, except that he was using it in a historical reconstruction not a sociological analysis. Renan’s use of the “ideal type” is directly related to his special way of describing the past. Rétat has insightfully noted that “whether he is speaking of Israel or Greece, Renan, for a large part, creates his object.”⁷⁴ In other words, Israel (or Greece) as an object of study for Renan is largely a *projection* of Renan’s mind. He highlights, inflates, and systematizes religious aspects that find echoes in his own thinking. Paone also observes that in his *Histoire du peuple hébreu*,⁷⁵ Renan creates a romanticized first stage of Elohist religion to which Israel incessantly came back in spite of a temporary regression to a particularistic Yahwism, and comments that in this historical sketch, “the projection of Renan’s desires and personal ideals onto religious history, already at work in previous works, is even more flagrant.”⁷⁶

Interestingly, his case is not isolated and there may be a pattern here. Indeed, in a recent book, Michel Dreyfus criticizes Hannah Arendt for her use of “ideal types” (such as her concepts of totalitarianism, imperialism and the pair of opposites “pariah” and “parvenu”), and notes that “expressed according to brilliant formulations, these ideal types are first of all intellectually attractive, which explains the fame from which they benefitted and which they still enjoy today.”⁷⁷ Among other things, Dreyfus shows that her historical sketch of the rise of antisemitism is flawed, based on selective and problematic sources (including writings by anti-Semites), which he explains by a disdain for history on her part. He notes that she “affirms and proclaims ... unnumbered falsehoods with absolute assurance and without the slightest demonstration.”⁷⁸ It is difficult to deny that her splendid book on totalitarianism is filled with

Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie et Compte-rendu des Principales Publications Scientifiques 21 [1888]: 324-329, 329 for the quotation).

⁷² Th. Reinach, “Ernest Renan: Histoire du peuple d’Israël, tome Ier, 1887,” *Revue des études juives* 15/30 (October-December 1887): 302-315 (see 308 n. 2 about Job).

⁷³ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 78. On this concept and its ambiguities, see Coenen-Huther 2003.

⁷⁴ L. Rétat, *L’Israël de Renan* (Recherches en littérature et spiritualité 9; Berne : Peter Lang, 2005), 185.

⁷⁵ E. Renan, *Histoire du Peuple d’Israël*, 5 vols (Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1887-1993).

⁷⁶ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 213.

⁷⁷ M. Dreyfus, *Hannah Arendt et la question juive: Pour une relecture* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2023), 22 (see also 17-19, 203).

⁷⁸ Dreyfus, *Hannah Arendt et la question juive*, 15.

sweeping descriptions which make for a very impressive intellectual construction but are much more often asserted than proved. If Dreyfus is correct, we find in Arendt's work a combination of the problematic features in the scholarly practices that we have already observed with Renan.

Correlatively, Renan's thinking was deeply shaped by a form of dualism, as Paone has pointed out.⁷⁹ He tended to organize the world into dual opposites, such as, of course, Semites and Aryans. This inclination to a schematic construction seems to have driven many of his historical sketches. Even when studying Judaism in the time of Jesus of Nazareth, he could not help reproducing the same kind of dualism within Judaism, opposing Galilee to Judea in simplistic terms.⁸⁰ Retrospectively, it is easy to see how such dualistic thinking shaped his views in essentialized categories.

A third factor leading Renan to oversimplify and generalize was the primacy he gave to linguistics over other fields when studying people; his comparison between people was ultimately shaped by his interpretation of linguistic features. This was made to the detriment of other fields. In a biography of Renan that proves largely sympathetic to its subject, Jean Balcou rightly writes about the problematic pages of *Histoire générale* that "the problem, then, is that we pass from a philological system to an ideological system."⁸¹ Interestingly, Dominique Paone has noted that the infamous fourteen pages filled with crude stereotypes about Semites were absent from the original manuscript, a thesis submitted in 1847 to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres; Renan added them when he reworked it for the publication in a book format in 1855.⁸² Thus, the lengthy *linguistic* analysis that forms the body of the book came first; it was written long before the "*ethnographic*" descriptions that he decided to prefix to it. Ironically, this reliance on linguistics, much more than on physiology or biological views, gave a more "scientific" appearance to his reasonings.

I wish I could say that our field is now immune to these penchants and scholarly practices. But I would be hard pressed to argue that contemporary publications in biblical studies and the study of ancient Israel are free of generalizations, of the temptation to convince through seductive prose, of speculative connections made by way of unwarranted comparisons between times and places, of theoretical categories (whether "ideal types" or others) created by scholars onto which they project preconceived ideas, of dual oppositions that are mostly produced by a scholarly imagination (or lack thereof), and of a primacy given to a sub-field or approach to the detriment of others.

I would argue, on the contrary, that there are special features of our field that make us especially vulnerable to the kind of issues noted in Renan's scholarship. Because large stretches of the history of ancient Israel and Judah remain obscure and essentially unknowable due to the lack of historical sources, we are at risk of projecting our own theories onto the events, beliefs, and practices, and of using models that are not determined by the evidence. The more numerous the lacunae in our historical sources, the more speculative our reconstructions.⁸³ These uncertainties should be accompanied by a proportionate scholarly caution in statements and historical sketches. Yet it would be quite difficult to state that contemporary publications are never affected by the scholarly ethos consisting in overplaying the certainty, in relation to the habitus of the self-assured professor or researcher. It is increasingly clear that such habits are at odds with the growing lucidity predominant among scholars about the impossibility of reconstructing in much detail the compositional history of the Hebrew Bible, and the history of Israel and Judah. Hopefully scholars will increasingly accept that taking into account our uncertainties makes

⁷⁹ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 116, 148-149, 194, 295.

⁸⁰ Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 190.

⁸¹ J. Balcou, *Ernest Renan: Une biographie* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2017), 149.

⁸² Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites*, 71-77.

⁸³ Another example of special feature is the fact that there exists a modern state of Israel, which creates a temptation to draw hasty comparisons with ancient Israel, with all the related risks, such as anachronism.

our work more rigorous, not less, and embrace what Mahri Leonard-Fleckman calls “irresolution” in historical practice.⁸⁴ For if there is one thing that we can learn from Renan’s case, it is that when it comes to ancient Israel and Judaism, scholarship is not without consequences, and that what we all want, namely to write influential ideas and be cited, only increases our social responsibility.

⁸⁴ M. Leonard-Fleckman, “Irresolution as Historical Practice and the Case of the Unnamed Woman in Timnah,” *JBL* 142 (2023): 409-429; idem, *Scribal Representations and Social Landscapes of the Iron Age Shephelah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025).