



# MOSES MENDELSSOHN

## ENLIGHTENMENT, RELIGION, POLITICS, NATIONALISM

edited by  
Michah Gottlieb and Charles H. Manekin



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## Was Mendelssohn a Deist or a Theist? And Does It Matter?

— Lawrence Kaplan —

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### I.

That Mendelssohn believed in God is clear and undeniable. But was he a deist or a theist? To answer this question, we must first define what we mean by deism and theism. This is not an easy task. Thus, in his important monograph *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, Allan Arkush, citing Robert Sullivan, maintains that what all deists in the early modern era “had in common was above all a certain coolness to revelation.”<sup>1</sup> Deism, then, is to be understood as a natural nonrevealed religion, and, by implication, for a religion to be theistic it would at a minimum have to be based on revelation. It would follow that if Mendelssohn did not believe in revelation—and, as we shall see in moment, Arkush argues that in fact he did not believe in it—he would have been a deist. But, at the same time, Arkush argues that Mendelssohn “was unquestionably a genuine Theist” because he believed in God, divine providence, and the immortality of the soul.<sup>2</sup> Here theism consists in the acceptance of certain substantive religious truth claims, whether based on reason or revelation. In contrast, the deist rejects these truth claims—or, to be more precise, the truth claims affirming divine providence and the immortality of the soul—believing instead, as the popular quip would have it, that God created the world and immediately retired to Florida. For our purposes, we

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1. Allan Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 147, citing Robert Sullivan, *John Toland and the Deist Controversy: A Study in Adaptations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 207.
  2. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 254.



will adopt Arkush's first definition, from which it would follow that the deist and theist clash over the idea of revelation, the theist accepting its veracity and the deist rejecting it.<sup>3</sup>

Now Mendelssohn, as is well known, affirmed time and again his belief not just in the philosophical possibility of revelation in general,<sup>4</sup> but in the actuality of the Sinaitic revelation.

More specifically, he maintained that the Pentateuch is the revealed word of God to Moses. And he famously defined Judaism as revealed legislation. Indeed, both Edward Breuer and David Sorkin portray Mendelssohn, primarily on the basis of his Hebrew writings, as a staunchly theistic defender of an enlightened but essentially traditional form of rabbinic Judaism.<sup>5</sup> How, then, could anyone be so perverse as to argue that Mendelssohn was not a theist, but rather a closet deist?

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3. Is there a connection between deism's "coolness to revelation" and its rejection of divine providence and the immortality of the soul? Let us focus on divine providence. Here we may perhaps find guidance in some illuminating remarks of Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbra Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). In part 2, book 1, Rosenzweig writes: "But in the Creation by God at the dawn of the world, it is not necessary that the world 'become' something created as 'finished,' but above all . . . as nothing other than—creature. That which is Creation from God's point of view can, from its side, mean nothing other than the breaking in of the consciousness it has of being a creature, of its consciousness of being constantly created. . . . The world's consciousness of being a creature, that is, its consciousness of being constantly created, and not of having been created, is objectified in the idea of divine providence" (131). As Rosenzweig states in part 2, book 2, "creation [is] already . . . a revelation of God. And indeed he does reveal himself in Creation as Creator" (171–172). But, Rosenzweig goes on to say, in God's "first revelation in an infinity full of creative acts God threatens to be lost again in the infinity of Creation; he seems to become mere 'origin' of Creation, and hence to become again the hidden God, just what he had ceased to be in creating. . . . So precisely for the sake of its revelatory character, the first Revelation in Creation requires the breaking in of a 'second' Revelation, of a Revelation that is nothing but Revelation, of a Revelation in the stricter sense of word, or rather in the strictest sense" (173–174). Thus Revelation in the strict sense of the word is necessary to protect the idea of divine providence contained in God's first Revelation in creation, in God as Creator and not simply as a deistic "origin" of creation, and, corresponding to that, in the world's consciousness of being constantly created, and not of having been created.
4. See Alexander Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn on Miracles," in *Hommage à Georges Vajda: études d'histoire et de pensée juives*, ed. Georges Vajda et al. (Louvain: Peeters, 1980), 463–477.
5. Edward Breuer, *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-*



But perhaps such a claim is not as perverse as it might seem at first. As scholars have noted, writers in the early modern era dealing with religion often offered two distinct and, indeed, contradictory bodies of teaching: a public, traditional, theistic teaching; and a private, skeptical, naturalistic, deistic one. There was certainly a private and a public Reimarus.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars argue that there was also a private and a public Locke.<sup>7</sup> Along these lines, David Berman, in a series of important studies, has shown how many writers on religion in this era cultivated the “art of theological lying,” the better to conceal their nontraditional, disbelieving views.<sup>8</sup>

Might there, then, be, as Arkush suggests,<sup>9</sup> a private deistic Mendelssohn hidden beneath the outer garb of the public theistic Mendelssohn? We certainly cannot deny this possibility a priori. Mendelssohn himself, in his famous essay “What Is Enlightenment?,” writes: “If certain useful and—for mankind—adorning truths may not be disseminated without destroying prevailing religious and moral tenets, the virtue-loving bearer of enlightenment will proceed with prudence and discretion and endure prejudice rather than drive way the truth with which it is so closely intertwined.”<sup>10</sup> This passage—and similar ones<sup>11</sup>—raise the pos-

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*Century Study of Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Although I am in basic sympathy with Sorkin’s and Breuer’s overall reading of Mendelssohn, I believe they exaggerate his traditionalism somewhat. See Lawrence Kaplan, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*, by David Sorkin [Review],” *AJS Review* 23:2 (1998): 300–307; Lawrence Kaplan, “Maimonides and Mendelssohn on the Origins of Idolatry, the Election of Israel, and the Oral Law,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, eds. Alfred Ivry, Elliot Wolfson, and Allan Arkush, 423–56. (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1998), 454, note 41.

6. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 151–156, 255, citing Charles Talbert, *Reimarus: Fragments*, trans. Ralph Fraser (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 6.
7. See the studies of Leo Strauss, Michael Zuckert, Thomas Pangle, and Michael S. Rabbah cited in Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 284, note 21.
8. David Berman, “Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Lying,” in *Deism, Masonry and the Enlightenment: Essays Honoring Alfred Owen Aldridge*, ed. J. A. Lemay (Newark: Associated University Press, 1987), 61–78; idem. *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Croom Helm, 1988).
9. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 255.
10. Mendelssohn, “On the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” (1784), trans. James

sibility, then, that Mendelssohn's theistic affirmations were merely an outward obeisance that he made to traditional sensibilities.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, as Arkush correctly points out, had Mendelssohn in truth been a deist, he would have had good and sufficient reason to conceal that fact. Mendelssohn's activities within the Jewish community as a proponent of Enlightenment and as a modernizer had already exposed him to criticisms by traditionalists in that community, despite his observance of Jewish law. An open denial on his part of the truth and authority of revelation would have destroyed any influence he exerted on the community; indeed, it might well have resulted in his excommunication. Thus Mendelssohn would have had political as well as pedagogical reasons for hiding his deistic sympathies.<sup>13</sup>

But the bare possibility that, in light of his views as expressed in "What Is Enlightenment?" and the general climate of the times, Mendelssohn's repeated theistic affirmations should not be taken at face value does not by itself offer us sufficient grounds for not so taking them. Arkush therefore in his above-mentioned monograph attempts a Straussian reading of *Jerusalem*, pointing to the existence of several apparently problematic passages and arguments that upon close examination would appear to indicate—or so Arkush argues—that Mendelssohn conceals a deistic subtext beneath *Jerusalem's* theistic surface, a subtext

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Schmidt, in *What Is Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 55, quoted by Arkush, 259.

11. See the passages from Mendelssohn's *Counter-Reflections to Bonnet's Palingenesis* and his preamble to *Phaedon* quoted by Arkush, 258–259.
12. However, Gideon Freudenthal argues that "Mendelssohn . . . believes that in case of collision between metaphysical speculation and its unacceptable moral consequences, there is good reason to suspect that the metaphysical premise is wrong" (*No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012], 55). Note also Mendelssohn's Yiddish letter, dated April 22, 1784, to Avigdor Levi, in which Mendelssohn writes: "One is not always required to say the truth and defend it, but one is always, under all circumstances, responsible for studiously not stating untruths" (quoted by Michah Gottlieb, "Between Jerusalem and German Enlightenment: Recent Works on Moses Mendelssohn in English," in Michah Gottlieb, *Faith, Reason, Politics: Essays on the History of Jewish Thought*, (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 246–247). As Gottlieb correctly concludes, "we thus see that Mendelssohn's principle is to never state anything he deems untrue" (*ibid.*, 247).
13. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 258.

whose very existence he covertly and subtly signals to the careful reader via these problematic passages and arguments.

Arkush advances two main arguments in support of his claim that Mendelssohn was a deist. In this first part of my essay—dealing with the question, was Mendelssohn a deist or a theist?—I will attempt to show that both these arguments are flawed. In the second part of my essay—dealing with the question, and does it matter?—I will similarly dispose of a third and subsidiary argument by Arkush.

Arkush's first argument is textual. He refers to a passage in *Jerusalem* where Mendelssohn, so Arkush claims, seeks to demonstrate the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation. This attempt, Arkush argues, is flawed—and furthermore, Mendelssohn must have known it was flawed.

In section II of *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn discusses the nature of historical truths. He notes that those truths, unlike eternal truths, depend on authority, on the testimony of narrators whose credibility is unimpeachable. Of course, the best example of such an unimpeachable narrator, Mendelssohn asserts, would be God himself. Mendelssohn then proceeds in the passage in question to set forth the historical truths revealed by God at Sinai. According to Mendelssohn's understanding, God revealed to the nation of Israel the following truths: "I am the Eternal, your God, who made a covenant with your forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and swore to make of their seed a nation of my own. The time for the fulfillment of this promise has finally come. To this end, I redeemed you from Egyptian slavery with unheard-of miracles and signs. I am your redeemer, your sovereign and king. I also make a covenant with you, and give you laws by which you are to live and become a happy nation in the land that I shall give you." "All these," Mendelssohn concludes, "are historical truths that by their very nature rest on historical evidence, must be verified by authority and can be confirmed by miracles."<sup>14</sup>

As Arkush notes, "this is a difficult passage to unravel."<sup>15</sup> He cites Alexander Altmann's suggestion that "what Mendelssohn probably attempted to convey was that the miracles accompanying the Exodus and the heavenly voice at Sinai served to invest the events that led up to

14. Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Introduction and Commentary by Alexander Altmann, trans. Allan Arkush (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 98

15. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 176.

the Giving of the Law with a more than ordinary significance, endowing them with the aura of the divine.”<sup>16</sup>

Arkush himself proceeds to explain the passage thus:

Before the revelation . . . none of the people present at Sinai knew from direct observation that God had made a covenant with their forefathers. All of them did know that they had been rescued from Egypt in an unheard-of fashion, but they did not *know* that God was responsible for their deliverance. . . .

And . . . the people did not yet know why they had been assembled at the mountain. Now, however, God deemed it necessary that the people know all of these things. Accordingly, he conveyed three kinds of historical truths to them: those concerning the remote past, those concerning the recent past, and those concerning the present moment. In the remote past God had made a covenant with their ancestors. Recently he had delivered them from Egyptian bondage; and presently he was giving them a law. Of the truth of all these things the people acquired sure knowledge because they are reported to them by a narrator whose credibility is absolutely beyond doubt—God.<sup>17</sup>

Arkush’s explanation is closer to the mark than Altmann’s, since it takes into account Mendelssohn’s reference to God’s announcement of his covenant with the patriarchs—something entirely ignored by Altmann, but requires further refinement. Before I put forward my own explanation, let us take note of the difficulty that Arkush raises at this point.

Arkush correctly notes that Mendelssohn “has not shown [here] that later generations who have not witnessed the Sinaitic revelation directly, nevertheless have sufficient reason to believe it actually occurred.”<sup>18</sup> Arkush consequently concludes that Mendelssohn has not established, then, “what appears to be his primary contention; that is, that the revelation at Sinai is itself a matter of history.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, Mendelssohn—by using the historical truths supposedly revealed by God at Sinai to prove the historicity of that revelation—would appear to be begging the question with a vengeance.

16. Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia: University of Alabama Press, 1973), 538.

17. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 176–177.

18. *Ibid.*, 177.

19. *Ibid.*, 177.

In Arkush's view, this difficulty with Mendelssohn's argumentation is so obvious that it is hard to believe that Mendelssohn could not have been aware of it and, furthermore, could not have imagined that others would not be aware of it. Arkush therefore concludes that not only was Mendelssohn aware of the weakness of his argument, but that by presenting such an obviously flawed argument he was sending a tacit signal to the discerning reader that he was indeed begging the question and that in fact he had no good proofs for the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation.

But is it Mendelssohn who begs the question, or is it Arkush? Arkush assumes throughout that Mendelssohn's aim in his discussion of the historical truths revealed at Sinai was to prove the historicity of that revelation. But I contend that this was not Mendelssohn's goal at all.

Mendelssohn's discussion of the historical truths revealed at Sinai takes place in the context of his larger discussion of the relationship between reason and revelation—more specifically, the question of what matters are fit subjects for revelation and what are not. Mendelssohn's main point is that eternal truths are not fit subjects for revelation, while the law, based on authority, is. But his further point is that since historical truths, like the law, depend upon authority, historical truths are also fit subjects for revelation. Therefore, Mendelssohn can maintain that although God at Sinai did not reveal any eternal truths, he did reveal both the law and historical truths. Mendelssohn's point, then, is not to prove the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation, but rather to explain why, given its historicity, it was proper that that revelation include historical truths.

But Mendelssohn's argument here is that not only was it fit and proper that historical truths be revealed at Sinai, it was necessary. As he explicitly states immediately before he paraphrases the first commandment as quoted above, "a historical truth on which his people's legislation was to be founded . . . was to be revealed here."<sup>20</sup> That is, the authority of the law revealed at Sinai ultimately derives from the historical truths revealed at Sinai, which is precisely why it was necessary to reveal them there. How so?

To answer this, we need to note that, for Mendelssohn, the authority of the law is not based solely on its revealed nature, but rather—a point I will develop in the second part of this essay—on the fact that it was revealed by God to the nation of Israel in his capacity "as Patron and

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20. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 98.

Friend by covenant of their ancestors, as Liberator, Founder, and Leader, as King and Head of the people.”<sup>21</sup> The historical truths revealed at Sinai, then, serve as the basis for the authority of the law revealed there, insofar as these historical truths relate how Israel was formed as a nation and how God became its “Patron and Friend . . . , Liberator, Founder, and Leader, . . . King and Head.”

Thus, when Mendelssohn discusses the historical truths that formed an integral part of Judaism “according to the intention of the founder,” he writes: “Historical truths or records of the vicissitudes of former ages, especially of the circumstances in the lives of the nation’s forefathers; of their having to come to know the true God, of their way of life before God; . . . of the covenant that God concluded with them, and of the promise . . . to make of their descendants, in the days to come, a nation consecrated to Him. *These historical records contained the foundation for the national cohesion*” (emphasis added).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, God became the nation’s “Patron and Friend by covenant of their ancestors.”

Perhaps even more significant, Mendelssohn, borrowing a leaf from the *Mekhilta*, asserts that God became “the King and Head” of the people precisely by liberating them from “Egyptian slavery by unheard-of miracles and signs.”<sup>23</sup>

To return, then, to Mendelssohn’s summary of the historical truths revealed at Sinai, we can now understand how, for him, these truths serve as the basis for the authority of the law revealed there. First, “I am the Eternal, your God, who made a covenant with your forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and swore to make of their seed a nation of my own” is the basis for the historical truths about the Patriarchs and “contained the foundation for the national cohesion” and for God’s becoming the “Patron and Friend” of their descendants. Second, “the time for the fulfillment of this promise has finally come. To this end, I redeemed you from Egyptian slavery with unheard-of miracles and signs” shows that it was precisely by redeeming the people from Egyptian slavery with unheard-of miracles and signs that God became their

21. *Ibid.*, 127.

22. *Ibid.*, 127.

23. *Ibid.*, 98. In the *Bi’ur* on Exod. 20:1 Mendelssohn explicitly refers to the *Mekhilta* on the verse. See Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe (JubA)*, ed. Alexander Altmann et al. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971ff.), 16:185–188.

“sovereign and king.” And finally, “I also make a covenant with you, and give you laws by which you are to live and become a happy nation in the land that I shall give you” shows that it is precisely as patron and friend, and king and head of the people that God was revealing to them laws “peculiar to this nation and through the observance of which it should arrive at national felicity.”<sup>24</sup>

All this is not to say that Mendelssohn’s summary of the historical truths revealed at Sinai is unproblematic. To take just one obvious problem: if it was so critical that God reveal at Sinai the historical truths connected with the covenant with the patriarchs, why does Exodus 20:2 omit all mention of that covenant and refer only to God’s redemption of the people from Egyptian slavery? But whatever problems there are with Mendelssohn’s summary, one thing in my view is certain—namely, that Mendelssohn, contra Arkush, does not beg the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation. Not only was establishing the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation *not* his “primary contention,” but he wasn’t even addressing the issue in the first place!

Arkush finds it strange that in light of Mendelssohn’s “overall purpose” in *Jerusalem* to defend the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation, he makes no argument in favor of that historicity. As Arkush correctly points out, Mendelssohn does not even “reiterate in a comprehensive manner the standard medieval arguments in defense of that historicity” that he had resorted to on other occasions.<sup>25</sup> But the moral we should

24. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 127.

25. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 178. Arkush reviews the “medieval arguments” that Mendelssohn elsewhere presented in defense of the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation, arguing that they are extraordinarily weak and that Mendelssohn knew or sensed that they were extraordinarily weak, while he knew or sensed that the arguments of the deist critics against the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation were very strong, perhaps unanswerable (173–175, 178–179). Freudenthal (*No Religion without Idolatry*, 82) first points to a number of texts overlooked by Arkush where Mendelssohn directly argues in favor of the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation—namely, the *Bi’ur* on Exod. 19:9 and his commentary on Maimonides’s *Millot ha-Higayyon*, chapter 8, and then maintains, contra Arkush, that Mendelssohn “had very good arguments for his position [affirming the authenticity of revelation]” and “that the opposite critical position was far from cogent itself” (*ibid.*, 84). Despite this sharp disagreement, Freudenthal, like Arkush, fails to appreciate that this was not the issue Mendelssohn was addressing in *Jerusalem*. Thus, Freudenthal refers to Mendelssohn’s view “that the truth of the event of revelation is hence ascertained by the general criteria of

draw from all this is not that we have here a glaring omission on Mendelssohn's part, but rather that the defense of the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation was simply not one of Mendelssohn's goals in *Jerusalem*. An author should have the right to set his own agenda.<sup>26</sup>

Arkush, perhaps realizing that one should not put too much weight on this textual argument, sets forth a second argument—this one structural in nature—in support of his view that Mendelssohn was a closet deist. That is, Arkush suggests that Mendelssohn's view of Judaism, as presented in *Jerusalem*, is structurally similar to both Spinoza's view of the universal principles of faith and Locke's view of Christianity.<sup>27</sup> Now, in Arkush's view, Spinoza was "without doubt an unbeliever . . . who did not really believe the fundamental dogmas of the universal religion to be true."<sup>28</sup> In a similar manner, Arkush—accepting the arguments of Leo Strauss and some of his students—contends that despite his protestations to the contrary, Locke, like Spinoza, did not accept the

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empirical truth" (ibid. 82) and refers to Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 93. But there Mendelssohn states: "It seems to me that only where historical truths are concerned does it befit the supreme wisdom to instruct men in a human manner, that is, through word and writing, and to cause extraordinary things to occur in nature, whenever this is required to confirm authority and credibility." Mendelssohn is referring in this passage not to the historical reliability of the biblical account of the Sinaitic revelation, but to the appropriateness of God's miraculously revealing to the Israelites on Mount Sinai historical truths that they would have had no way of knowing had God not revealed them, truths that "contained the foundation for the national cohesion" and for God's becoming the people's "Patron and Friend."

26. In a later article, Arkush appears to realize that in *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment* he had misread this key passage, and that, in truth, it does not—as he had believed before—serve "to establish that readers of the Bible possess sure knowledge of the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation," but only "how the Israelites who were personally redeemed from Egypt could have obtained knowledge of various other historical facts" ("The Questionable Judaism of Moses Mendelssohn," *New German Critique* 77 [1999]: 32). Exactly. Nevertheless, in the very same paragraph, he persists in maintaining that this passage "may reflect Mendelssohn's recognition of the obsolescence" of the arguments in favor of the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation, and that it constitutes a conscious evasion of the arguments of the deist critics against the historicity of that revelation. This strikes me as special pleading. Again, an author should have the right to set his own agenda.

27. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 241–243, 260–265.

28. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 243, 245.

truth of biblical revelation.<sup>29</sup> For both Spinoza and Locke, then, the teachings of the Bible are not true, but only morally and, even more important, politically useful.

Arkush's view that Spinoza was "an unbeliever . . . who did not really believe the fundamental dogmas of the universal religion to be true," is, I believe, undeniable and is accepted by practically all Spinoza scholars. Indeed, it seems clear that Spinoza did not believe in biblical revelation in any serious sense and that he should be viewed as one of the forerunners, perhaps the major forerunner, of the eighteenth-century deistic tradition. That this is the case appears increasingly certain in light of the massive researches of Jonathan Israel.<sup>30</sup>

What of Locke? Sorkin—who, as we saw, portrays Mendelssohn as a staunchly theistic defender of an enlightened but essentially traditional form of rabbinic Judaism—simply dismisses Arkush's Straussian reading of Locke as a closet deist, maintaining that it "is not widely accepted."<sup>31</sup> The issue is a complicated one, and I do not feel qualified to adjudicate between the conflicting readings. But fortunately for the purposes of this essay it is not necessary to do so.

For let us grant, for argument's sake, Arkush's claim that Locke was a closet deist. I still maintain that this tells us nothing about Mendelssohn, since, as I will now proceed to show, the structural similarity Arkush purports to discern between Mendelssohn's view of Judaism, as presented in *Jerusalem*, and both Spinoza's view of the universal principles of faith and Locke's view of Christianity disappears upon closer examination. What is that similarity? Arkush argues:

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29. See the references cited in Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 151–156, 255.
30. See Israel's magisterial, if controversial, trilogy, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
31. David Sorkin, "The Mendelssohn Myth and Its Method," *New German Critique* 77 (1999): 25, n. 74. Sorkin there cites the monograph of James Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Rebellion, and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) as presenting a "sustained exposition of the view . . . that Locke was not anti-Christian, but a particular type of Christian, i.e., an Arminian." See also Victor Nuovo, *Christianity, Antiquity and Enlightenment: Interpretations of John Locke* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2011), 53–73.

Spinoza and Locke had proffered interpretations of the Bible that virtually “stripped it down” to such moral doctrines . . . as they considered essential to the maintenance of obedience to the laws of the state. . . . Mendelssohn in effect stripped things down even further. The Bible, he argued (though . . . most inconsistently . . .) revealed no doctrines at all. In spite of his different approach to the Bible, however, the religion with which he is left, his Judaism, consists, like the civil religions of Spinoza and Locke, mainly of the principles of natural religion and rational morality and is similarly supportive of the laws of the state. In addition to these principles, it stipulates nothing more than the continuing duty of every Jew to obey the Mosaic Law.<sup>32</sup>

First, as I have argued elsewhere in response to Arkush, although it may appear that Mendelssohn contradicts himself by both affirming and denying the presence of revealed doctrines in scripture, a close examination of several key passages in *Jerusalem* leads to the conclusion that when Mendelssohn denied that scripture contains any revealed doctrines he meant that there are no revealed scriptural doctrines “forced upon our belief” (that is, no revealed doctrines in which we are *commanded* to believe), but there certainly are revealed religious doctrines in the sense that scripture contains rational religious truths, “excellent propositions . . . presented to the understanding” (that is, religious truths *commended* to our knowledge).<sup>33</sup> In this latter respect, as Mendelssohn passionately declares, Scripture “includes an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines. . . . The more you search in it the more you will be astounded at the depths of insight that lie concealed in it.”<sup>34</sup> Can one imagine Spinoza or even Locke making such a declaration?

32. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 264.

33. Kaplan, “Maimonides and Mendelssohn on the Origins of Idolatry, the Election of Israel, and the Oral Law,” 451, note 31. Arkush, responds to my critique of his view in “The Questionable Judaism of Moses Mendelssohn,” 34, n. 8. He very generously describes my critique as “penetrating” and, equally generously, further concedes that my own interpretation is based “on a careful reading of several passages in *Jerusalem*.” Nevertheless, he rejects my reading as unconvincing. However, Michah Gottlieb is, in turn, unconvinced by Arkush’s response and accepts and further develops my reading of Mendelssohn, lending it greater textual support (*Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn’s Theological-Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57–58, 153, n. 192).

34. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 99–100.

But let us set aside the question of Mendelssohn's view regarding the presence of revealed doctrines in scripture. If we compare what Mendelssohn, Spinoza, and Locke each consider to be the distinctive teaching of the Bible, we find that, contra Arkush, Mendelssohn's view differs significantly from both Spinoza's and Locke's. For Spinoza the distinctive teaching of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) consists of the universal principles of faith; for Locke (referring to the New Testament alone) it consists of a vague and ill-defined faith in the messiahship of Jesus and repentance—that is, “an hearty sorrow for our past misdeeds, and a sincere resolution and endeavor, to the utmost of our power, to conform our actions to the law of God;”<sup>35</sup> for Mendelssohn (referring to the Hebrew Bible alone) it consists of the Mosaic law.

But neither Spinoza's universal principles of faith nor Locke's specifically Christian doctrines (according to the deistic reading of Locke) possess any cognitive value; rather, they possess only moral and, even more so, political value. Thus, as we saw above, Arkush states: “Spinoza and Locke had proffered interpretations of the Bible that virtually stripped it down to such moral doctrines... as they considered essential to the maintenance of obedience to the laws of the state.” But for Mendelssohn, although Mosaic law certainly possesses moral value (and under the original Mosaic constitution, it possessed political value as well), its primary function is cognitive. Thus, as Mendelssohn states in *Jerusalem*, all the ceremonial laws were “closely related to the speculative knowledge of religion and the teachings of morality”; they were “a kind of script . . . guid[ing] the inquiring intelligence to divine truths, partly to eternal and partly to historical truths upon which the religion of this people was founded.”<sup>36</sup> Or, as he states in a famous letter to Naftali Herz Homberg, even if the ceremonial laws had lost their significance as symbolic script, their observance would serve to preserve the Jewish people as a community of “genuine theists”—that is, as a community of people who preserve the rational religious truths of natural religion, truths that, in turn, constitute an essential part of Judaism.<sup>37</sup> In either case, the cog-

35. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, quoted in Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 251.

36. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, p. 128.

37. See “Letter to Naftali Herz Homberg,” in Moses Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, ed. Michah Gottlieb, trans. Allan Arkush, Curtis Bowman and Elias Sacks (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 114.

nitive function of the content of revealed law is clear. Thus the presumed structural similarity, put forward by Arkush, between the views of Mendelssohn and those of Spinoza and Locke cannot, upon closer examination, be accepted.

To conclude the first part of this essay: it is, of course, impossible to look into Mendelssohn's heart, and, consequently, one cannot claim with complete certainty that his theistic affirmations were genuine. What I believe can be said is that we have not been offered any convincing reasons to assume the contrary.<sup>38</sup>

## II.

Does it matter? Well, one would think so! After all, does not the authority of the law, according to Mendelssohn, rest upon the fact that it was revealed by God to his people Israel? Therefore, if we accept that Mendelssohn was in fact a deist and consequently that in his heart of hearts he believed that the law was not revealed, would that not have the effect of completely undermining its authority? What could matter more than that?

But perhaps the question as to whether Mendelssohn was a deist or a theist matters less than we might imagine. Even though it is my opinion that Mendelssohn was a theist who genuinely believed that the law was revealed, I would argue that he nevertheless, perhaps unwittingly, undermined the authority of that revealed law, or better, that the logic of his argument, perhaps unbeknown to him, undermined its authority.

To appreciate this argument, let us take a step back and first examine the issue of the unity of *Jerusalem*. Immediately after its publication, the question of the relationship or lack thereof between sections I and II was raised by critics. Mendelssohn himself referred to one critic, who jibed that section I, with its use of natural law, was written by a sophist, while section II, with its theory of Judaism, was written by an arrant Jew.<sup>39</sup> Yet, perhaps because section I was neglected in the scholarly lit-

38. As I already indicated in notes 25, 31, and 33, Sorkin ("The Mendelssohn Myth and Its Method") Gottlieb (*Faith and Freedom*), and Freudenthal, (*No Religion Without Idolatry*) all in various ways take issue with Arkush's Straussian reading. Also see Jeremy Dauber, *Antonio's Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 106–107, 142–144, 154, n. 209. All of these authors have made valuable observations, but none of them, I believe, confronts and responds to these two central arguments of Arkush as directly as I do.

39. Mendelssohn, *JubA*, 13:179.

erature until fairly recently, this issue of the unity of *Jerusalem* does not appear to have received the attention it deserves.

Altmann, both in his classic biography of Mendelssohn and even more so in his introduction to the English translation of *Jerusalem*, faces this issue head on and convincingly shows that there are Jewish motifs that infuse Mendelssohn's philosophical discussion in section I, while there are philosophical motifs that infuse his theory of Judaism in section II.<sup>40</sup> Yet this demonstration, although valid, does not really resolve the issue of unity—which, as we will see, is more topical than thematic.

*Jerusalem*, as the reader will recall, is a reply to a pamphlet titled *The Search for Light and Right in a Letter to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn, on the Occasion of his Remarkable Preface to Menasseh ben Israel*. This pamphlet, in the form of two open letters to Mendelssohn, consists of two critiques of his "Preface to [the German translation of Menasseh Ben Israel's] *Vindiciae Judaeorum*." The major critique and body of the text, "The Search for Light and Right," after which the pamphlet as a whole was named, was written by August Crazz, while the second and considerably briefer critique, simply titled "Postscript," was written by Ernst Daniel Mörschel.<sup>41</sup>

Crazz criticizes Mendelssohn's view, expressed in his preface, that coercion in matters of religion is not legitimate, whether exercised by church or state. Crazz notes that Mosaic law "attaches coercion and punishments to the failure to observe the duties associated with the divine service"<sup>42</sup> and argues that by denying the legitimacy of coercion in matters of religion, Mendelssohn is, in effect, denying the legitimacy of Mosaic law. Crazz asks: "To what extent can you, my dear Mr. Mendelssohn, persist in the faith of your fathers and shake the entire structure by clearing away its cornerstones, seeing that you dispute the ecclesiastical law that was promulgated by Moses and that appeals to divine revelation?"<sup>43</sup> He therefore suggests to Mendelssohn that he has apparently "come closer to the Christian faith, by throwing off the servitude of

40. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 552; and "Introduction," in *Moses Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 13–17.

41. All three texts—Mendelssohn's "Preface to *Vindiciae Judaeorum*," Crazz's "Search for Light and Right," and Mörschel's "Postscript"—can be found in Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 40–52, 55–67, and 68–69, respectively.

42. Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 57.

43. Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 60.

the iron bonds of the [Jewish] church, and henceforth teaching the system of freedom of rational divine service,” since “this constitutes the true mark of Christian devotion to the divine, in accordance with which we have escaped from coercion and burdensome ceremonies”<sup>44</sup> and hints that he draw the appropriate conclusions—that is, convert.

Mörschel notes that Mendelssohn in his preface mentions pagans, Jews, Moslems, and adherents of natural religion all in one line; pleads for tolerance of naturalists; affirms that religion teaches eternal truths; and, finally and above all, states that “Reason’s house of devotion requires no locked doors. There is nothing inside it that is to be guarded, and no one outside it who is to be denied entry.”<sup>45</sup> All of this leads Mörschel to suspect that in truth Mendelssohn is “a despiser of all revelation.”<sup>46</sup> As Mendelssohn explains in *Jerusalem*, “in Mr. Mörschel’s opinion . . . no adherent of revelation would plead so openly for toleration of naturalists, or speak so loudly of *eternal* truths that religion should teach, and . . . a true Christian or Jew should hesitate before he calls his house of prayer Reason’s house of devotion.”<sup>47</sup>

Section I of *Jerusalem* is devoted in its entirety to restating and elaborating upon the arguments against the use of coercion in matters of religion that Mendelssohn had already put forward in the preface. In the beginning of section II, Mendelssohn refers to the argument raised by Cranz that Mendelssohn, by denying the legitimacy of coercion in matters of religion, was, in effect, denying the legitimacy of Mosaic law and with it the legitimacy of Judaism. Although conceding that “this objection cuts me to the heart,” inasmuch as “many of my coreligionists” share Cranz’s notion of Judaism,<sup>48</sup> Mendelssohn points to the inconsistency

44. Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 61.

45. Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 69. This passage in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, apparently owing to an editorial slip, will baffle the reader. Mörschel here refers to a number of, in his view, problematic passages from Mendelssohn’s “Preface to *Vindiciae Judaearum*” by page number, but, aside from the statement that “Reason’s house of devotion requires no locked doors,” does not actually cite them. Neither does the editor. Here he should have followed Mendelssohn’s own example in *Jerusalem*, who, as I have, spells out Mörschel’s references.

46. Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 69.

47. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 88. The translation of this passage in Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 79, has been modified slightly, with—as a careful reader will see—unfortunate results.

48. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 85. Mendelssohn goes on to say that if, hypothetically,

of Cranz's suggestion that, Mendelssohn, having supposedly rejected the Mosaic law as contradicting his rational principles, should consequently proceed to embrace Christianity. As Mendelssohn asks in a famous passage: "If it be true that the cornerstones of my house are dislodged, and the structure threatens to collapse, do I act wisely if I remove my belongings from the lower to the upper floor for safety? Am I more secure there? Now Christianity is built upon Judaism, and if the latter falls, it must necessarily collapse with it into *one* heap of ruins. You say that my conclusions undermine the foundation of Judaism, and you offer me the safety of your upper floor; must I not suppose that you mock me?"<sup>49</sup>

In such a way, Mendelssohn tentatively suggests, he might have been able to "avoid the trap" set for him by Cranz "without engaging in any further discussion" with him.<sup>50</sup> But, Mendelssohn concludes, this would not be enough, since he would still have Mörschel's critique to deal with. Mendelssohn resolves therefore to respond substantively to both

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he "were convinced" that Cranz's notions of Judaism were true, he would "shamefully retract my propositions and bring reason into captivity under the yoke of faith," but he immediately proceeds to deny the possibility of doing so, since "authority . . . can suppress reason but not put it into fetters." Rather, in such a case of an apparent contradiction between the word of God and his reason, he would fervently, with "childlike prayers," supplicate God for illumination to help resolve the contradiction and "call out with the Psalmist 'Lord send me Thy life, Thy truth' (Ps. 43:3)." Since the phrase "bring reason into captivity under the yoke of faith" is a "silent" citation from 2 Cor. 10:5, Mendelssohn here may be seen as tacitly contrasting the Christian approach of subordinating—nay, enslaving—reason to faith, with the Jewish approach, exemplified by the psalmist, of according reason independent authority alongside revelation. (I am developing here a stimulating, if somewhat cryptic, suggestion in Dauber, *Antonio's Devils*, 142–144.) I do not know whether it has been noted that precisely this same imagery appears toward the end of *To the Friends of Lessing*, where, in the very last words he ever wrote, Mendelssohn contrasts Jacobi's "faith in his fathers" with Mendelssohn's "faith in my fathers." Although Jacobi "brings a muzzled reason into obedience through the conquering might of faith"—shades of 2 Corinthians!—he, Mendelssohn, "cherishes a childlike [!] confidence" that God in his "omnipotence has the power to bestow upon human beings the ability to recognize the [eternal] truths upon which their happiness is based and [that] in His infinite mercy He wishes to bestow this ability upon me" (*To the Friends of Lessing*, ed. and trans. Bruce Rosenstock, in *Moses Mendelssohn, Moses Mendelssohn: Last Works* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 175.

49. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 87.

50. *Ibid.*, 87.

Mörschel's and Cranz's critiques. First, he responds to Mörschel's critique, in the course of which he develops his famous theory that Judaism "knows of no revealed religion"<sup>51</sup> but rather consists of (1) eternal religious truths "recommended to rational acknowledgement,"<sup>52</sup> (2) divinely revealed historical truths, and (3) divinely revealed legislation. This response to Mörschel takes up most of section II,<sup>53</sup> and only toward the end of the section does Mendelssohn return to Cranz's critique and respond to it.<sup>54</sup>

But this seems to split *Jerusalem* into two: section I and the beginning and end of section II, dealing with Cranz's critique, are concerned with the issue of coercion; while the bulk of section II, dealing with Mörschel's critique, is concerned with developing a theory of Judaism. Is there any connection between Mendelssohn's responses to the two critiques? And if there is one, what might it be? Or are we really dealing with two unrelated units?<sup>55</sup>

Altmann, in his commentary on *Jerusalem*, remarks: "Mendelssohn treats Mörschel with a tinge of irony, but does do 'justice' to 'his searching eye' and actually devotes the major part of *Jerusalem* II to the theme of reason and revelation raised by Mörschel. The question brought up by Cranz is addressed only briefly towards the end of the book."<sup>56</sup> Arkush, in line with his generally more negative and more suspicious reading of *Jerusalem*, views Mendelssohn's reply to Mörschel as an evasive tactic on

51. Ibid., 89.

52. Ibid., 126.

53. Ibid., 89–128. Note how this section is clearly marked off by Mendelssohn by his presenting his tripartite division of Judaism at both the section's beginning (90–91) and its end (126–127).

54. Ibid., 128–132.

55. Bruce Rosenstock offers a holistic reading of *Jerusalem*, arguing that in section I of the book "Mendelssohn . . . deliberately pushed his critique of ecclesiastical rights to its furthest limits in order to bring into the sharpest possible relief his continuing allegiance to Jewish law. This defense will occupy section two of *Jerusalem*. In defending his acceptance of the obligations of Jewish law, Mendelssohn must show Judaism defines a unique society, neither purely ecclesiastical . . . nor purely civil" (*Philosophy and the Jewish Question: Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig, and Beyond* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2010], 47). This, however, makes it appear that section II is wholly a response to Cranz's critique and entirely ignores Mendelssohn's response to Mörschel's critique, which constitutes the bulk of section II. Indeed, Rosenstock never once in his book mentions Mörschel.

56. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 204. See also Altmann, "Introduction," 11.

his part. In truth, Arkush maintains, Mendelssohn might have made short shrift of Mörschel. After all, Arkush correctly points out, Mörschel's claim that "no adherent of revelation would plead so openly for toleration of naturalists, rests on faulty logic." Consequently, in Arkush's view, Mendelssohn should simply have replied that "one need not be a naturalist to argue that the state ought to tolerate adherents of natural religion." Or, if he had wished to elaborate a bit, he might have briefly noted that since "Judaism is binding only upon the members of the Jewish people, non-Jews, as far as it was concerned, had to live only in accordance with natural law"<sup>57</sup>—that is, in accordance with the rational religious truths and rational ethical principles of natural religion.

However, Arkush maintains, Mendelssohn knew that he had no convincing reply to make to Cranz. He therefore spent most of section II on the congenial task of responding to Mörschel and developing his theory of Judaism, despite the fact that there was no need for him to do so, in order to avoid confronting the force of Cranz's critique. Only at the end of the section did he briefly return to Cranz and attempt to fob him off with an unsatisfactory reply—a reply that moreover, so Arkush believes, Mendelssohn must have known was unsatisfactory.<sup>58</sup>

Arkush here is unfair to Mendelssohn. Whatever one may say about the cogency of Mendelssohn's reply to Cranz at the end of section II—and I will seek to show that it is more cogent than Arkush would allow—Arkush understates the force of Mörschel's critique. In his reply to Mörschel, Mendelssohn was addressing not Mörschel's claim that no adherent of revelation could plead, as Mendelssohn did, so openly for toleration of naturalists, but rather his claim that Mendelssohn by referring to reason's house of worship and the eternal truths that religion should teach was thereby identifying religion with reason and tacitly denying the need for revelation. It is in reply to *this* point that Mendelssohn develops his theory of Judaism. He begins by, in a famous passage, boldly and emphatically conceding to Mörschel that "*I recognize no eternal truths other than those that are not merely comprehensible to human reason but can also be demonstrated and verified by human powers*"<sup>59</sup> but, at the same time, maintaining that this does not obviate the need for the revelation of the Mosaic law—that is, for "supernatural legislation"—and

57. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 223.

58. *Ibid.*, 224–228.

59. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 89 (emphasis in the original).

for the revelation of the historical truths upon which the authority of that supernatural legislation was based. Thus, Altmann gets it exactly right when, in his commentary on *Jerusalem*, he states that Mendelssohn “devotes the major part of *Jerusalem* II to the theme of reason and revelation raised by Mörschel.”<sup>60</sup>

In any event, whether we agree with Altmann (as I do) that Mendelssohn’s reply to Mörschel was warranted by the gravity of the issue Mörschel raised or whether we agree with Arkush that Mendelssohn’s reply to Mörschel was unnecessary and just an evasive tactic on his part, the end result, according to both Altmann and Arkush, would appear to be that Mendelssohn’s reply to Mörschel has nothing to do with his reply to Cranz and that consequently *Jerusalem* really does consist of two unrelated parts.

In contrast, I would argue that there is a common theme linking the two replies—or, to put it somewhat differently, that precisely the points raised by Mendelssohn in his reply to Mörschel’s critique concerning the issue of reason and revelation enable him then to reply to the critique of Cranz concerning the issue of coercion. That common theme is the kingship of God.<sup>61</sup>

It is commonly asserted, that, for Mendelssohn, the authority of the law derives from its revealed nature—that is, the law is binding on the Jewish people because God revealed it to them. This, as I briefly noted in the first part of this essay, is an oversimplification. Rather, the law is authoritative because it was revealed by God to the nation of Israel in his capacity “as Patron and Friend . . . ., as Liberator, Founder, and Leader, as King and Head of the people.” That is, the law is binding on the Jewish people because it is the law of God, who by virtue of redeeming the people of Israel from Egypt became their political sovereign. For Mendelssohn then, the concept of the kingdom of Heaven should be understood in strictly political terms. Indeed, as we also saw in the first part of this essay, for Mendelssohn the historical truths revealed at

60. Ibid., 204.

61. The fact that the theme of the kingship of God plays a particularly important role in Mendelssohn’s thought is stressed by Warren Zev Harvey, “Mendelssohn’s Heavenly Politics,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, eds. Elliot Wolfson, Allan Arkush, and Alfred Ivry (Amsterdam: Hardwood, 1998) 403–412; and by Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry*, 174–179, 240–245. Neither, however, identifies the kingship of God as the key unifying theme of *Jerusalem*. I will return their analyses at my essay’s end.

Sinai are precisely those historical truths that relate how Israel was formed as a nation and how God became its “Patron and Friend . . . , Liberator, Founder, and Leader, . . . King and Head”—that is, precisely those historical truths that serve as the basis for the authority of the revealed Sinaitic law. Note well, that whenever in *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn speaks of the revelation of the law, he always takes care to stress that it was revealed to the people not just by God, but by God their king.

We have already seen this to be the case in Mendelssohn’s famous paraphrase of the first of the Ten Commandments,<sup>62</sup> which we discussed in the first part of this essay. Similarly, when Mendelssohn discusses the “Laws, precepts, commandments, and rules of life” that formed an integral part of Judaism “according to the intention of the founder,” he carefully notes: “The lawgiver was God, that is to say, God not in his relation as Creator and Preserver of the universe, but God as Patron and Friend by covenant of their ancestors, as Liberator, Founder, and Leader, as King and Head of the people.”<sup>63</sup> Finally, when Mendelssohn explains “more clearly” his “surmise about the purpose of the ceremonial law in Judaism,” he states: “Our nation . . . lived under extreme pressure among barbarians and idolaters [in Egypt]; and misery had made them as nearly insensitive to the truth as arrogance had made their oppressors. God liberated them from this state of slavery by extraordinary miracles; He became the Redeemer, Leader, King, Lawgiver, and Judge of this nation that He himself had fashioned, and He designed its constitution in a manner that accorded with the wise purposes of his providence.”<sup>64</sup> The most succinct expression, however, of the connection in Mendelssohn’s thought between the Kingship of God and the authority of the revealed Sinaitic law is not to be found in *Jerusalem*, but in the *Bi’ur* on Deuteronomy 32:43, where Mendelssohn refers to God as “malkenu me?obebenu” (“our king, our obligator”).<sup>65</sup>

Thus, the concept of the kingship of God serves as a linchpin for Mendelssohn’s theory of Judaism enunciated in his reply to Mörschel, inasmuch as it serves as the source of the authority of Israel’s “supernatural legislation” and by extension also serves to account for the content

62. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 97–98.

63. *Ibid.*, 126–127.

64. *Ibid.*, 118.

65. The significance and exegetical background of this phrase are acutely analyzed by Harvey, “Mendelssohn’s Heavenly Politics,” 406–407.

of the historical truths revealed at Sinai. But God's kingship serves not only as the source of the authority of the revealed law. It also serves to justify the fact—and here we turn to Mendelssohn's reply to Cranz—that the revealed law, under the original Mosaic constitution, could, in certain very limited circumstances,<sup>66</sup> be imposed through coercion. Although the law, as we have already seen, has a religious character—inasmuch as all the ceremonial laws were “closely related to the speculative knowledge of religion and the teachings of morality,” and as they were “a kind of script . . . guid[ing] the inquiring intelligence to divine truths, partly to eternal and partly to historical truths upon which the religion of this people was founded”—it also possesses a political dimension inasmuch as it is the law revealed to Israel by their political sovereign, God. And it is the revealed law, qua political law, that may properly be imposed on its subjects. Mendelssohn writes:

In this original constitution, state and religion were not conjoined but *one*; not connected but identical. . . . God, the Creator and Preserver of this world, was at the same time the King and Regent of this nation. . . . Every sacrilege against the authority of God, as the lawgiver of this nation, was a crime against the Majesty, and therefore a crime of state. Whoever blasphemed God committed lese majesty; whoever sacrilegiously desecrated the Sabbath implicitly abrogated a fundamental law of civil society, for an essential part of this constitution was based on the establishment of this day. . . . Under this constitution these crimes could and indeed had to be punished civilly, not as erroneous opinion, not as unbelief, but as misdeeds, as sacrilegious crimes aimed at abolishing or weakening the authority of the lawgiver, and thereby undermining the state itself.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, in emphasizing the political character of the law, Mendelssohn is taking a leaf from Spinoza's writings. But Spinoza emphasized the political character of the law in order to argue for its obsolescence. That is, in Spinoza's view, Mosaic law possessed no religious or moral significance and was authoritative only in so far as it was the political constitution of the ancient Jewish state. Consequently, Spinoza argued, the end of that state brought in its wake the end of that law's authority. In contrast, Mendelssohn emphasized the political character of the law not to argue for its obsolescence, but simply to answer

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66. *Jerusalem*, 129–130.

67. *Ibid.*, 128–129.

Cranz's query as to how, given Mendelssohn's view forbidding coercion in matters of religion, the law could be imposed by coercion—his answer being, as we have seen, that it was imposed by coercion qua political law, not qua religious law.

To be sure, although Mendelssohn has, at least in my view, succeeded in justifying on the basis of his own premises the fact that the ceremonial law under the original Mosaic constitution could be imposed by coercion, he still seems uncomfortable with the idea. No doubt that is why he emphasizes at such length the “leniency” with which “even these capital crimes [like violating the Sabbath] were punished,” the “superabundant indulgence for human weakness” the law—according to its oral interpretation—manifested, and finally the extreme infrequency with which punishments for violating the law were actually imposed.<sup>68</sup>

Arkush acutely and correctly senses Mendelssohn's discomfort. Nevertheless, I believe Arkush misses the point when he claims that, “Mendelssohn tacitly acknowledges that the ancient Israelite constitution did in fact include punishments for what were in a certain sense religious offenses.”<sup>69</sup> In fact, as we have seen, this is precisely what Mendelssohn denies. The blatant, deliberate, and public violations of the ceremonial law under the original Mosaic constitution, to repeat, were, for Mendelssohn, not punished as religious offenses, as “erroneous opinion,” but rather as civil offenses, as “misdeeds . . . aimed at abolishing or weakening the authority of the lawgiver.”

In sum, despite a certain discomfort with his justification of coercion under the original Mosaic constitution, Mendelssohn nonetheless successfully justifies it and thereby also successfully responds to Cranx's critique.<sup>70</sup> But what enables him to respond successfully is his use of the

68. *Ibid.*, 129–130.

69. Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 225.

70. Rosenstock argues that for Mendelssohn “in the Mosaic constitution, the punishment meted out for those who reject the sanction of the law is itself an act of divine benevolence. Mendelssohn declares that it is ‘a quality of divine love that for man nothing is allowed to go entirely unpunished’” (*Philosophy and the Jewish Question*, 71, quoting Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 123). He further cites Mendelssohn's statement that under the original Mosaic constitution, for corporal punishments or the death penalty to be imposed “the criminal had to have acknowledged the punishment in express words . . . and committed the crime immediately afterwards in the presence of . . . witnesses” (*ibid.*, 71, quoting *Jerusalem*, 129), and argues

concept of the kingship of God—the concept that he first enunciates in developing his theory of Judaism in his reply to Mörschel—to establish the law’s political character. Thus the theme of the kingship of God links Mendelssohn’s reply to Mörschel’s critique concerning the issue of reason and revelation with his reply to that of Cranz concerning the issue of coercion, and *Jerusalem*, despite strains and stresses, emerges as a unified work.

But precisely at this point, it seems to me, Mendelssohn’s complex argument runs into trouble. For Mendelssohn’s political conception of God’s kingship leads him to the conclusion, though he never states it in black and white, that though God was once king over Israel he is so no longer. Mendelssohn writes: “The Mosaic constitution did not persist long in its erstwhile purity. Already in the days of the prophet Samuel, the edifice developed a fissure, which widened more and more until the parts broke asunder completely. The nation asked for a visible king as its ruler, a king of flesh and blood. . . . The people persisted in their resolution [and] obtained their wish. Now the constitution was undermined, the unity of interests abolished. State and religion were no longer the same and a collision of duties was no longer impossible.”<sup>71</sup> To be

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that this means that “the criminal must first demonstrate that his action springs from a complete rejection of the benevolence of God, and the infliction of the punishment becomes his own freely accepted subjection to the law. ‘In the state of this paternal ruler, the transgressor suffers no other punishment than the one he himself must wish to suffer were he to see their effects and consequences in their true light’” (ibid, 72, quoting *Jerusalem*, 124). I cannot agree. Mendelssohn in *Jerusalem*, 123–124, is discussing God’s heavenly punishment of the transgressor for the “sins” he commits, for his violation of the “laws of God,” a punishment designed for his “moral improvement.” This has nothing to do with Mendelssohn’s discussion in *Jerusalem*, 129–130, of the state’s very physical, civil punishments under the original Mosaic constitution of the transgressor who blatantly, deliberately, and publicly violates the divine ceremonial law. His transgressions are not punished by the state as religious offenses, as sins—whose punishment must be left to God alone—but rather purely as civil offenses, as “misdeeds . . . aimed at abolishing or weakening the authority of the lawgiver.” That this is the case is shown by Mendelssohn’s argument at the bottom of page 130 that once “the civil bonds of the nation were dissolved, religious offenses were no longer crimes against the state, and the religion, as religion, knows of no punishment, no other penalty than the one the remorseful sinner *voluntarily* imposes upon himself. It knows of no coercion, uses only the staff [called] *gentleness*, and affects only mind and heart.”

71. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 132.

sure, Mendelssohn immediately goes on to say: “Still, such a collision must have been a rare occurrence as long as the king himself not only was of the nation, but also obeyed the laws of the land.” If I understand Mendelssohn’s point here, what he is arguing is that even after the appointment of a human king, God was still king over Israel, except that he no longer ruled over Israel directly, but through the intermediacy of a human king, who served, as it were, as his regent.

But even such an intermediate stage did not last very long. As a result of “all sorts of vicissitudes and changes,” to which Mendelssohn only alludes, by the time “of the sad period in which the founder of Christianity lived . . . the state was under foreign domination and received its orders from foreign gods, as it were.”<sup>72</sup>

Although Mendelssohn refers to the period when “the state was under foreign domination and received its orders from foreign gods, as it were,” as a “sad” one, as Altmann astutely notes in his introduction to *Jerusalem*, no doubt sensing Mendelssohn’s discomfort referred to earlier, “while Mendelssohn deplores these transformations and seemingly yearns for the ancient way, we see that he is by no means unhappy with some of them as a passionate advocate of ‘persuasion’ and ‘gentleness.’”<sup>73</sup> But what does the fact that “the state was under foreign domination and received its orders from foreign gods, as it were” mean, if not that God is no longer the “King and Head of the [Jewish] people?” God is still creator and preserver of the universe and must so be acknowledged by all, but it is the secular ruler, the temporal earthly sovereign, not God, who is king over all the people, including all the Jews, living in his dominion.

And Mendelssohn needs God to be dethroned, as it were, for two reasons. First, and most fundamental, Mendelssohn in *Jerusalem* defends the use of coercion to enforce the divine law under the original Mosaic constitution but condemns such coercion in his own day. As we have seen, he defends the use of coercion to enforce the divine law under the original Mosaic constitution with the argument that although the revealed law, under that constitution, clearly possessed a religious dimension, it also possessed a political dimension inasmuch as it was the law revealed to Israel by their political sovereign—namely, God. And the revealed law, qua political law, may properly be imposed on its subjects. But for Mendelssohn to condemn the use of coercion to enforce the

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72. *Ibid.*, 132.

73. Altmann, “Introduction,” 17.

divine law in his own day, he must argue that the law now possesses only a purely religious and not a political dimension, and that consequently coercion is inadmissible. But if the divine law originally possessed a political dimension by virtue of its being the law of Israel's political sovereign, God, it follows that the only way the law can lose that political dimension is if God is no longer Israel's sovereign.<sup>74</sup>

Second, and more broadly, *Jerusalem* for Mendelssohn is part of a larger project, the aim of which is to achieve political emancipation or civic betterment for the Jews. But such a project would be possible only if the Jews were viewed by others and viewed themselves as being the loyal political subjects of the temporal earthly sovereign in whose dominion they resided, whether that sovereign be George III, Louis XVI, Frederick II, or the Continental Congress.<sup>75</sup> Again, it follows that if they are to be loyal political subjects of a temporal earthly sovereign, they cannot at the same time be loyal political subjects of a divine sov-

74. My analysis, I believe, can shed light on the reason for Mendelssohn's differing positions in the *Bi'ur* and *Jerusalem* as to when God's kingship over Israel came to an end. Harvey ("Mendelssohn's Heavenly Politics," 404–409) notes that in the *Bi'ur* on Deuteronomy 17:15, Mendelssohn maintains that the people's coronation of Saul as king was an act of rebellion against God and directly led to the dissolution of God's kingship over Israel. In contrast, as we have seen and as Harvey notes, "the people's request for a king is presented in *Jerusalem* as the beginning of a long, gradual process of deterioration of the Mosaic constitution, a process that came to an end with the Destruction of the Second Temple" (ibid., 408). Although Harvey offers his own very interesting explanation for this difference, I suggest the following reason for why Mendelssohn in *Jerusalem* could not take the position he took in the *Bi'ur*. Had God's kingship over Israel ended with the coronation of Saul, the position taken in the *Bi'ur*, the consequence would be, given *Jerusalem's* premises, that all the ceremonial laws would have lost their political aspect and have been purely religious in nature. It would further follow that as purely religious laws, they could not have been imposed on anyone thorough coercion. But, in fact, Mendelssohn cites as proof for his view that authentic rabbinic Judaism rejected coercion once "religious offenses are no longer crimes against the state" (Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 130) the rabbinic statement that "with the destruction of the Temple, all corporal and capital punishments, and, indeed, even monetary fines, insofar as they are only national, have ceased to be legal" (ibid., 130). The clear implication of this rabbinic statement, in Mendelssohn's reading, is that the kingship of God came to an end with the destruction of the Temple and not before.

75. See Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 139, note\*, where he refers to the "Congress in America."

ereign, given that Mendelssohn conceives of divine sovereignty in political terms.

If, however, it was God's kingship over Israel that served as the source of the authority of the revealed law, and if God is no longer Israel's king, does it not follow that the very ground of the authority of the revealed law has collapsed and that it is consequently no longer binding? And would it not immediately further follow that the observance of the law on the part of the Jews is now voluntary—not just in the practical sense directly addressed by Mendelssohn that they cannot be coerced either by governmental or ecclesiastical authorities to observe it, but also in the deeper theoretical sense that they are no obliged to observe it?

To be sure, Mendelssohn—contrary to the radical conclusions I have drawn from the logic of his argument—explicitly and eloquently argues in a famous passage that the law is still as binding on the Jewish people as it was on the day it was revealed:

In fact, I cannot see how those born into the House of Jacob can in any conscientious manner disencumber themselves of the law. We are permitted to reflect on the law, to inquire into its spirit, and, here and there, where the lawgiver gave no reason, to surmise a reason that *perhaps* depended upon time, place, and circumstances, and that, *perhaps*, may be liable to change in accordance with time, place, and circumstances—if it pleases the Supreme Lawgiver to make known to us His will on this matter, to make it known in as clear a voice, in as public a manner, and as far beyond all doubt and ambiguity as He did when He give the law itself. As long as this has not happened, as long as we can point to no such authentic exemption from the law, no sophistry of ours can free us from the strict obedience we owe to the law; and reverence for God draws a line between speculation and practice that no conscientious man can cross. . . . Personal commandments, duties imposed upon a son of Israel, without regard to Temple service and landed property in Palestine, must, as far as we can see, be observed strictly according to the words of the law, until it shall please the Most High to set our conscience at rest and to make their abrogation known in a clear voice and in a public manner.<sup>76</sup>

This argument, which Mendelssohn had already made in slightly different manner in his *Counter-Reflections to Bonnet's Palingenesis*<sup>77</sup> is based,

76. Ibid., 133–134.

77. *Counter-Reflections to Bonnet's Palingenesis*, in Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 22–23.

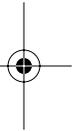


as I have noted elsewhere,<sup>78</sup> on Joseph Albo's *Iqqarim*, 3:13–20, particularly chapter 19. This argument actually makes two points, which are two sides of the same coin. First, it is possible that a future public divine revelation may modify or even abrogate the Mosaic law. Second—and this is the key point here—until such a revelation takes place, the Mosaic law remains binding.<sup>79</sup>

But in light of my analysis, this argument will not do. The assumption underlying this argument is that the authority of the divine law stems from the fact that God publicly revealed it to the Israelites on Mount Sinai. It follows that the divine law would retain its authority unless or until it would be modified or abrogated by a new public divine revelation. But, as we saw, the reason the divine law is authoritative for Mendelssohn is not simply because it was publicly revealed by God to the Israelites on Mount Sinai, but because it was publicly

78. Lawrence Kaplan, "Supplementary Notes on the Medieval Jewish Sources of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 87, nos. 3–4 (1997): 342.

79. Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry*, 235–236, points out that there is a fundamental difference between the *Counter-Reflections* and *Jerusalem*. In the *Counter-Reflections*, Mendelssohn, in speaking of the messianic era, states: "All the Old Testament prophets agree, and reason takes uncommon pleasure in this hope, that the differences among religions will not last forever; that at some future time there will be one shepherd and one flock; and that knowledge of the true God will cover the earth as waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9)" (*Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 23). In contrast, Freudenthal notes, in *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn espouses a more pluralistic monotheistic vision, and although he does not deny the prophecy that there will be one shepherd and one flock, he points out that "under the care of this Omnipresent Shepherd, the entire flock need neither graze in one pasture nor enter and leave the master's house through a single door" (*Jerusalem*, 135). I would just add that in the passage in *Counter-Reflections* cited by Freudenthal, Mendelssohn goes on to say: "At that time, divine wisdom may no longer find it necessary to separate us from other peoples by means of special ceremonial laws, and will instead introduce, in a second public appearance, *external rites* [emphasis mine] that will unite the hearts of all men in worship of their Creator, mutual love, and beneficence." Thus, whether, as in *Jerusalem*, the Jewish people will retain their separate identity in the messianic era, or whether, as in *Counter-Reflections*, "the differences among religions will not last forever," one thing remains constant: any future monotheistic community, whether particularistic or universal, will require divinely revealed external ceremonial rites. Robert Erlewine describes Mendelssohn's messianic vision solely in terms taken from the *Counter-Reflections*, not appreciating the very different vision suggested by Mendelssohn in *Jerusalem* (*Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010], 67).



revealed to the Israelites on Mount Sinai by God, who was their sovereign, “King and Head of the people.” Therefore, to reiterate, even absent any future public divine revelation modifying or abrogating the law, its authority would appear to lapse automatically with the lapse of God’s sovereignty over the people, and any observance of the law on the part of the Jews would then appear to be voluntary. Indeed, to follow the strict logic of the argument, it was already voluntary by the time “of the sad period in which the founder of Christianity lived.”

I cited earlier Mendelssohn’s description of God as “malkenu mehobebenu” (“our king, our obligator”) in the *Bi’ur* on Deuteronomy 32:43. Warren Harvey notes<sup>80</sup> that this description is based on Mendelssohn’s understanding of the difficult phrase in Deuteronomy 33:3 “af hobeb ‘anim.” While Mendelssohn agrees with Rashi, ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides that *‘anim*, even though it is in the plural, refers to the nation of Israel, he disagrees with them, and indeed with all the medieval commentators, regarding the meaning of “hobeb.” While the medievals link “hobeb” to *hibbah* (love), Mendelssohn links it to *hovah* (obligation). The phrase, therefore, does not mean that God loves Israel, but that the law, the “eshdat,” the religion of fire, referred to in the previous verse, obligates Israel. And this is because, as it states in Deuteronomy 33:5, “there was a king in Jeshurun,” the king being, Mendelssohn maintains following the Talmud (BT *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 32b), God himself.

Towards the end of his famous essay, “Halakhah ve-Aggadah”<sup>81</sup> the great Hebrew poet, Hayyim Nahman Bialik bemoans the fact that the Judaism of his day had become a “Judaism of *reshut*, an optional Judaism, hanging by the thread of *hibbah*, love: love of land, of language, of literature.” “Love?” he thunders. “But where is the obligation (*hovah*)? From where will it come? And from what will it draw its sustenance?” He answers that that sustenance will not come from *Aggadah*, Jewish lore, which “by its nature is only *reshut*, optional,” but only from *Halakhah*, Jewish law, with its iron yoke of commandments. What I am suggesting, then, is that Mendelssohn’s position leads to the ineluctable conclusion that once God has ceased to be king in Jeshurun, the very law itself is no longer *hovah*, but only *hibbah*.<sup>82</sup>

80. Harvey, “Heavenly Politics,” 406–407.

81. Hayyim Nahman Bialik, “Halakhah ve-Aggadah (Halakhah and Aggadah),” *Kol Kitvei Bialik* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1955), 213.

82. It is unclear, however, from his comment on Deuteronomy 32:43 whether God, in Mendelssohn’s view there, was “malkenu, mehobebenu” only in the past or

Here we must return to Mendelssohn and Spinoza. I noted earlier that in emphasizing the political character of the law, Mendelssohn is borrowing a leaf from Spinoza. Nevertheless, at the time, I strongly contrasted the views of the two. For Spinoza, the Mosaic law possessed only a political character and had no religious or moral significance. The law was authoritative only insofar as it was the political constitution of the ancient Jewish state. *Consequently*, the end of that state brought in its wake the end of that law's authority. For Mendelssohn, in contrast, the law possessed and still possesses profound religious, moral, and cognitive significance. He emphasized the political character of the law not to argue for its obsolescence, but simply to answer Cranz's query about how, given Mendelssohn's view that coercion was forbidden in matters of religion, the law could be imposed by coercion. Nevertheless, it now turns out that the distance separating Mendelssohn from Spinoza is not as great as it had appeared. Even for Mendelssohn, the end of the ancient Jewish state brought in its wake the end of the binding authority of the Jewish law.

Of course, for Mendelssohn, unlike Spinoza, even if observance of the law on the part of the Jews is now voluntary, this is not to say that the law ought not to be observed. It is still *hibbah*, even if no longer *hov-ah*. As we saw earlier, for Mendelssohn observing the ceremonial laws will still serve important cognitive functions—either, as he states in *Jerusalem*, insofar as they are “closely related to the speculative knowledge of religion and the teachings of morality” and can serve as “a kind of script . . . guid[ing] the inquiring intelligence to divine truths, partly to eternal and partly to historical truths upon which the religion of this people was founded” or, as he states his letter to Homberg, as a means of preserving the Jewish people as a community of “genuine theists,” a community of people who preserve the rational religious truths of natural religion. In turn, these truths constitute an essential part of Judaism.

But note what has happened. In *Jerusalem* the cognitive function of the ceremonial law belonged to the realm of *ta'ame ha-mitzvot* (reasons for the commandments). Thus he presented his theory of the ceremonial laws serving as a symbolic script as a “surmise about the purpose of the ceremonial law in Judaism.”<sup>83</sup> That is, it serves to explain the moti-

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whether he continues to be so even in the present exile. Note the shift in the comment—perhaps significant, perhaps not—from “malkenu, mehobebenu” to “Ha-Shem.”

83. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 117.

vation of the divine legislator in giving these laws. The ground of the authority of these laws, however, was that they were publicly revealed to the Israelites on Mount Sinai by God who was “King and Head of the people.” By the time of Mendelssohn’s letter to Homberg, however, these two features of the ceremonial law—their serving as a symbolic script and their serving to unify the Jewish people as a community of “genuine theists”—are invoked not to explain the motivation of the divine legislator, but as a means of motivating the performers.<sup>84</sup> Was Mendelssohn in the letter simply accommodating his argument to Homberg’s perspective—a *le-shitakha* type of argument, as it were—realizing that the latter would not be swayed by an appeal to divine revelation? Or was he already aware, at least subliminally, of the fact that the logic of his argument in *Jerusalem*, however unintentionally, had led, in an almost Spinozistic fashion, to the undermining the authority of the divine law, and thus he could not in good faith appeal to that authority in his attempt to resolve Homberg’s doubts regarding the continued necessity to observe the ceremonial laws?

I have no answer. As I stated at the conclusion of the first part of this essay, it is impossible to look into Mendelssohn’s heart. It is worth noting, however, that Gideon Freudenthal devotes two appendices in *No Religion without Idolatry* to discussing the significance of “Mendelssohn’s Messianic Allusions” and “The Title: *Jerusalem*,” respectively. He ends the first appendix by suggesting that Mendelssohn, in referring in *Jerusalem* to the year 2240 and to the messianic prophecy from Zech. 8:19, was thereby “allud[ing] to the messianic Age when the Mosaic constitution and pluralistic monotheism will reign in Jerusalem.”<sup>85</sup> He ends the second appendix on a similar note. “It should be clear that the messianic vision of *Jerusalem* at the end of days perfectly fits Mendelssohn’s own views: the direct reign of God as in the time of the Mosaic constitution (for the Jews) and pluralistic monotheism for which he pleads at the end of *Jerusalem*.”<sup>86</sup> To elaborate: just as God originally became

84. See David Shatz, *Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies, and Moral Theories* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 55: “Maimonides’ concern is not with identifying the motives of the performer, but with identifying the motives of the legislator.” In note 12, Shatz refers to Lawrence Kaplan and Josef Stern.

85. Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry*, 240.

86. *Ibid.*, 245. *Jerusalem*’s messianic vision of pluralistic monotheism is thus to be contrasted with the *Counter-Reflections*’ vision of universalistic, nondifferentiated monotheism. See note 79.

the people of Israel's political sovereign by redeeming them from Egyptian slavery by extraordinary miracles, so he would once again become their sovereign by redeeming them from their current exile in an equally miraculous fashion and bringing them back to the land of Israel.<sup>87</sup> It would follow that with the reestablishment of God's reign over Israel in Jerusalem, the divine law in its current form would once again regain its ancient authority or—more likely in Mendelssohn's view—that God as Israel's king once again would either modify the original divine law or reveal an entirely new divine law to the Jewish people. In any event, the Jewish people would once again be bound by a divine law revealed to them by their “King and Head of the people.”

Scholars have hotly debated the claim, put forward by Freudenthal and others, that Mendelssohn looked forward to the future “direct reign of God as in the time of the Mosaic constitution for the Jews,” and to “state and religion” once more being “identical.”<sup>88</sup> In “Mendelssohn's Heavenly Politics,” Warren Harvey convincingly shows that

87. See Warren Zev Harvey, “Moshe Mendelssohn ‘al Eretz Yisrael” (Moses Mendelssohn on the Land of Israel)” in *Eretz Yisrael ba-Hagut ha-Yehudit be-‘Et ha-Ḥadashah*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1998), 301–312, particularly the quote from the *Bi'ur* on Deut. 32:43 on page 312.

88. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 128; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, 266–270, cites Mordecai Eliasberg, *Shevil ha-zahav* (Warsaw: Shuldberg, 1897) and Ron Sigad, “Moses Mendelssohn: Judaism, Divine Politics, and the State of Israel,” *Daat* 7 (1981): 93–103 (Hebrew), both of whom maintain that Mendelssohn's liberalism and his advocacy of separation of church and state were only tactical, and that in his view the ideal state is one in which state and religion are identical, as in the ancient Mosaic or future messianic state. Arkush is sharply critical of both, arguing that “there is no reason to think that for Mendelssohn separation of church and state and the resulting establishment of liberty of conscience represents anything less than ideal” (270). Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 154, n. 196, seeks a middle ground: “I do agree with Arkush that if pressed Mendelssohn probably would have conceded that the separation of the civil and religious law in the modern state was preferable to their unification in the ancient Israelite state. Nevertheless, I do not think that Mendelssohn is being disingenuous 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 it.” Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry*, 263, note 63, responding to both Arkush and Gottlieb, comments: “None of these authors noticed Mendelssohn's reservations concerning the separation of church and state at the beginning of *Jerusalem*, or Mendelssohn's interpretation of Saul's appointment, or finally his clear partisanship for the direct rule of God in Jerusalem in the messianic time.” See note 90.

Mendelssohn consistently throughout his writings, from his early German translation of Judah Halevi's famous "Ode to Zion," "Tziyyon halo tishali," to his commentary on Deut. 17:15 and 33:2–5 in the *Bi'ur* and *Jerusalem*, both published in the same year, maintained that the ideal form of government is the kingship of God.<sup>89</sup> This would lend strong support to the claim that Mendelssohn did in fact look forward to the God's future direct reign over the Jewish people.

It should be noted, however, that in both his early translation of Halevi's "Ode to Zion" and his commentary on Deut. 17:15 and 33:2–5 in the *Bi'ur* Mendelssohn does not link the theme of the kingship of God to the issue of coercion. It is only in *Jerusalem*, in responding to Cranz's challenge, that he makes the critical quasi-Spinozistic claim that God's kingship over Israel imbued the law He revealed to the Jews with a political character alongside its essentially religious nature, and that the law's political character serves to justify a modicum of coercion under

89. Harvey, "Mendelssohn's Heavenly Politics," 403–412. Maren Ruth Niehoff, however, in her essay "Targumo Shel Moshe Mendelssohn Letzion Halo Tishali Shel Yehuda Halevi (Moses Mendelssohn's Translation of Judah Halevi's Elegy on Zion)," in *Eretz Yisrael ba-Hagut ha-Yehudit be-'Et ha-Hadashah (The Land of Israel in Modern Jewish Thought)*, ed. Aviezer Ravitsky, (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1998), 312–325, understands Mendelssohn's quite free translation of Halevi's poem very differently than Harvey does: "Zion, for Mendelssohn, has lost its theological-ethical meaning; no longer is she a place of revelation, and the detachment between her and the Jewish people is clear. In his view, the most positive aspect attaching to Zion expresses itself in the historical achievements of the Jewish people there, but these belong to the past. . . . Since there is no future in the longing for Zion, one ought to cling firmly to the historical achievements and principles of Judaism, while, at the same time, integrating—as a Jew—into the surrounding social-political context" (320, my translation). Although Niehoff correctly contends that, in Mendelssohn's view, Zion in the present lacks any "theological-ethical meaning," she goes too far in suggesting that he further believed that Zion cannot regain that meaning in the future. In this respect, Mendelssohn's position in the poem—although, of course, very different from that of Halevi himself—can be seen as similar to that of the Khazar king at the end of Halevi's *Kuzari* or the addressee of his poem "*devarekha ke-mor over*," which is that in the past the land of Israel was sacred, inasmuch as the visible divine presence manifested itself there, and in the messianic future it will once again become sacred with the reappearance of that visible divine presence, but in the present it lacks any sacred significance and is just a heap of stones. The fact, then, that Mendelssohn genuinely encouraged his coreligionists to integrate into the surrounding society does not mean that he did not, equally sincerely, look forward to the eventual miraculous messianic return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel.

the original Mosaic constitution. But this means that the reestablishment of the original Mosaic constitution or the establishment of a modified Mosaic constitution would once again justify the imposition of the ceremonial law on individuals through coercion, however mild and lenient such coercion might be. To be sure, once again it would be the ceremonial law in its political aspect—concerning crimes against the state—and not in its religious aspect that would be imposed on the people. Still, one wonders how comfortable Mendelssohn could have been with such a result. So let us grant the claim of Freudenthal, Harvey, and others that Mendelssohn looked forward to the future “direct reign of God”—and I, for one, am willing to grant it. Let us even add to it my point that one of the reasons he looked forward to the future “direct reign of God” is because as a result of it the law would regain, whether in its original or modified form, its ancient, but currently lost, binding authority. The question remains: Did Mendelssohn also look forward to the reimposition of the ceremonial law on individuals through coercion, a reimposition that follows from the logic of his argument as set forth in *Jerusalem*? To reverse my point: Mendelssohn may have been unhappy with the dissolution of “the civil bonds of the nation” when the kingship of God came to an end with the destruction of the Temple. Was he equally unhappy—indeed, was he unhappy at all—with the consequence that “religious offenses were no longer crimes against the state, and the religion, as religion, knows of no punishment, no other penalty than the one the remorseful sinner *voluntarily* imposes upon himself. It knows of no coercion, uses only the staff [called] *gentleness*, and affects only mind and heart”?<sup>90</sup>

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90. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 130. In this respect, Arkush and Freudenthal may be talking past one another. Freudenthal may be entirely correct regarding Mendelssohn’s “reservations concerning the separation of church and state at the beginning of *Jerusalem* . . . [and] his clear partisanship for the direct rule of God in Jerusalem in the messianic time,” while Arkush may be equally correct about Mendelssohn’s concerns that God’s direct rule in Jerusalem and the consequent reidentification of state and religion—however much he looked forward to them and however desirable in principle they might be—would lead to the reauthorization of religious coercion and the subsequent restriction of liberty of conscience in the form of the imposition of the ceremonial law on individuals through coercion, however mild and lenient such coercion may be. To be sure, as I noted, it would be the ceremonial law in its political aspect, as crimes against the state, and not in its religious aspect, that would be imposed upon the people, but Arkush, I believe, is correct in sensing that this technically valid distinction would not serve to allay

Poor Mendelssohn. In his “Preface to *Vindiciae Judaearum*,” referring to the Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 16a, he argues: “Introducing Church discipline while preserving civil felicity unharmed seems to be a problem that politics has yet to solve. It is the answer of the supreme Judge to the accuser: ‘He is in your hand; only spare his life’ (Job 1:12). ‘Shatter the jug,’ the commentators said, ‘but do not let the wine run out.’”<sup>91</sup> Indeed, he liked this image so much that he repeated it verbatim at the conclusion of part I of *Jerusalem*.<sup>92</sup>

Yet one wonders whether Mendelssohn—in looking forward to that messianic day when God would once again reign as king over Israel, while perhaps wishing at the same time to somehow avoid the consequence that that day would bring with it the justification of the ceremonial law once again being imposed on individuals through coercion—had not set for himself a problem as difficult as that which the supreme Judge had set for the accuser!<sup>93</sup>

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Mendelssohn’s concerns. In this regard, I believe, Arkush is correct when, in “The Questionable Judaism of Moses Mendelssohn” (41, note 21), he takes issue with Harvey’s assertion in “Mendelssohn’s Heavenly Politics,” 407, that the “Mosaic constitution is . . . a constitution of freedom: it liberates human beings from the oppressive rule of other human beings.” As Arkush notes, “freedom and the exemption from oppressive rule are not the same thing. Even a well-meaning tutelary government, such as is enjoined by the Mosaic constitution, can deprive individuals of much of the freedom to which Mendelssohn considers them entitled.”

91. Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings*, 51.

92. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 74.

93. If I might leave the realm of sober scholarship for that of pure speculation—assuming I have not done so already!—I would suggest that Mendelssohn might have hoped that God in his future public revelation of the divine law—whether to the Jewish people alone, as in *Jerusalem*, or to humanity as a whole, as in *Counter-Reflections*,—would stipulate that this time around the external rites of the ceremonial law would not be imposed on individuals through coercion under any circumstances, not even the most limited.

