Nahida Ruth Lazarus’ “Das jüdische Weib”

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Kate Menlove and Dr. Michelle James, German & Russian

My ORCA project centered on the book *Das jüdische Weib*, written by Nahida Ruth Lazarus in 1896. This book explores the contributions that Jewish women have made to the world and celebrates their strength and culture. While Lazarus was researching and studying to write this book, she fell in love with the culture and religion of Judaism. She is one of the very unique cases of people converting to Judaism from Christianity at that time.

My focus in the paper was on the book, *Das jüdische Weib* and I commented on the strength and sacrifices made by Jewish women and how Lazarus’ writings can be impactful on a modern-day reader. This project will help to serve Women’s Studies, German history, and Jewish history literary sources. I am excited to publish this paper about Nahida Ruth Lazarus and her book exploring beliefs and early feminism to the BYU Sophie website because it is a little-known story. Lazarus’ voice deserves to be heard today because she has interesting opinions about conservative feminism, equality, and respect for women—all shown through the Jewish faith and culture.

The methodology that my project required was fairly simple. I read the book *Das Jüdische Weib* several times over the course of the year, underlining words I did not understand, circling some references that may need to be annotated, and highlighting my favorite quotes from Lazarus. I also did some supplemental reading both to help me grasp the contents of the book better and add some quotes that would help a reader to learn more as well. I began researching the vocabulary list I compiled from my reading. However, no words were unknown enough to warrant a footnote or a definition. I also planned to include some annotations, however there were no annotations I found that a simple Google search could not answer. I believe this is because the piece is only from the early 20th century and not very ancient. Upon researching Lazarus, I found that Dr. Katharina Gerstenberger at the University of Utah had conducted some research on Lazarus in the past. I took initiative and set up a meeting with Dr. Gerstenberger. I was able to learn from her thoughts and that interview was invaluable to me as I finished my project. I spent about 5 months writing the report and editing, rewriting and editing, with Dr. James. My findings included a discovery about myself that was surprising. Though Lazarus was (and is) not a world-renowned early feminist, she was a strong supporter of the women’s movement in her own way. Lazarus is an advocate of a more conservative feminism, one focused on equal rights for women while still seeing value in raising children and building a strong home. I had thought that this balance was impossible, however Lazarus has helped me see that not only is it possible, but that I can help others believe that as well.

Another finding from *Das jüdische Weib* is the difference that religion can make in a child’s upbringing, either with a strong emphasis or no religious emphasis at all. Lazarus is very adamant about the strong role that a mother has in a child’s physical, emotional, and spiritual development. Even though she was not raised in a Jewish home, Lazarus had many of the Jewish values instilled in her by her single mother. Lazarus was able to study and explore this new religion, Judaism, and find commonalities with the people and their belief system, so much so that she desired to join them. This is a testimony to the value in learning from other religions.

I completed my project, which was to write an introduction and analysis for *Das jüdische Weib*. My mentor, Dr. Michelle James will now format it correctly to be published on the BYU SOPHIE website (https://sophie.byu.edu/). I was also selected to present my findings in the ORCA Symposium in October of 2018.
One topic that I often find myself discussing with others after reading Das jüdische Weib is that of conservative feminism and equality between men and women. Feminism today is construed as a negative word, based on the extremely radical feminists that receive most of the publicity. So how am I, as a young Christian college student, supposed to identify as a feminist? I still want to have children and do believe that women can have a strong influence on their children’s lives. After reading Lazarus’s book, I know that it is possible to have conservative beliefs and still be a feminist. One term that stuck out to me while I was doing additional research for my project is cognitive equality. This is the idea that even though men and women have different strengths and weaknesses in mental and physical capacities, they have equal roles in the home, business place, and marriage. I think that this fits perfectly into what Lazarus was trying to explain—that we can celebrate each sex for the accomplishments that they have achieved, and we work together to progress as a human race. This discussion topic, taken from Nahida Ruth Lazarus, has proven very influential to everyone I come in contact with and I’ve even had some express to me that they have been searching for this very thing, but didn’t know how to put words to it. With my project, I hope to show readers that it is possible to want both sexes to excel and promote traditional values, while still being a feminist.

Through my ORCA project, I can conclude that Nahida Ruth Lazarus has a unique voice in the women’s movement that deserves to be heard. Not only could her book be inspiring to Jewish girls and women around the world, but it also inspired me, a Christian young adult. This project was extremely influential in my life and studies and I discussed it with everyone that I could find. All of my friends and colleagues were interested in hearing more about what I found and how they could obtain a copy of my research as well. After presenting at the ORCA Symposium in October, I was astonished to see how many attendees had questions about Lazarus or wanted to know more about her story and her book. This only strengthened my conviction that this book can be influential for people all over the world at every stage of life, no matter what religion you are. Nahida Ruth Lazarus can teach readers about equality, feminism, love, and being a respecter of all religions and beliefs.

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