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FAITH, REASON, POLITICS

Essays on the History of Jewish Thought

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The most important Mendelssohn scholar of the past two centuries is Alexander Altmann. But it is sometimes forgotten that six years before Altmann published his massive biography of Mendelssohn, an important treatment of Mendelssohn appeared by a promising young scholar from Hebrew Union College. Michael Meyer's The Origins of the Modern Jew is a powerfully argued, devastating assessment of Mendelssohn. While Altmann produced more extensive and detailed studies, in my view, Meyer has been more influential in shaping the perception of Mendelssohn among non-specialists.

Meyer begins by providing a nice succinctus of Mendelssohn's life and thought. Raised in a traditional home in the rural hamlet of Dessau, "the young Moses . . . became acquainted with Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed and developed a love for the medieval Jewish philosopher which he retained for the rest of his life." This was important as "Maimonides' philosophy, though medieval in character, served Mendelssohn as a bridge from Talmudic Judaism to the religion of reason that . . .

4 The only possible exception to this is the work of Altmann, which I discuss below. Recent monographs have also appeared in German, Hebrew, and French. These include: Simon Tred, Moses Mendelssohn (Bielefeld: Rubwitz: Taschenbuch Verlag, 2007); Samuel Felsner, Moses Mendelssohn (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985); Wolfgang Vogt, Moses Mendelssohn: Geschichte der Wirklichkeit Menschlichen Erkenntnis (Wurzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2005); Dominique Bauler, Moses Mendelssohn 2006: Der Historiker durch die Moderne (Wiesbaden: Königshausen und Neumann, 2006); Dominique Bauler, Moses Mendelssohn: La Histoirle du Judaïsme Moderne (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); Carla Bärtschi, Leibniz and the Jewish Question: Moses Mendelssohn's Philosophy of Religion and Enlightenment Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a detailed survey of Mendelssohn scholarship from 1969-1980, see Michael Almehl, "Moses Mendelssohn: Ein Forschungsbericht 1960-1985," Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte 37 (1987): 64-166. Since the original appearance of this article in 2010 several new books on Mendelssohn have appeared. See the postscript below.

he encountered a few years later in Berlin.69 In this religion of reason whose most important exponent was Christian Wolff, "Mendelssohn was unable to find [anything] that seemed to him to contradict Judaism." Indeed, "enlightened Christians included the upright Jew among those who... were worthy of salvation." As such, "Mendelssohn was... able to feel that the deepest stratum of religion produced no differences between himself and his Christian friends."70

While embracing a universal religion of reason whose principles included God's existence, divine providence, and the immortality of the soul, Mendelssohn remained fully committed to the "continued existence of a separate Jewish community," whose "chief preserving force" was "the ceremonial law."71 But for Meyer herein lies the weakness of Mendelssohn's thought. For Mendelssohn's commitment to the universal ideals of the Enlightenment did not truly square with his commitment to Jewish difference thereby resulting in an "ephemeral" German-Jewish synthesis.72

Meyer is very specific in his criticisms of Mendelssohn offering three reasons why Mendelssohn's synthesis was inherently unstable. First, as a traditional Jew, Mendelssohn affirmed Jewish election. This involved God choosing to reveal to the Jews the ceremonial law, which helped them preserve pure monotheism. In this way, the Jews served as a "light unto the nations" who continually lapsed into idolatry. But, asks Meyer, since Mendelssohn considered God to be universally benevolent how could God grant one particular people a special means to preserve monotheism? Meyer concludes: "if [Mendelssohn] were to carry his reasoning to its logical conclusion he would be a deist."73

Second, Meyer thinks that Mendelssohn's notion that the fundamental principles of religion can be known through reason undermined his claim that the ceremonial law was binding. The purpose of the ceremonial law was to direct one to the contemplation of rational religious truth. But since knowledge of rational religion did not require obedience to the ceremonial law, why continue to obey this law especially if it was inconvenient and could impede one's social interactions with Gentiles?74

Finally, Meyer argues that Mendelssohn's rationalist metaphysics were outdated even in his own lifetime. Romantic mystics such as Jacobi and Hamann challenged the idea that religious truth was rational. Human skepticism and Kantian criticism destroyed Mendelssohn's conviction that God can be proven through speculative metaphysics. As Meyer puts it, "it was almost pathetic how hard [Mendelssohn] tried to explain away the Critique [of Pure Reason], how he was totally unable to recognize the epochal character of the work."75 Furthermore, by assuming a static conception of reason, Mendelssohn's religious rationalism reflected his lack of "historical sense."76 This failure was especially evident in the fact that Mendelssohn simply "could not grasp Lessing's concept of religious progress,"77 which Lessing sketched five years before Mendelssohn's death. For Lessing, religious consciousness was in a process of development. Judaism represented primitive conceptions of God, which were refined and replaced by Christianity, and which in turn will be replaced by a higher understanding in a future age.

These criticisms are weighty on their own. But what makes Meyer's arguments so effective is that he uses the fate of Mendelssohn's children and disciples to demonstrate the weakness of Mendelssohn's ideas. Chapter three is devoted to Mendelssohn's closest disciple David Friedländer. Meyer notes that like his master Friedländer was a religious rationalist. But unlike Mendelssohn who sought to preserve Jewish difference through the continued practice of the Jewish ceremonial law, Friedländer abandoned halakhic observance shortly after his master's death and proposed conversion to Enlightened Christianity.78 While Friedländer's proposal was rebuffed, Mendelssohn's sons Abraham and Nathan converted to Christianity on the basis of their religious rationalism. As Abraham Mendelssohn famously wrote to his daughter Fanny, "The outward form of religion that your teacher has given you is historical, and changeable like all human ordinances. Some thousands of years ago the Jewish form was the reigning one, then the heathen form, now..."

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 20.
8 Ibid., 41.
9 See ibid., 56. Chapter two of Meyer's book is entitled "An Ephemeral Solution."
10 See ibid., 57.

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11 Ibid., 50-1. This conclusion was in practice drawn by Mendelssohn's disciple David Friedländer and by his acquaintance Solomon Maimon. I discuss this point in greater detail below.
12 Ibid., 53.
13 Ibid., 54.
14 Ibid., 55.
15 Ibid., 56.

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the Christian form."16 Meyer stresses the outdated nature of Mendelssohn’s rationalist view of religion through a discussion of the fate of Mendelssohn’s daughters Dorothea and Henrietta. These daughters rejected Judaism not because they viewed all religions as grounded in universal ideas of reason, but rather because they saw Mendelssohn’s Judaism as comprising “dry, sterile rationality” joined with “inhibiting, meaningless law.”17 Craving a more personal, emotional spiritual experience they converted to Romantic Christianity.

Meyer drives home the point about Mendelssohn’s lack of appreciation of history in a chapter devoted to Leopold Zunz, the great Jewish historian and an early exponent of Reform Judaism. Meyer notes that in his early career, Zunz was a Mendelssohnian.18 However, Zunz moved away from this position seeing history rather than reason as the best means to understand Judaism. By viewing Judaism historically, Zunz emphasized Jewish nationhood and culture, something that Mendelssohn could not adequately ground through reason. And Zunz’s historical sense led him to appreciate the fluidity of Judaism. In this way, he was able to apply a discriminating approach to Halakhah, rejecting elements of it as dependent on historical circumstances, which no longer applied. This allowed him to sketch a more up-to-date, relevant version of Judaism.19

It has been more than forty years since the appearance of Meyer’s book. How do his conclusions hold up? Recent research calls into question whether Meyer’s critiques of Mendelssohn are as conclusive as they once seemed. First, work on Mendelssohn’s aesthetics and his biblical writings demonstrates that Mendelssohn did not espouse dry religious rationalism. While Mendelssohn believed in human beings’ capacity to demonstrate metaphysical truths, he also emphasized the human minds’ inability to fully comprehend God, thereby preserving an element of religious mystery.20 Furthermore, Mendelssohn held that religious truth was not just to be known abstractly, but was supposed to inspire action. To this end, he emphasized the aesthetic elements of the Bible seeing it as stirring, poetic work, whose aim was to unite heart, mind, and action in promoting perfection.21

Second, I have argued elsewhere that Mendelssohn’s defense of religious difference can be separated from his defense of Jewish election. Whether or not Mendelssohn’s defense of Jewish election is convincing, his commitment to religious pluralism is central to his liberalism. For Mendelssohn, the idea that religious truth is universally knowable through reason does not lead to the conclusion that there should be only one expression of this truth. In fact, he considers the idea that there should be a single expression of metaphysical truth to be a great danger to the continued preservation of religious knowledge.22 Furthermore, Mendelssohn holds that freedom in the sense of the right to self-determination is a right not just for individuals, but for groups as well. Hence liberal demands tolerate variation for Jews not just as individual human beings, but also as members of the Jewish people.23

Third, recent scholars have challenged the idea that Mendelssohn was a strict Wolfian who did not appreciate Kant’s attack on speculative metaphysics. Frederick Beiser and others have shown that Mendelssohn’s final philosophical treatise, Morning Hours contains a sophisticated response to many of Kant’s arguments against the possibility of demonstrating God’s existence.24 Similarly, Mendelssohn’s extensive debate with Romantic writers such as Lavater, Jacob, and Hamann shows that he is well aware of these critics of Enlightenment and offers them a serious rejoinder.25 Most recently, Gideon Reuveni and myself have argued that in his final works Mendelssohn departed quite significantly

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21 See Alexander Altmann, Von der Mittlerenlskheit zur Modernen Aufklärung (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1987), 242 and chapter four above. I will discuss this issue in greater detail when Discussing Sokol’s work below.

22 See chapter three above.


25 For Mendelssohn’s debate with Jacob, see Beiser, The Fate of Reason, 92–105. I discuss Mendelssohn’s debate with Jacob in detail in Godail, Faith and Freedom, chs. 3–4. For Mendelssohn’s debate with Hamann, see Frederick Beiser, Distinct’s Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapter 7.
from Wolffian rationalism and articulated an original philosophical position that Freydent calls "skeptical common sense" and that I call "pragmatic idealism."26

Finally, recent scholarship has shown that Mendelssohn does not discount history and has a much more sophisticated philosophy of history than Meyer assumes.27 In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn accounts "historical truths" about the people of Israel one of the three elements of Judaism and he notes that these truths "contain the foundation for national cohesion (Nationalverbindunge)."28 Philosophically, Mendelssohn espouses a cyclical view of history according to which humankind is not progressing towards perfection, but rather "oscillates between periods of bloom and decay."29 To be sure, Mendelssohn denies Lessing’s theory of historical progress. But in the wake of the tragedies of the twentieth century, this makes Mendelssohn’s conception of history seem more plausible than Lessing’s.

In my view, the cumulative power of Meyer’s approach derives from its quasi-Hegelian philosophy of history. By using the fate of Mendelssohn’s children and students to judge Mendelssohn’s ideas, Meyer seems to implicitly assume that history is a proper judge of truth. But perhaps Mendelssohn’s children and students did not fully understand their master’s teachings. And even if Mendelssohn’s teachings were not live options for the majority of German-Jews who lived immediately after him, perhaps in a different social and political context, his ideas can again become live options. Writing two hundred years after Mendelssohn’s birth, Simon Rawidowicz notes that while Kantianism

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Alexander Altmann’s work on Mendelssohn. In 1969, Altmann produced a detailed study of Mendelssohn’s early aesthetic and metaphysical writings entitled *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zur Metaphysik*. Four years later, he published his authoritative biography *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*. In addition to these two books, he produced some twenty-five separate articles on Mendelssohn’s life and thought. He collected twelve of these articles in his 1981 book *Die trotzvolle Aufklärung: Studien zur Metaphysik und politischer Theorie Moses Mendelssohns*.

In addition to these studies, in 1971 Altmann restarted the Jubilee edition of Mendelssohn’s collected writings, which had been halted in 1939.30 Collecting numerous unpublished manuscripts from libraries around the world, Altmann expanded the Jubilee edition to 34 volumes.31 Altmann personally supervised the editing of many of these volumes, most notably his masterful edition of Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*.

In his Mendelssohn studies, Altmann assumes the guise of a disinterested, positivistic scholar. In the introduction to *Moses Mendelssohn*, Altmann describes his aim as presenting Mendelssohn in "strictly biographical terms." He does not seek "to assess his significance from the hindsight of historical perspective or to trace his image in subsequent generations . . ."32 Altmann always places Mendelssohn in intellectual context, paying attention to both his predecessors and contemporaries. This context is very broad and includes Jews and Christians, rabbis.

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30 See Rawidowicz, "Moses Mendelssohn," 608-8; See above, chapter six.
31 For an account of the publishing of the Jubilee edition through 1939, see chapter 6.
philosophers, theologians, and political thinkers. Altmann’s approach is generally expository and he rarely offers explicit assessments of Mendelssohn. As such, it is very difficult to discern an overarching thesis guiding his interpretation of Mendelssohn.

In a touching necrology written by Altmann’s junior colleague the Harvard intellectual historian Isadore Twerksky, Twerksky seeks to discern what Mendelssohn meant to Altmann. Twerksky writes that for Altmann, “Mendelssohn was a pivot not only from an academic-intellectual vantage point, but also existentially.” As Altmann was a German Jew who inhabited both the rabbinic and philosophical worlds, he was strongly attracted to Mendelssohn. Like Mendelssohn, Altmann had trained as a rabbi under a great Talmudic master, and like Mendelssohn Altmann was a philosopher. Twerksky, however, goes further, claiming that, “there is much that is autobiographical in [Altmann’s] writing, particularly in his essay ‘Moses Mendelssohn’s Concept of Judaism Re-examined.’

This is not the place to undertake a detailed analysis of Altmann’s important essay, which appeared in the last year of his life. I would, however, like to offer a few remarks about Altmann’s approach to Mendelssohn in this and a few other revealing pieces. Addressing the perennial question of the relationship between Mendelssohn’s German and Jewish selves, Altmann writes that, “to what extent the two disparate worlds of Judaism and modern Enlightenment jostle each other in his mind and to what degree he could harmonize them are questions that admit of no facile answer.” At times, Altmann marvels at Mendelssohn’s ability to synthesize the two sides of himself noting “the astonishing . . . degree of harmonization [that] he did achieve.” At other times, however, Altmann strikes a position reminiscent of Meyer’s writing that “for all the apparent ease and elegance with which [Mendelssohn] accomplished his feat of reconciliation, his stance is dated and it could not be repeated after him. He represents a blissful moment in Jewish intellectual history but also one replete with inner tensions which surfaced in their full extent only later . . . Neither his theory of Judaism nor his personality were as unified as might have appeared on the surface.”

Altmann, however, is not content just to note these tensions. Rather, he seeks to explain what drove Mendelssohn to uphold his Judaism despite its uncomfortable relation to Enlightenment. Remarking on Mendelssohn’s use of hackneyed “pious phraseology” in letters to Jewish traditionalists, Altmann surmises that there are “archaic layers in [Mendelssohn’s] soul, which are activated and come to the fore when he is face to face with people of the old school whom he respects.” At one level, Altmann sees this as a dichotomy between intellect and sentiment. Intellectually, Mendelssohn was “a citizen of the European Republic of letters,” while in sentiment he was “still rooted in the Ghetto.” But Altmann also seeks to explain this psychologically and theologically. Psychologically, Altmann suggests that Mendelssohn had “a certain sense of guilt” in relation to “the world of [Jewish] tradition, its images, mores, and value-judgments.” Expressing matters theologically, Altmann surmises that Mendelssohn felt bound to what Altmann calls, “the mystery of Israel.” While the Enlightenment put a premium on giving reasons for all of one’s commitments, Mendelssohn’s felt an intense attachment to Judaism that he could never fully explain using the language of Enlightenment discourse, and which he thus “tried to live with as an ultimately inexplicable fact.”

I would suggest that Altmann’s understanding of the relationship

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37 Mendelssohn’s teacher was Rabbi David Fränkel, author of the classic commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud, Körner Nährle. Altmann was a disciple of Rabbi Yehiel Weinberg, author of the famous responsa Sered Ein. On Weinberg, see Marc Shapiro, Between the Divine World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Yehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1864–1950 (London: Littman, 2002). Mendelssohn was, of course, a world-renowned philosopher, and Altmann had graduated summa cum laude from Berlin University with a doctorate in philosophy. For a recent discussion of Altmann’s early life, see Meyer, Von Ende der Dreissiger Jahre: Jüdische Philosophie und Theologie Nach 1833 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

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between the two sides of Mendelssohn can be made clearer by examining an essay that Altman published on Ludwig Wittgenstein.47 In the essay, Altman deploys Wittgenstein's notion of "language-games" to explain the difference between what Altman calls "the God of religion" and the "God of metaphysics." According to Altman, Wittgenstein's theory of language games posits that, "there are distinct systems of speech, each with its own ground rules, self contained and structured in such a way that nothing can be properly understood without reference to the whole." Each language-game "is defined by the a priori assumptions [that are] valid within the system concerned" and "has inner autonomy."48

Altman argues that the "God of religion" and the "God of metaphysics" are distinct language-games. The religious language game involves personal faith in God that yields "total surrender to the will of God."49 It is "non-falsifiable" remaining steadfast in its faith in God in the face of all seemingly contradictory evidence such as the prevalence of evil.50 The religious language-game is pictorial, relying on "an inventory of images" through which the divine is "concretized."51 And this faith is "conative" as it must "issue in action."52 In contrast, the metaphysical language-game does not seek contact with a personal God, but rather seeks to understand impersonal Being theoretically.53 To this end, metaphysical language games use proposition languages to speak about Being, rather than speaking to God.54

Near the end of the essay, Altman poses the crucial question: "Can the God of religion and the God of metaphysics be reconciled?" He is very doubtful of this possibility writing that, "that the chances [of reconciliation] are rather dim seeing that they [that is, the God of religion and the God of metaphysics—MG] belong to different language-games."55 Both Altman's essay on Wittgenstein's language-games and the essay "Mendelssohn's Concept of Judaism Re-examined" appeared in Altman's last year of life. While in the essay on Wittgenstein Altman does not apply Wittgenstein's insights to Mendelssohn, Altman does so in another piece writing that Mendelssohn "was immersed in the rich world of Hebrew literature and participated in what, with Ludwig Wittgenstein, we may call the 'language game' of his native religion. . . ."56 Altman apparently thought that Mendelssohn was unable to successfully reconcile Judaism with Enlightenment philosophy because they were distinct language games.

III

Of Altman's pupils, the most accomplished Mendelssohn scholar is Allan Arkush. Arkush's command of Mendelssohn's opus is very impressive. Like his mentor, Arkush is careful to present Mendelssohn in his intellectual context paying particular attention to Mendelssohn's place among his German philosophical contemporaries. But Arkush surpasses the work of his mentor in his careful attempt to unpack and assess the validity of Mendelssohn's arguments.57

In the introduction to his 1994 monograph, Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment, Arkush states his guiding question: "Did Mendelssohn construct a coherent synthesis of rationalist philosophy and Jewish religion, or was his theory of Judaism not only an ephemeral solution, but an unstable one as well?"58 The reference to an "ephemeral solution" alludes to Meyer; but Arkush goes beyond Meyer, noting that while "many scholars have. . . identified weaknesses and inconsistencies in Mendelssohn's interpretation of Judaism. . . what has not been understood is. . . that Mendelssohn himself was entirely aware of this failure and much of what he says is aimed at disguising it."59

48 Ibid., 289.
49 Ibid., 291.
50 Ibid., 292-3.
51 Ibid., 294-5.
52 Ibid., 295.
53 Ibid., 297.
54 Ibid., 303.
55 Ibid., 303.
57 Ibid., 20.
58 Ibid., 21.
59 Ibid., 11.
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I will focus on two problems that Arkush identifies in Mendelssohn’s work. The first problem, which Arkush calls the “historical challenge,” stems from radical critiques such as Spinoza who question the veracity, unity, and textual integrity of the Bible. Arkush claims that Mendelssohn has no adequate response to these critics and he knows it. But rather than admit this, Mendelssohn tries to hide this failure by appealing to outdated medieval arguments for the Bible’s authenticity. Adapting arguments from the medieval philosophers Saadya Gaon and Judah Halevi, Mendelssohn claims that in contrast to Christianity, which is based on private miracles performed by Jesus, Judaism rests on God’s public miraculous revelation of the Torah to the Israelites at Sinai. While private miracles can be falsified, public miracles cannot, and hence the Torah should be deemed trustworthy. For Arkush, even by the standards of eighteenth-century historical scholarship these arguments are clearly inadequate, and Mendelssohn knows it.60

Second, Arkush raises what we might call a “liberal challenge.” This involves the alleged contradiction between Mendelssohn’s commitment to religious freedom and his adherence to Judaism. While Mendelssohn asserts that religious coercion (whether of belief or action) is never legitimate, this manifestly contradicts the Bible’s stipulation of punishments for religious disobedience.61 In Jerusalem, Mendelssohn famously tries to square this circle by claiming that when the Israelites had a state, God was their sovereign and the ceremonial law was also a civil law. Disobeying the ceremonial law was punished only because of its civil aspect, as this disobedience was tantamount to treason against the political sovereign. With the fall of the Temple, however, the Jews lost their statehood and the ceremonial lost its civil function thereby becoming a purely religious law. This explains why with the fall of the Temple, punishments for the violation of the ceremonial law ceased.

Arkush sees this argument as clearly inadequate for two reasons. First, with the fall of the Temple, punishments for violation of the ceremonial did not end. In the Middle Ages, Jewish courts continued to mete out punishments, including excommunication.62 Second, on

Mendelssohn’s principles it would be preferable to separate civil and religious authority so that religion could be practiced freely. As such, the fall of the Temple seems to be a desirable event. As a traditional Jew, however, Mendelssohn must regard the Biblical polity as the ideal constitution. Hence Arkush concludes that Mendelssohn’s defense of Judaism is insincere.64

Arkush uses political considerations to explain Mendelssohn’s disingenuous defense of Judaism. For Arkush, Mendelssohn seeks to “propagate a version of Judaism suitable to modern times,” but to succeed in this endeavor, he needs “to retain his credentials as a faithful Jew.”65 Arkush casts Mendelssohn as similar to other early modern political philosophers such as Spinoza, Locke, and Kant, who present their teachings as the “perfection” of revealed religion rather than as what they really are—a repudiation of revealed religion. By accommodating their teachings to the ingrained prejudices of the masses, these political philosophers think that they are more likely to succeed in influencing their contemporaries to accept liberal political ideas.66


64 See Arkush, Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment, 222–89, idem, “The Liberalism of Moses Mendelssohn,” 64; idem, “The Questionable Judaism of Moses Mendelssohn,” 37. Arkush raises a third challenge, which we might call the “doctrinal problem.” He notes that historical critics argue that the teachings of the Bible do not always conform to the tenets of enlightened theology. For example, while the immortality of the soul is a central tenet of enlightened theology, historical critics claim that this doctrine is not found in the Bible. Instead as Mendelssohn expounds enlightened theology, it is unclear how he can regard the Bible as authoritative. According to Arkush, Mendelssohn seeks to dodge this problem by claiming that according to Judaism God reveals only laws, but not doctrines. In Mendelssohn’s famous phrase, the Bible contains “revealed legislation” but not “revealed religion.” Arkush notes, however, that in other places Mendelssohn acknowledges that the Bible contains metaphysical teachings. Arkush concludes that Mendelssohn’s claim that the Bible does not contain revealed religion is a ploy meant to divert attention away from the discrepancy between the teachings of natural religion and those of the Bible. See Arkush, Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment, 188–90. Lawrence C. Kaplan has replied to Arkush arguing that Mendelssohn never claims that the Bible does not contain metaphysical teachings. Rather, according to Kaplan, Mendelssohn claims that “there are no revealed Scriptural doctrines . . . that Jews are commanded to believe.” There are, however, “revealed religious doctrines in the sense that Scripture contains natural religious truths, ‘presented to our understanding’ in that religious truths conceived to our understanding.” See Lawrence Kaplan, “The Origins of Militar, The Election of Israel and the Civil Law,” in Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mythics, ed. Adolph Levy, Elliott Wolfson, and Allan Arkush (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1989), 451, note 31. Arkush has responded to Kaplan, claiming that he does not see Kaplan’s reading as sufficiently grounded traditionally. See Arkush, “The Questionable Judaism of Moses Mendelssohn,” 54 note 8.1 and Kaplan’s arguments persuasive.

65 See Arkush, Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment, 64.

66 The most famous scholar who interprets Spinoza and Locke in this way is, of course, Leo Strauss.
Arkush's burden of proof is very high. To establish his thesis, he needs to prove three distinct claims: (1) Mendelssohn's defense of Judaism fails; (2) Mendelssohn is aware of this failure; (3) Mendelssohn seeks to disguise it. Unlike a thinker like Maimonides, however, Mendelssohn never states that he writes esoterically about Judaism, which makes Arkush's task all the more difficult. 67

Comparing Arkush's treatment of other "bad" arguments that he finds in Mendelssohn highlights the difficulty of establishing Mendelssohn's insincerity on the basis of the weakness of his arguments. For example, Arkush claims that his defense of liberty of conscience, Mendelssohn "does not convincingly substantiate the existence of a right to liberty of conscience nor is he fully consistent in his protection of it." 68 Arkush does not, however, conclude that Mendelssohn's defense of religious liberty is therefore disingenuous. Rather, he claims that "Mendelssohn's political theory seems to be a rather haphazard and makeshift effort to give expression to his commitment to the idea of religious liberty." 69

Why does Arkush not assume that Mendelssohn's defense of Judaism is likewise a "haphazard and makeshift effort to give expression to his commitment to Judaism?"

Turning to the "historical challenge," I agree with Arkush that the medieval arguments for the reliability of the Bible could not meet the challenges posed by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historical critics. But I question whether Mendelssohn ever intended these arguments as a reply to these critics. The context in which Mendelssohn presents these arguments is crucial—they are written as a rejoinder to Charles Bonnet's defense of Christianity, which Lavater had used to try and convert Mendelssohn to Christianity. 71 I would suggest that Mendelssohn does not deploy these arguments to convince critics who question the reliability and integrity of the Bible, but rather that he directs these arguments at Christians like Lavater and Bonnet who accept the Old Testament but validate their belief that the New Testament had superseded the Old Testament by appealing to Jesus' miracles. Mendelssohn invokes the medieval arguments to claim that the public miracles in the New Testament should carry more weight than the private miracles found in the New Testament. As such, a Jew is on firm ground in accepting the Old Testament, but not the New Testament.

Turning to the "liberal challenge," Arkush is correct in noting that Jewish courts did not cease meting out punishments with the fall of the Temple. Yet as Arkush himself notes, in the postexilic period the nature of juridical autonomy changed, being no longer "universal nor . . . without limitations." 72 So, in claiming that the status of Jewish law had changed, Mendelssohn is picking up on something real. Mendelssohn is, of course, well-aware that rabbis in his own time are still employing religious coercion. In his preface to Menasseh ben Israel, he refers to the recent case of "a renowned Rabbi" (Rabbi Raphael Cohen of Altona) who in 1781 was reported to have excommunicated a wayward member of his community in order to coerce him into religious observance. But for Mendelssohn the fact that Jews resort to religious coercion does not make this legitimate according to the true concepts of Judaism. Indeed, after mentioning the report of Rabbi Cohen's actions, Mendelssohn writes that he "trust[s] that the most enlightened and most pious among the Rabbis and elders of my nation will gladly . . . renounce all church and synagogue discipline, and will allow their brethren to enjoy the same love and tolerance for which they have been yearning so much." 73

Furthermore, it is crucial to remember that Mendelssohn writes as a theologian, not as an historian. The nature of theology is to emphasize certain elements of a religious tradition and to ignore or marginalize others. 74 This is not necessarily done in a premeditated way, but as a

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67 I will not venture into the debate whether or not this is a correct interpretation of Spinoza and Locke. Sokol cites scholars who disagree with Strauss. See Sokol, "The Mendelssohn Myth and its Method," 25, note 74. Arkush's claim that Mendelssohn defends Judaism to preserve his standing among his fellow Jews is not new. It can be found among Mendelssohn's contemporaries, including Johann Balthasar Kollros, David Ernst Mdnchel, Immmanuel Kant, Solomon Maimon, David Friedlander, and Mendelssohn's own son, Joseph.

68 Arkush cites several passages in which Mendelssohn writes of the philosopher's responsibility not to disturb ingrained prejudices of the masses as long as those prejudices do not lead to immorality. See Arkush, Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment, 257–60. But Mendelssohn never applies this to Judaism. Furthermore, he only advocates refraining from criticizing prejudices. He never advocates erasing them. See below.

69 Ibid., 291.

70 Mendelssohn's arguments appear in his "Counter-Reflections" to Bonnet as well as in a private letter to him.


72 Mendelssohn, Judah, 9, 24.

73 This claim that the Jewish courts lost their authority to mete out punishments Mendelssohn is following a Talmudic tradition. See Babylonian Talmud, Aboth Zarah, 8a, Sanhedrin 41a; Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 14b. The Talmud states that forty years before the fall of the Temple, Omer, 703.
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matter of course because the theologian simply cannot imagine that his faith tradition does not cohere with his other deeply held beliefs. While the historian often sees the theologian as reshaping tradition, the theologian sees himself as uncovering the deep truth of his received tradition.74 That this is Mendelssohn's approach seems evident by the fact that in addressing apparent contradictions between philosophy and Judaism, Mendelssohn invokes the medieval adage "truth cannot conflict with truth."75 I see Mendelssohn's defense of Judaism as a sincere theological exercise, rather than as an intentional act of obfuscation.76

There is very strong evidence against Arkush's claim that Mendelssohn writes things that he does not believe. In a letter from Kant to Mendelssohn dated 8 April, 1766, Kant explains that although "I often think much with the clearest conviction (allerklarsten Überzeugung)... that I would never have the courage to state" nevertheless, "I never say what I do not think."77 In other words, while Kant does not say everything that he believes, he will not say things that he does not believe to be true. Unfortunately, Mendelssohn's reply to Kant's letter is lost. But in a Yiddish letter dated 22 April, 1784 to Avigdor Levi, Mendelssohn affirms the same approach as Kant writing that, "One is not always required to say the truth and to defend it, but one is always under all circumstances responsible for studiously not stating untruths (emphasis mine)."78 We thus clearly see that Mendelssohn's principle is to never state anything he deems untrue.

In a recent article entitled "The Liberalism of Moses Mendelssohn" Arkush seems to have softened his position somewhat. Arkush repeats the claim that Mendelssohn is conscious of being unable to reconcile Judaism with Enlightenment. But he does not press the claim that Mendelssohn was a closet Deist instead conceding the possibility that, "Mendelssohn was at bottom . . . [not] a liberal deviously masquerading as a believer. He may simply have been of two minds, attracted by two theoretically incompatible ways of understanding the world and incapable of choosing between them."79 So Arkush appears open to returning to his teacher's view that tensions in Mendelssohn's thought stem from Mendelssohn having felt committed to two irreconcilable positions.

IV

Two years after the appearance of Arkush's Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment, the historian David Sorkin published Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment. Despite the similarity between the titles of the two books, their theses could not be more different. In the preface, Sorkin presents his book as a "serviceable introduction" in light of the fact that Altman's biography is "so vast and vastly learned as to tax even the specialist's abilities." Sorkin is, however, far too modest. His book is a major new interpretation of Mendelssohn that goes well beyond Altman and is diametrically opposed to Arkush.

Sorkin presents his thesis as informed by bibliographical considerations. He writes of a "Mendelssohn Myth" that came about by Mendelssohn having been studied "primarily or even exclusively from his German works."80 According to Sorkin, by focusing on Mendelssohn's German works and ignoring or marginalizing his Hebrew writings, scholars "Germanified" Mendelssohn, interpreting him primarily as an

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75 See Mendelssohn, JbJ. 8:190; idem, Jerusalem, 150.

76 This being said, I agree with Arkush that if pressed Mendelssohn probably would have conceded that the separation of civil and religious law in the modern state was preferable to their unification in the ancient Jewish state. Nevertheless, I do not think that Mendelssohn is disengaged in his treatment of the Mosaic state. While there are various aspects of the Mosaic state that Mendelssohn praises, I do not find any place where he praises the unification of civil and religious law in the Mosaic state. In Jerusalem, Mendelssohn simply seeks to show that he can explain the punishment for disobedience of the ceremonial law on the basis of his liberal principles. He does not claim that this is the ideal state of affairs. Moreover, as Mendelssohn thinks that the Mosaic constitution is unjust and that Jews are enjoined not to actively work to reestablish this state, the unification of civil and religious law in the Mosaic constitution is of no practical significance for him. Indeed, in a short paper written in 1784 that addresses the question of the best constitution, Mendelssohn does not present the Mosaic constitution as ideal. See Mendelssohn, JbJ. 6:3:127-36. For authors who claim that Mendelssohn does see the Mosaic constitution as ideal, see Warren Zev Harvey, "Mendelssohn's Holiness Politics," in Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism, ed. Alfred Ivey, Elliot Wolfson, and Allan Arkush (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1986), 403-12; Perednikh, Ne Religion Without Ideology, 57-58.

77 This letter is found in Mendelssohn, JbJ. 13:104.
Enlightenment philosopher and only secondarily as a Jewish thinker. Furthermore, by interpreting the Enlightenment as a fundamentally anti-religious phenomenon, they came to regard Mendelssohn's Judaism as in tension with his commitment to Enlightenment. For Sorkin, giving proper weight to Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings reveals his deep traditionalism and the harmony between his enlightened ideas and his Judaism. The novelty of Sorkin's approach (even on his own understanding) is evidenced by the fact that while in the preface to Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment Sorkin presents his work as a précis of Alkman's, in a later piece Sorkin includes Alkman among those who perpetrated the "Mendelssohn Myth." 

For Sorkin, the key to understanding Mendelssohn's traditionalism is to situate him at the crossroads between a stream of Enlightenment thought that he calls the "Religious Enlightenment" and a medieval tradition of Judaism that he calls "Andalusian." Members of the Religious Enlightenment hold that reason can establish the truths of natural religion including God's existence, divine providence, and the immortality of the soul. Miracles and divine revelation are deemed compatible with reason and the Religious Enlightenment promotes a broad educational ideal emphasizing the cultivation of intellectual as well as aesthetic perfection. The Religious Enlightenment considers the practice of universal ethics to be the central aim of religion and it is animated by an egalitarian impulse believing that all human beings (not just elite philosophers) can know metaphysical truth. As such, the Religious Enlightenment rejects the view that there are truths, which philosophers must keep hidden from the masses. 

82 Ibid., 9. 
85 See Sorkin, Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment, 18–60; ibid., The Religious Enlightenment, 1–52. 
88 Kaplan claims that Sorkin is not consistent in his use of the term "practical knowledge" and that this term does not appear in Mendelssohn's work. See Kaplan, "Review of Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment," 301–302. Kaplan is correct, but in my view Sorkin's basic point is still on target. See the next note. 
89 Frederick Buecher notes the central role of what he calls "effective" knowledge in Mendelssohn's aesthetics. Buecher's "effective knowledge" is roughly equivalent to Sorkin's notion of "practical wisdom." See Buecher, Dietrich's Children, chapter 7. The concept of "effective knowledge" also 

Because of the Andalusian tradition's compatibility with the ideals of the Religious Enlightenment, Mendelssohn is able to achieve complete harmony between Judaism and Enlightenment. On Sorkin's rendering, the Andalusian tradition includes figures such as Saadah Gaon, Judah Halevi, and Nahmanides. It embraces reason, but at the same time establishes boundaries to it, "subordinating [philosophy] to piety and observance." The Andalusian tradition promotes a "broad curriculum" that includes the study of "philosophy and biblical exegesis, Hebrew language, and rabbinical literature," and it is an exotic tradition, rejecting "the search for ultimate truths or secret wisdom." 

As one recent critic has noted, the concept of "practical wisdom" is the linchpin of Sorkin's Mendelssohn interpretation. In speaking of "practical wisdom," Sorkin emphasizes the fact that for Mendelssohn contemplation is not an end in itself, but rather that knowledge is of value to the extent that it impacts lived experience. As Mendelssohn deems ethical practice central to human happiness, he prizes knowledge, which promotes ethical action. But for knowledge to impact action, it must affect the emotions—in Sorkin's words it has to be "practical." For Mendelssohn, a prime example of a text that conveys this type of knowledge is the Bible whose literary virtuosity helps inspire people to act ethically. 

In pointing to this dimension of Mendelssohn's thought, Sorkin has made a crucial contribution. I fully concur that the notion of "practical wisdom" is key to understanding Mendelssohn's thought. I am less certain, however, that one requires his Hebrew writings to appreciate the centrality of this notion for Mendelssohn. Thus a recent scholar has noted the centrality of this concept in Mendelssohn's philosophical aesthetics without referring to any of Mendelssohn's Hebrew works.
Sorkin is overly sanguine on the question of Mendelssohn’s ability to harmonize Judaism and Enlightenment. Part of the reason for this is Sorkin’s way of presenting the Andalusian tradition and his under-emphasizing the unprecedented social and political circumstances in which Mendelssohn lived. That Mendelssohn draws heavily on the medieval Hispano-Jewish tradition is indisputable. In this tradition’s appreciation of philosophy, Hebrew grammar, and poetry, Mendelssohn surely finds a congenial precedent for himself. But identifying Mendelssohn straightforwardly with this tradition is problematic. For example, Mendelssohn sees Judaism as comprising several elements. It includes natural religion, which consists of tenets such as God’s existence, divine providence, the immortality of the soul and the obligatory nature of universal ethics. Natural religion is knowable by all people in virtue of being human. Judaism also includes the ritual laws revealed by God to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The ritual laws are in service of natural religion as their function is to promote living knowledge of metaphysical truth, which helps motivate people to seek perfection the central component of which involves ethics. This understanding of ethics and ritual law cannot, however, be identified with the emphasis on “piety and observance” in the Andalusian tradition. For example, a main representative of the Andalusian tradition,

appears in Mendelssohn’s metaphorical writings where he accords a certain priority to the moving, yet philosophically less rigorous theological proof of God’s existence over the more philosophically conclusive, but abstract ontological proof. The notion of “effective knowledge” is also operative in Mendelssohn’s concern with presenting philosophical defenses of truths of natural religion in elegant ways as exemplified by his defense of the immortality of the soul, in his masterpiece the Meiner. On the connection between Mendelssohn’s writings on the Bible and his philosophical aesthetics, see chapter 4.

91 In my view, however, Sorkin overemphasizes the centrality of this tradition for Mendelssohn. As Breuer notes, Mendelssohn’s work on the Bible “revealed a deep affinity for the rubrically oriented exegetical traditions of Northern European Jewry.” Similarly, while Sorkin excludes Maimonides from the Andalusian tradition, claiming that “in the most fundamental issues Mendelssohn differed with (Maimonides),” Sorkin, Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment, 168 (in my view, Mendelssohn’s relation to Maimonides is much more complicated, involving a mixture of admiration and rejection. For this perspective, see Kaplan, The Origins of Haskalah, the Election of Israel and the Oral Law; and Gotthilf, Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn’s Theologico-Political Dogmatics, chapter two. In Sorkin’s most recent work, he seems to have softened his earlier stance on Mendelssohn’s opposition to Maimonides, noting that Mendelssohn “Grew on the medieval Andalusian tradition of practical philosophy and piety (Maimonides, Judah Halevi, to mention Maimonides’ emphasis mine).” Sorkin, Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment, 168.

92 A third element of Judaism for Mendelssohn that I mentioned above are narrative about the history of Israel. See Mendelssohn, Judah, B 151-152; Ham, Judah, 156-157.

Judah Halevi, views the relationship between ethical action and ritual practice in the exact opposite way as does Mendelssohn casting moral action as a preparation for ritual practice.93 For Halevi, Jews are a separate species superior to other human beings who alone are capable of achieving special knowledge of the divine.94 Mendelssohn’s claim that promoting perfection is the aim of Halakah is precisely the type of view that Halevi attributes to the philosophers and which he sees as undermining halakhic observance. For this view opens to door to the possibility that one can dispense with halachic observance if perfection can be attained through other means.95 This precisely the conclusion drawn by Mendelssohn’s younger colleagues Salomon Maimon and David Friedländer, and which, as we saw in the chapter five, greatly disturbed Samson Raphael Hirsch.

The fact that the Andalusian tradition could not harmonize unproblematically with the Religious Enlightenment should not be surprising. For all the cosmopolitanism of medieval Spain, the idea of political emancipation was never an option and it would have been almost inconceivable for a medieval Jewish thinker to expose theories of religious universalism and tolerance of the type found in Mendelssohn.

Edward Breuer’s The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans and the Eighteenth Century Study of Scripture is a groundbreaking study that ad-

93 See Halevi, The ROC, II, 113-114.
94 See ibid, I, 25-31; I, 109-110; II, 10-14; 34; III, 7, 11, 23.
95 See ibid, III, 69; IV, 19.
96 See Solomon Maimon, Salomon Maimon Leibnizschüler, ed. Zvi Rachel (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdische Verlag, 1991), 9; and Solomon Maimon, Salomon Maimon: An Autobiography, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: Schocken, 1967). 147. For discussion of the centrality of Maimonides’ notions of intellectual perfection for Maimon, see Aba Sacher, The Radical Enlightenment of Solomon Maimon (Delhi: Alm Streetford University Press, 2007), 82-127; 42. On Friedländer’s radical use of Mendelssohn, see Richard Cramer and Julia Hazan, ed. A Debate on Jewish Eschatology and Christian Theology in Old Berlin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 41-78. In a recent email correspondence Segalman notes that he be distinguished among Spanish heirs of the “Haskalic-Andalusian” tradition more conservative and a more radical tendency. One of the distinguishing features of the conservatives was their ‘building’ at the tendency of the more rationalistic wing to identify the deepest teachings of the Jewish religion with “philosophy.” For Mendelssohn, however, Judaism’s core metaphysical beliefs are simply the trends of natural religion. Septuagint to Gotthilf, 02/28/2009.

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dresses the problem of the connection between Mendelssohn's commitment to Enlightenment and to Judaism through a detailed analysis of Mendelssohn's work on the Bible. Like Sorkin, Breuer situates Mendelssohn between the twin contexts of eighteenth-century enlightenment thought and medieval Jewish thought, and like Sorkin sees Mendelssohn as accomplishing a subtle, relatively harmonious synthesis between Judaism and Enlightenment. Breuer is, however, much more open to the novel character of Mendelssohn's work within the Jewish context as well as to the limits of Mendelssohn's synthesis.

Breuer presents Mendelssohn's biblical work as having a dual purpose, namely to bring Jews closer to German culture and to instill pride in the Jewish tradition. As the Bible was "a text shared by Jews and Christians, [it] could serve to highlight a common religious and cultural heritage, a notion that reinforced grounds for economic and social integration." At the same time, emphasizing the complex literary character of the Bible, Mendelssohn was "determined to show that the language and classical literature of Jew yielded a rich cultural tradition" which would, "enable Jews to assure any sense of cultural inferiority by suggesting that biblical Hebrew no less than contemporary German contained lucid and refined expressions."

Breuer stresses the novel aspects of Mendelssohn's biblical work in relation to then-prevailing rabbinic educational ideals. In translating the Bible into High German rather than into Yiddish, stressing the grammatical study of Hebrew, providing text-critical notes, focusing on the plain meaning of the biblical text, and privileging the study of the Bible over Talmud study, Mendelssohn's biblical work represented a "rebellion against the traditionally narrow focus on the Talmud" then dominant in Prussia. At the same time, Mendelssohn's work displayed a conservative strain affirming the authority of rabbinic biblical interpretation as well as the unity and integrity of the Masoretic Bible against attacks by contemporary Christian Bible critics. Breuer, however, is sensitive to the limits of Mendelssohn's defense of the Bible noting that "Mendelssohn never sought to engage European scholarship in any serious or substantive way." Rather, "keenly aware that the presumptions of contemporary biblical scholarship were sharply at odds with the ways in which Jews handled Scripture, Mendelssohn sought to shield his coreligionists from an idolized and culturally sophisticated Bible that rooted itself firmly within Jewish textual traditions." So while like Sorkin Breuer does not doubt the sincerity of Mendelssohn's traditionalism, like Arkush, Breuer notes that Mendelssohn does not address important challenges posed by Enlightenment critics.

VI

What explains the great interest in Mendelssohn? Taking a page from Michel Foucault, I would suggest that Mendelssohn has been regarded as a special kind of author who "produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of the formation of other texts." Mendelssohn is widely regarded as the founder of German-Jewish thought. As such, part of the continued interest in him stems from the sense that shifting our understanding of Mendelssohn can reshape our understanding of German-Judaism. Were German-Jews able to forge a genuine synthesis between German and Jewish identity, or was German-Judaism, at bottom, an unstable mixture doomed from the outset to lead Jews to a sense of alienation and self-doubt?

More generally, Mendelssohn is widely considered the founder of modern Jewish philosophy. How scholars interpret Mendelssohn can then affect how they regard the project of modern Jewish philosophy as a whole. Is modern Jewish philosophy a paradox inasmuch as the presumptions of modern philosophy are fundamentally at odds with

97 Breuer also stresses the influence of Mendelssohn's more immediate Jewish context.
99 Ibid., 26.
100 Ibid., 25.
101 Ibid., 175.
103 Altman notes four ways in which Mendelssohn served as a model for later German-Jews: (2) his mastery of German language and culture; (2) his continued loyalty to Judaism; (2) his being a pioneer of modern Jewish thought; (4) his defense of Jewish civil rights. See Altman, " Moses Mendelssohn as the Archetypical German Jew," 17-31. Mendelssohn's status as the "patron saint" of German-Judaism is even in the steady Jewish celebrations that German-Jews held to his honor through 1939. For discussion, see Christhard Hoffmann, "Constructing Jewish Modernity: Mendelssohn's Jubilee Celebrations within German-Jewry, 1829-1939," in Toward Normality? Assimilations and Modern German-Jewry, ed. Rainer Liedtke and David Rechter (Heidelberg: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). For a more detailed analysis of representations of Mendelssohn from 1929 through 1939, see chapter 6.
Judaism, or is it a genuine synthesis between modern philosophy and Judaism possible? Is modern Jewish philosophy really just philosophy with Judaism added as window dressing or does Judaism play a substantive role in shaping the philosophical thinking of modern Jewish thinkers?

The five scholars that I have discussed have advanced our understanding of Mendelssohn immeasurably. Any serious Mendelssohn scholar must grapple with their work, and any reservations that I have raised pale in comparison with my debt to them. As a member of a new generation of Mendelssohn scholars, I hope to live up to the standards set by these important scholars and to continue working along the pathways cleared by them.

Postscript