

“The Pattern for Jewish Reformation”: The Impact of Lessing on Nineteenth-Century German Jewish Religious Thought

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■ Abstract

The widespread Jewish sympathies for Lessing’s pre-Hegelian, pro-Jewish, progressive Deism from the *Education of the Human Race* spurred some Jewish authors to return to and discuss Lessing’s religious thought within the theological endeavors of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in nineteenth-century Germany. To be able to rely on Lessing, even retroactively, was welcome proof for Jewish Reformers that the humanistic approach to religious problems that stood at the very center of their project was at once Jewish and universal. It was the spirit of Lessing’s *Education* that was appropriated here for Judaism rather than Lessing’s letter. With Lessing in the camp of Reform Judaism the intended modernization of Judaism was safeguarded against the accusation of political and social egoism on the part of the Jews. It was the universal idea of religious progress that they shared with Lessing, not just the sloughing off of the yoke of outdated talmudic law.

■ Keywords

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Jewish theology, Enlightenment, religious truth, Talmudic exegesis

■ Introduction

The esteem in which educated German Jews of the nineteenth century held the “great classical writers” of German literature, Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, is legendary.¹ Such high regard has often been viewed as reflective of a certain Jewish eagerness to imitate those Christian authors’ aesthetics, ethics, and lifestyle for the purpose of demonstrating Jewish readiness for acculturation and acceptance into general German culture and society. This imitation theory, however, can hardly be substantiated. It is certainly true—and a glance at contemporary sources tells us clearly—that many of the Jewish elite of Germany had a deep understanding of Goethe’s and Schiller’s works, an advanced knowledge that in some cases extended to their academic study.² Yet enlightened German Jewry did not venerate Goethe and Schiller out of an aspiration to think like Christians but from a belief that those famed writers thought essentially as good and faithful Jews ought to think.³

With Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), one of the founding fathers of German *Aufklärung*, the case is more complex and thus much more interesting. For Lessing was not only a *Schöngeist* (aesthete), he was also a Christian theologian—and, as such, a lifelong, outspoken supporter of the absolute superiority of Christianity over the Jewish religion. Lessing came from an orthodox Lutheran family, studied theology, philosophy, and medicine in Leipzig and Wittenberg, and led a restless, wandering life until 1770, when he finally settled down as a librarian in Wolfenbüttel.⁴ There, between 1774 and 1778, he published seven anonymous *Fragmente eines Ungenannten* (Fragments from an unnamed author), containing a radical critique of the belief in supernatural revelation. This publication prompted what was arguably the most important theological debate of the eighteenth century, the so-called *Fragmentenstreit*, which raged between Enlightenment thinkers and Lutheran orthodoxy.⁵

¹ Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews, and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Wilfried Barner, *Von Rahel Varnhagen bis Friedrich Gundolf. Juden als deutsche Goethe-Verehrer* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1992); *The Jewish Response to German Culture* (ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg; Hanover: University Press of New England, 1985). See also Gershom Scholem, “Jews and Germans,” *Commentary* 42 (1966) 31–40.

² For a convincing claim of Jewish superiority in questions of *Bildung* during the 19th century, see Götz Aly, *Warum die Deutschen? Warum die Juden? Gleichheit, Neid und Rassenhass—1800 bis 1933* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2011) 37–48.

³ The best example is certainly that of Michael Bernays (1834–1897), the son of the Hakam Isaac Bernays of Hamburg. Bernays was considered one of Germany’s leading experts on Goethe during the second half of the 19th century. Although he converted to Christianity, Rabbi Caesar Seligmann (who studied Goethe with him in Munich) writes in his autobiography that Bernays’s conversion was triggered by “his unrequited love for the daughter of a Protestant pastor” (see Caesar Seligmann, *Erinnerungen* [Frankfurt: Kramer, 1975] 68–69).

⁴ On Lessing in general, see Hugh Barr Nisbet, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: His Life, Works, and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵ The author of the “fragments” was actually Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), who did not dare to publish them himself. For Lessing’s own theology, see the overview in Henry E. Allison,

Deep in his heart, however, Lessing belonged to the theater. The author of world-renowned stage plays, Lessing revolutionized European theater when, almost single-handedly, he introduced the “bourgeois tragedy.” In this genre, for the first time, ordinary people featured as protagonists.⁶ As a dramaturg in Hamburg, Lessing effectively initiated the Shakespeare reception in Germany. And, he is the only German dramatist whose works have been staged in theaters continuously until today.⁷

As the first non-Jewish playwright of modernity, Lessing crafted a positive Jewish figure already in his early work, *Die Juden* (1749). However, it was to be his last composition, *Nathan der Weise* (1779), which would present perhaps the best-known Jewish stage-role of all time, second only to Shakespeare’s Shylock. The eponymous protagonist of the play soon became a symbol of religious tolerance. For many, the casting of a Jew as a sympathetic and philosophical character was another outright revolution, a watershed in the treatment of Judaism in the arts and beyond. Beginning with *Nathan the Wise*, world literature took a more balanced, and multilayered, view of Jewish life and thought. The play’s “parable of the three rings,” although not original with Lessing, was henceforth associated with his impressive clamor for a peaceful competition of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam for the best path to a moral and just life. It has been so taught in countless German classrooms to generation after generation of humanistic German gymnasium students until today.⁸

Unsurprisingly, the Jewish reaction to *Nathan the Wise* was almost always positive, often enthusiastically so.⁹ During the nineteenth century, a handful of voices, many of them Orthodox, doubted the orthodoxy of Lessing’s fictional, artistic figure, because Nathan avowedly preferred to be a human being over being Jewish.¹⁰ The non-Orthodox majority of German Jewry during this period unanimously celebrated the character of Nathan for exactly the same reason—until the rise of the Zionist movement and the post–World War I renewal of Jewish patriotism. Eventually, in the “Lessing Year” of 1929, nationalistic Jewish thinkers like Robert Weltsch and Ernst Simon openly declared they would even consider

Lessing and the Enlightenment: His Philosophy of Religion and Its Relation to Eighteenth-Century Thought (New York: SUNY Press, 2018).

⁶ For an introduction, see *A Companion to the Works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* (ed. Barbara Fischer and Thomas C. Fox; Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), and Francis J. Lamport, *Lessing and the Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁷ When already culturally isolated, the theater of the Jewish *Kulturbund* premiered Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise* in Berlin in 1933.

⁸ The motif of the ring parable is derived from a complex of medieval tales that first appeared in German in the story of Saladin’s table in the *Weltchronik* of Jans der Enikel. Lessing probably adapted the parable from the third narrative of the first day in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

⁹ For good summaries, see, in German, Barbara Fischer, *Nathans Ende? Von Lessing bis Tabori: Zur deutsch-jüdischen Rezeption von “Nathan der Weise”* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2000), and Willi Goetschel, “Lessing and the Jews,” in *A Companion* (ed. Fischer and Fox) 185–208.

¹⁰ See Lessing, *Nathan*, Zweiter Aufzug, fünfter Auftritt: “es gnügt, ein Mensch zu heißen!”

Shylock a better Jew than Nathan, for Shylock at least distressfully cries, “My daughter!” when Jessica converts to Christianity.¹¹ The first university-trained Jewish historian, Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), however, writing nearly sixty years before Simon, had praised Nathan for the very opposite reason: only a Jewish father could raise his stepdaughter in a humanistic way, without converting her to his own religion. Christian fathers, by contrast, were always under the compulsion of the exclusive salvation promise of their church.¹²

Much less discussed than his *Nathan*, but no less revolutionary, was Lessing’s theology. With his final publication, *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1780), Lessing decisively shaped the future of theological thought and anticipated many later achievements in rational religious philosophy.¹³ On the outside, the work compares the historical development of human reason to the intellectual development of the individual, depicting God as the educator of humanity. Divine revelation, for Lessing, is the equivalent of parental education for the entire “human race.” Revelation and human reason, however, are not separate entities in the *The Education of the Human Race*; they are dialectically linked processes. In the decisive sections 36–37, reason comes to illuminate (*erhellen*) revelation; they stand in mutual service, and God is the creator of both—“so that without Him one of the two would be dispensable.” Divine revelation is not a one-time event but perpetual, Lessing argued in the book; it is a metaphor for the actual state of development, that is, of the “not yet” of human reason—and God himself thus turns into a representation of the inner human imperative for this development.

Arguably the first religious thinker to propose the dynamic development of human reason—as opposed to the absolute and static truth-claims of all positive religions, here Lessing formulated unorthodox ideas with far more and wider damaging effects than *Nathan’s* apparent assimilationism had for Judaism. Because, if there is a *developing* truth in religion—which is to say, an approximation of truth, a becoming truth, or a truth in historical progress—even if this progressive development outdated Judaism in favor of Christianity, as Lessing claimed in

¹¹ Ernst Simon, “Lessing und die jüdische Geschichte,” *Jüdische Rundschau* (22 January 1929)—referring (of all people) to the poet Heinrich Heine, who described in a fanciful text from 1838 how he heard the sobbing voice of an invisible Shylock when visiting the Venice ghetto at the end of Yom Kippur. Shylock had by then still not overcome the loss of his daughter to Christendom, according to Heine’s report (Heinrich Heine, *Shakespeares Mädchen und Frauen und kleinere literaturkritische Schriften* [ed. Jan-Christoph Hauschild; vol. 10 of *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*; Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1993]:135).

¹² Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden* (1870; 2nd ed.; 11 vols.; Leipzig: Leiner, 1897–1911) 11:34, note. Page numbers from the 2nd ed. More on Graetz and Lessing below. See Moses Mendelssohn’s discussion in the Lavater epistle (1771) of the decisive advantage of Judaism over Christianity on this very point, where he refers to the (talmudic) “Seven Noahide Commandments” as a Jewish version of natural law, the acceptance of which would bring salvation to non-Jews. For background, see David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹³ First published in 1780, Lessing’s *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* contains 100 short paragraphs, the first 53 of which were already part of the *Fragmentenstreit* of 1777 (see n. 5).

the *Education*, this was less problematic for Jewish thinkers. For they knew that, eventually, even Christian truth would not be the last word but just another stage in the development of religious thought.

In a brilliant essay-contribution to Lessing's bicentennial celebrations, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) showed that this novel theological theory of Lessing's came to solve the old problem of how to cross the “nasty wide ditch” (Lessing: *garstiger breiter Graben*) between the truth of history and the truth of reason.¹⁴ Every positive religion is both a collection of philosophical and moral concepts and a belief in the historical revelation of those concepts, via historical founding figures. But to derive from the incidental truths of history the necessary truth of reason—this was the impassible ditch that Lessing the theologian spent his life trying to traverse.¹⁵ Both he and his Jewish friend, the Enlightenment thinker Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), knew well that it is in fact begging the question to establish the absolute truth of revelation on the Bible's say-so and the holiness of the Bible on the historical truth of its revelation. But while Mendelssohn tried to resolve this problem by exclusively founding all religion on the self-revelation of human reason, as manifested by the innate ideas of God and immortality, Lessing suspected that by separating rationality from faith and tradition the ditch was concealed but not crossed.¹⁶ His own solution was based on a radically new concept of reason itself. By the eighteenth century, human reason was still largely conceived of as immutable and independent of the vicissitudes of history. For Lessing, however, reason was dynamic, developing, a part of the “stream of becoming” (Cassirer). This does not mean, though, that reason merely drifted in the swirls of events. On the contrary, reason was able to find its self-assurance, its steadiness, only in the continuous stream of history. Both shores of the ditch remain forever unpaved, undefined. While Mendelssohn lived philosophically in an endless present, Lessing's new theological approach was future-oriented. In terms of Judaism, it was almost messianic in nature—and, hence, later enthusiastically endorsed by many reformist Jewish thinkers of the nineteenth century.

Concerning Jewish traditionalism, however, Michael A. Meyer has written that “Lessing's short work represented a more devastating and complete destruction”

¹⁴ Ernst Cassirer, “Die Idee der Religion bei Lessing und Mendelssohn,” in *Festgabe zum zehnjährigen Bestehen der Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Berlin: Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, 1929) 22–41, esp. 27–33. In the following paragraph, I draw on Cassirer's essay.

¹⁵ For the original, see Lessing's “Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft” (1777). For discussion, see Toshimasa Yasukata, “Lessing's Ugly Broad Ditch,” in idem, *Lessing's Philosophy of Religion and the German Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 56–71, and Gordon Michalson, *Lessing's “Ugly Ditch”: A Study of Theology and History* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985).

¹⁶ The best work on Mendelssohn's life and thought is still Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973). Mendelssohn and Lessing became friends as early as 1754 and maintained a close intellectual cooperation and personal relation until Lessing's death—probably holding the first true Christian-Jewish dialogue on theology.

than any other book or historical force—not only of Moses Mendelssohn’s religious philosophy but also of the permanent value of the Torah, the backbone of Jewish belief to date. After Lessing, “retaining ceremonial law becomes equivalent to having been left behind in the divine historical process; it means reading the primer when the rest of the class has gone on to a more advanced text.”¹⁷ The rabbis were doing precisely this, according to Lessing: They read into the Torah what the text was incapable of bearing. And it is this point from the *Education* that nineteenth-century Reform Jewish theologians would take up repeatedly, as will be discussed below, for if Lessing was right, the attempt of modern Orthodox Judaism to hide behind the past represented, at best, an intuitive regard for tradition and, at worst, a power grab disconnected from the demands of a developing reason.¹⁸

Thus, similar to what he accomplished with *Nathan*, Lessing’s trailblazing creativity in *The Education of the Human Race*, with its new idea of religious reason in progress, left deep traces in the Jewish thought and writing of the first hundred years after Lessing’s death, the period under discussion in the present study. While much has been written on the reception of *Nathan* in modern Jewish thought, I will focus here mainly on the effect of Lessing’s theological writings, especially the *Education*.¹⁹ I will argue that Lessing’s thought was present and relevant for Jewish nineteenth-century theologians, sometimes even more so than that of his Jewish friend Moses Mendelssohn. While it is hard to determine whether Lessing had a direct, genetic impact on the emergence of Reform Jewish theology, it can be demonstrated that some of the major thinkers involved in this process believed that Lessing’s ideas were at least guided by the very same theological principles that shaped the Jewish Reform project. As in the case of Goethe and Schiller concerning aesthetics, some nineteenth-century Jewish theologians held that good religious reformers ought to think as Lessing thought in terms of the role of dispassionate historical criticism in religious questions. Below, I will present the examples of Gabriel Riesser, Abraham Geiger, Immanuel Ritter, and Manuel Joel as religious thinkers who appreciated Lessing’s theology for a reformed approach to Judaism from various different angles.

¹⁷ Michael A. Meyer, *On the Origins of the Modern Jew* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967) 54–56.

¹⁸ On the discussion of the term orthodoxy in modern Jewish thought, see Jeffrey C. Blutinger, “So-called Orthodoxy: The History of an Unwanted Label,” *Modern Judaism* 27.3 (2007) 310–28.

¹⁹ For the influence of the *Education* on Judaism, see Michael Graetz, “Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts und jüdisches Selbstbewußtsein im 19. Jahrhundert,” *Judentum im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (ed. G. Schulz; Wolfenbüttel: Jacobi, 1977) 273–95. For some reason, the essay discusses only thinkers who did not explicitly refer to Lessing’s theology. Hannah Arendt seems to believe that Lessing’s religious thought was more radical in other theological texts than the *Education*, but I do not see exactly why (see Arendt “Aufklärung und Judenfrage,” *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland* 2/3 (1932) 65–77, at 67).

■ Nathan from a Jewish Point of View

The first and probably best known of those Jewish reactions to Lessing's theological provocations was Moses Mendelssohn's own blunt rejection of the idea of religious progress, as expressed in his major work, *Jerusalem*, published only two years after Lessing's death.²⁰ There is an evident resemblance between Lessing's idea of a progressive moral education of humanity and the concept of at least the non-apocalyptic, rational, Maimonidean form of Jewish Messianism.²¹ Mendelssohn, however, seems to be unaware of this. "I, for my part, have no concept of the education of the human race," he wrote in 1783—and the Jewish philosopher could not conceive of how his "esteemed late friend Lessing" had come up with such peculiar ideas. Mendelssohn thought that human progress was only possible for the individual over the course of a single earthly life and that "the purpose of Providence does not appear to me to have been for humankind as a whole to advance itself perpetually here on earth, perfecting itself over the course of time."²² Mendelssohn consequently refuted the idea of a personal messiah miraculously and unexpectedly redeeming humankind. Human salvation must be conditioned on accepting the laws of reason, using common sense.²³

Some fifty years after both thinkers' deaths, Reform Jewish theology, as developed within the framework of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, rediscovered the messiah as an essential part of the Jewish contribution to the development of the universal religious idea, as those theologians saw it.²⁴ *Wissenschaft des Judentums*

²⁰ For Mendelssohn's critique of Lessing's *Education*, see: Gideon Freudenthal, "Moralische Bewährung oder Erziehung durch Offenbarung? Mendelssohn über Lessings Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts," *Lessing Yearbook* 39 (2012) 199–216.

²¹ Maimonides (1138–1204) transformed the often confusing messianic thought of talmudic literature into an ordered system of a this-worldly Messianism, a period where eternal peace, learning, and prosperity are brought about by humanity itself (see his commentary on Mishnah Sanh. 10:1 and his *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and Wars*, chs. 11 and 12). For discussion, see Kenneth Seeskin, "Maimonides and the Idea of a Deflationary Messiah," in *Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism* (ed. Michael L. Morgan and Steven Weitzman; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015) 93–107.

²² Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum* (ed. David Martyn; Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2001) 92 (my translation). Recently, however, Elias Sacks pointed out that "Mendelssohn's denial of global continuous progress should not obscure his conviction that some newly emerging philosophical systems may plausibly be judged to be superior to their predecessors" (Elias Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016] 65). But in fact, much more must be said about Lessing's and Mendelssohn's differences.

²³ Gideon Freudenthal reads Mendelssohn's idea of the messianic age as the prevalence of religious pluralism rather than as the rule of a universal religion of reason (see Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* [Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2012] 235–45).

²⁴ For the rediscovery of Messianism in 19th-century Reform Jewish theology, see, for example, Samuel Hirsch, *Die Messiaslehre der Juden in Kanzelvorträgen* (Leipzig: Hunger, 1843); Levi Herzfeld, *Zwei Predigten über die Lehre vom Messias* (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1844); or, for discussion, George Y. Kohler, "Prayers for the Messiah in the Thought of Early Reform Judaism," in *Jewish Prayer: New Perspectives* (ed. Uri Ehrlich; Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016) 5–29..

was an intellectual movement founded in the 1820s in Berlin, which, for the first time in Jewish history aimed to approach the entire corpus of the religious literature of Judaism with scientific tools and methodology. It was deeply rooted in the revolutionary paradigm shift that took place during the first half of the nineteenth century—with the introduction of the critical, empirical, and inductive method of research and with specialized, university-trained experts replacing the aristocratic polymath.²⁵

In the wake of Hegel, the concept of intellectual development took on salience in the philosophy of religion. Accordingly, most first-generation Reform theologians rejected Mendelssohn's view of an enlightened Judaism wherein law and reason are two completely separate, static categories.²⁶ Some of these thinkers, as we will see, turned to Lessing's dynamic theology of progress instead.²⁷ This implicit rejection of the (at first sight) likelier identification with Hegel's philosophy of history is probably surprising, but it may find its explanation in the intrinsically Christian nature of Hegel's thought. While indeed some important nineteenth-century Jewish theologians turned to Hegel in their attempt to modernize Judaism, most of these approaches ultimately failed because decisive aspects of Hegel's deterministic philosophy of ethical realism would not find expression in traditional Jewish thought.²⁸ Especially the incarnation of Hegel's *Weltgeist*, closely connected with his belief in the rationality of the ontological being, instead of a transcendently commanded *ought*, made it difficult for Hegel's Jewish students to incorporate his ideas into Judaism. Contrary to all forms of Hegelianism, salvational progress in Judaism is not asserted because of natural or actual inevitability, but in spite of historical irrationality. It is the fully transcendent God of the Hebrew Bible who represents the moral good and the demand for humans to achieve it, and not any historical reality. Jewish salvation is an imperative, the more categorical for its empirical failures. In addition, most Jewish theologians of the nineteenth century explicitly emphasized what they perceived as Judaism's fundamental *differences*

²⁵ On the complex relation between the reform of Judaism and the *Wissenschaft* movement (often featuring the same protagonists), see Michael A. Meyer, "Two Persistent Tensions within Wissenschaft des Judentums," in *Modern Judaism and Historical Consciousness* (ed. C. Wiese and A. Gotzmann; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 73–89.

²⁶ This view of Mendelssohn, as seeing law and reason as completely separate, has been challenged in the recent scholarship. See also, along with the above-mentioned book of Elias Sacks (n. 22), the general line of argument in Michah Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), and Freudenthal, *No Religion*. This is not the place to discuss their arguments, however.

²⁷ The reception of Mendelssohn's religious philosophy within the Jewish *Wissenschaft* theology has yet to receive its scholarly due. For now, see Gershon Greenberg, "Mendelssohn in America: David Einhorn's Radical Reform Judaism," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 27.1 (1982) 281–93, for at least Einhorn's radical critique of Mendelssohn. Other critics include Abraham Geiger, Samuel Holdheim, and many more.

²⁸ See here, for example, Samuel Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden* (Leipzig: Hunger, 1843), and, for discussion, Emil L. Fackenheim, *Samuel Hirsch and Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

from Christianity, a perfect example of which is future messianic hope.²⁹ The perfection and ultimate redemption of humankind was often viewed by Judaism, from talmudic times on, as an event that was infinitely approached rather than practically achieved—and German Reform theology further expanded this idea. Here, Lessing’s emphasis on the infinite, progressive search for religious truth seemed to serve Judaism’s theological interests much better.³⁰

Contrary to Hegel, for many Jewish *Wissenschaft* scholars of nineteenth-century Germany, Lessing also remained the ultimate proponent of the idea that humanist ethics stand high above all positive religions. Most Jewish debates about Lessing during the nineteenth century turned on the question of religious tolerance and the relation between Judaism and Christianity.³¹ I will mention a few among many examples of arguments about *Nathan* that are connected to theological questions before engaging with the impact of Lessing’s actual theology on Reform Jewish thought. In theological terms, the nineteenth century saw a widespread conviction among educated German Jews that Judaism stood far above half-pagan Christianity, a religion that adopted all its positive values from her Jewish mother.³² With this modern sense of Jewish pride, *Nathan* was seen—for example, by Rabbi Dr. Abraham Meyer Goldschmidt of Leipzig (1812–1889)—specifically *not* as a call for the leveling of religious differences, as many understood the play’s message.³³ Goldschmidt argued that this standard reading of Lessing’s play countered the idea of religious progress in history, as found in Lessing’s *Education of the Human Race*, written only shortly after *Nathan*. Lessing at least suspended the question of “the most progressive religion,” Goldschmidt claimed in 1860, and left it for the

²⁹ Only with Jewish existentialism after World War I did Jewish thought return to Hegel; see, for example, Franz Rosenzweig’s dissertation, later published as *Hegel und der Staat* (1920). At that point, many Jewish thinkers became more Hegelian, though often only via Marx or Heidegger.

³⁰ If God were to hold all truth in his right hand, and in his left only the steady and diligent drive for truth, Lessing would take the left hand, he famously wrote (see his “Eine Duplik,” in idem, *Gesammelte Werke in drei Bänden* [ed. Heinz Puknus; 3 vols.; Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1966] 3:240).

³¹ See Ritchie Robertson, “‘Dies Hohe Lied der Duldung’?: The Ambiguities of Toleration in Lessing’s *Die Juden* and *Nathan der Weise*,” *Modern Language Review* 93 (1998) 105–20.

³² On its path to the messianic era, Judaism would only “utilize” Christianity, wrote Solomon Formstecher in 1841, in a passage typical of Reform theology of the 19th century. According to Formstecher, Christianity contains a “pagan element” that was extremely useful for its mission to pagan peoples, while Judaism must always maintain its separate tradition for its own mission, which is the representation of pure intellectual monotheism (see Salomon Formstecher, *Die Religion des Geistes* [Frankfurt am Main: Herrmann, 1841] 414).

³³ Goldschmidt, who had studied philosophy in Berlin, became the rabbi of Leipzig in 1858 where he officiated for over 30 years (see Ludwig Fränkel, “Goldschmidt, Abraham Meyer,” *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* 49 (1904) 435–38. For further discussion of his relation to Lessing, see Barbara Fischer, “From the Emancipation of the Jews to the Emancipation from the Jews,” in *Contemplating Violence: Critical Studies in Modern German Culture* (ed. Stefani Engelstein and Carl Niekerk; New York: Rodopi, 2011) 165–82, at 176. His wife, Henriette Goldschmidt, who helped to found an early feminist organization in Germany, explicitly referred to Lessing’s *Nathan* when she encouraged religious ecumenism in Leipzig (on this, see Ann Taylor Allen, *The Transatlantic Kindergarten: Education and Women’s Movements in Germany* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017] 66).

future to decide, “in the same way as he approached this subject in the *Education of the Human Race*.” The idea of tolerance in Lessing, per Goldschmidt, is one of interhuman love, which still leaves room for a future decision about the “true religion.”³⁴

In July 1867, Rabbi Ludwig Philippson, editor of the popular and influential *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, published in his paper a self-written editorial about *Nathan* that cited at length an open critique of the play. Titled *Nathan from a Jewish Point of View*, the critical letter was authored by Moritz Ehrentheil of Raab, Hungary (1825–1894).³⁵ If Lessing intended with *Nathan* to pen a plea for the sake of Judaism, he utterly failed, Ehrentheil wrote in his letter to the editor. With regard to the historical succession of Judaism and Christianity, Ehrentheil argued that “he who cannot tell the original apart from the copy certainly does not want to know the truth.” It is rather obvious that the entire parable of the rings “aims at a negation of all positive religions.” Such a negation might be to the political advantage of modern Jewry, Ehrentheil concluded, but it is to the incalculable disadvantage of Judaism, because no religious tolerance must be bought for the very price of Judaism itself.³⁶

Philippson’s editorial sets out to refute Ehrentheil point for point, claiming that Ehrentheil’s critique is actually not directed against Lessing or *Nathan* but against modern Jewish indifference toward religion. Of course, one cannot say that all three monotheistic religions possessed equal authenticity and validity, Philippson conceded. Judaism is not an imitated (*nachgeahmt*) ring, as the two other religions are. Indeed, this is also the main line of argument in Philippson’s own theological approach to Judaism, published about this time in a major three-volume work.³⁷ In fact, the rise of the Christian religion is understood by Philippson as, at best, an “indispensable error of world history,” as he once quipped.³⁸ In his editorial response

³⁴ Abraham Goldschmidt, “Die Bedeutung Lessings für die Juden. Rede bei der Lessingfeier in Leipzig am 22. Januar 1860,” *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* (14 February 1860) 95–100, at 99.

³⁵ Ehrentheil was a teacher, grammarian, publicist, and book editor. In the 1870s he edited the weekly *Šebet ’Ahim* (Tribe of brothers) in Judeo-German, the organ of Orthodox Jewry in Hungary, and in 1880 he published a theology in German, *Der Geist des Talmud* (Budapest: Burian, 1887). Ehrentheil’s earlier book, *Jüdische Charakterbilder* (Pest: Robert Lampel, 1867), is an important source for the biographies of several otherwise almost unknown rabbinical figures.

³⁶ “Etwas über Nathan den Weisen vom jüdischen Standpunkte,” *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* (unsigned editorial; 23 July 1867) 589–93, at 590 [italics in original].

³⁷ Ludwig Philippson, *Die Israelitische Religionslehre* (3 vols.; Leipzig: Baumgärtner, 1861–1865). The rabbi, scholar, novelist, Bible commentator, and newspaper editor Ludwig Philippson (1811–1889) was arguably the most seminal intellectual of German Jewry of nearly the entire 19th century. Today often underestimated, Philippson was active in so many fields of modern Jewish thought and culture that hardly anyone interested in Judaism during that time could avoid being confronted with his opinions and public statements. See Andreas Brämer, “Ludwig Philippsons Konstruktion der jüdischen Geschichte als Fundamentalkritik des Christentums,” in Ludwig Philippson, *Ausgewählte Werke* (ed. Andreas Brämer; Cologne: Böhlau, 2015) 7–33.

³⁸ Ludwig Philippson, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Fock, 1911) 1:104. Already as early as the 1840s, Philippson gave a series of lectures titled “The Development of the Religious

to Ehrentheil, he argues (like Goldschmidt before him) that, in the metaphysical discussion of religious doctrines, Lessing was “definitely not willing to give an ultimate (*endgiltig*) answer.” For Philippson, too, Lessing was not pleading for Judaism specifically, nor for any other religion, but against persecution and intolerance in the name of religion, and for brotherly love. However, Lessing does not deny, Philippson added, that a time will come when truth concerning religious doctrine will be obvious to all humankind and “the originality of *one ring* will become manifest.”³⁹

■ Progressive Revelation in the *Education*

While this use of Lessing’s *Nathan* as a paradigm in theological debates was a trend in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* circles in nineteenth-century Germany, only a handful of thinkers turned to the *Education of the Human Race* for the same purposes, despite the latter work’s offering a useful and progressive model for a modern Jewish theology. One of the few Jews to refer to the *Education* was Gabriel Riesser (1806–1863), a lawyer, judge, and politician and a prominent member of the board of the Hamburg Reform Temple. After the turmoil of revolution and war around the beginning of the nineteenth century, until the 1830s nobody even knew the location of Lessing’s grave. Only in 1833 did the art historian Carl Schiller (1807–1874) find the gravesite, and, four years later, Schiller and other Braunschweig dignitaries published a call to raise money for the erecting of a statue of Lessing in the town where the author had long lived. One of the first to reply to the call was Riesser, who in that same year (1837) published a booklet called *A Few Words about the Lessing Monument to the Israelites of Germany*, donating all the proceeds to the statue project.⁴⁰ Riesser, who was a standard-bearer of Jewish emancipation and civil equality, formulated in this essay an outright manifesto of modern Judaism—surprisingly, with none other than Lessing as a pivotal point of reference. Several key elements of Reform theology, such as the mission and the vocation of Judaism as a decisive contributor to world culture and civilization, are found in Riesser’s essay, alongside the important claim that a radical modernization of Judaism comes to the rescue and not to the detriment of the Jewish religion.⁴¹

Idea in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” without, however, mentioning Lessing (Ludwig Philippson, *Die Entwicklung der religiösen Idee* [Leipzig: Leiner, 1847]).

³⁹ “Etwas über Nathan den Weisen,” 592. These intra-Jewish debates about the true religious intention of Lessing’s *Nathan*, did not exhaust themselves in the 19th century but ran well into the 20th. On the Jewish reception of Lessing in the last third of the 19th century, facing a new rise of anti-Semitism, see Christhard Hoffmann, “Constructing Jewish Modernity,” in *Towards Normality? Acculturation and Modern German Jewry* (ed. Rainer Liedtke and David Rechter; Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 68; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 27–52, at 42–44.

⁴⁰ The statue was eventually erected and inaugurated in 1853.

⁴¹ We are still missing a modern, monographic account of Reform Jewish theology as it was developed in 19th-century Germany and spread to America. See, in German, from 1933, Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation* (Berlin: Philo, 1933). Michael A. Meyer has

According to Riesser, Lessing's most valuable contribution to theology was his intransigent advocacy of the freedom of conscience and belief. Lessing's view that "a holy urge for truth" is even more important than the eventually discovered truths themselves was a direct consequence of his lifelong theological thought and struggles.⁴² For Lessing, only "the *striving* for religious truth" is undiluted, because it is still unclouded by religious dogma, untouched by the corrupt coercion of theological allowances. That is why, Riesser pointed out, Lessing sometimes disconcertingly came to the defense even of the most orthodox opponents of rationalism: freedom of opinion and argument was more important than truth itself, for truth is dynamic and needs unrestricted room for its progressive development. For this reason, Lessing respected every honest conscientious belief, rejecting only hypocrisy.⁴³

This observation helped Riesser to appreciate Lessing's personal example, which was crucial for Riesser's own commitment to Judaism, as he indicated. For, as much as Lessing was attacked by his Protestant coreligionists, he never abandoned his own Protestantism. It probably was no coincidence that the same was true of Mendelssohn and his Judaism.⁴⁴ Riesser emphasized that Lessing knew as well as Mendelssohn about "the deficiencies and prejudices prevailing in the Judaism of their time," and still Lessing was outraged (*entrüstet*) by all attempts to lure his Jewish friend over to Christianity. Lessing respected Mendelssohn's critical but positive approach to Judaism as it was very similar to how Lessing himself related to his own religion.⁴⁵ Conversion to Christianity should be no option for the modern Jew, Riesser seems to imply here. Although Riesser's essay is mainly a diatribe against those of his "enlightened" Christian contemporaries who saw the Jews' abandoning of their "superstitious" tradition as a precondition for emancipation, it can also be read as a Jewish declaration that civil rights for the Jews ought not to be bought at the price of religious reforms but, rather, granted as self-evident.

After an extensive discussion of *Nathan*, Riesser drew from the play several conclusions concerning Judaism—conclusions that Lessing himself was still "not allowed to express."⁴⁶ In Riesser's Jewish reading, it was Lessing's hidden message with *Nathan* that the long centuries of historical Jewish suffering, as a consequence of persecution and injustice, were not in vain but "served the higher purpose of humanity" itself. Interestingly, this complex theodicy concept, here attributed

published a comprehensive history of the Reform movement, containing much theological material (see *idem*, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995]).

⁴² See above, n. 30.

⁴³ Gabriel Riesser, *Einige Worte über Lessings Denkmal an die Israeliten Deutschlands gerichtet* (Frankfurt am Main: Stockmar & Wagner, 1838) 11–12.

⁴⁴ The irony in this is that Riesser was the grandson of one of Mendelssohn's fiercest critics, Rabbi Raphael Kohen from Hamburg, who threatened to ban Mendelssohn's German translation of the Pentateuch (on the affair, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 383–88).

⁴⁵ Riesser, *Einige Worte*, 16–17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

to Lessing, is common Jewish lore, found in writers from Rashi (1040–1105) to Hermann Cohen (1842–1918): “All of the nations gain atonement through the afflictions of Israel,” to quote a comment of Rashi’s on a verse in Isaiah.⁴⁷ But this historical theodicy is often based, Riesser explained, on the idea that only one religion could possess the absolute, unchangeable, and dogmatic truth, for which its believers are happily ready to suffer. In Riesser’s view, Lessing’s theory of religion is different, though it still provides a satisfying purpose for Jewish suffering in history. In the *Education of the Human Race*, Lessing gave “the most dignified expression” to the idea that all positive religions are important, but mere preliminary stages, “in the molding of a God-pleasing humanity”—which is to say, for Lessing, all religions represent only a *striving* for truth, not the fulfillment of it. A ruling majority religion, however, is easily inclined to attribute to itself the greatest contribution to this ultimate purpose of humanity and would thus soon neglect all striving and progress “in conceited self-idolization,” Riesser argued, still in the name of the “silent” Lessing. The despised minority, by contrast, suffers precisely because of the resulting spiritual obliquity and stagnation. Riesser concluded his esoteric interpretation of Lessing’s ideas by combining his reading of *Nathan* and the *Education*: The progressive revelation of new religious insights will necessarily come specifically from minority religions. This is because such insights “are suggested to the repressed minority by their very suffering,” while for the oppressor it would take too much self-mastery to arrive at the same opinions.⁴⁸

This “higher vocation” of the minority, supposedly learned from Lessing, should sustain and raise his fellow Jews, Riesser insisted. The Jewish awareness of having this mission for the ultimate purposes of all of humanity “must be dear and holy to us.” More than any other religion, Judaism, with its inherent faith that truth is universal (“the possession of all mankind and confessions”), dialectically combined with its religious belief the conviction that it is the Jew’s duty “to be inseparably bound by this very belief to the community of his brothers in faith and suffering.” Hence, Judaism must cling to the thought “that we courageously persevere for the cause of humanity.” According to Riesser and many of his successors in the formulation of a Reform theology, it is Judaism’s self-sustaining religious mission to “perpetually raise objections against the falsification of truth”—objections formulated in the interest of one absolute truth, which, for Lessing, was nothing but “the pure striving for truth.” It is in this sense that Lessing secretly intended to award the Jews “a world-historical retribution” (*weltgeschichtliche Vergeltung*) for their suffering, Riesser exclaimed at the end of the essay, because Lessing believed

⁴⁷ Rashi’s commentary on Isa 53:4. Cohen even claims that “in suffering for the nations, Israel acquires the right to convert them” (Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* [trans. S. Kaplan; New York: Scholars Press, 1972] 283). See also Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Neunzehn Briefe über Judentum* (Altona: Hammer, 1836), Letter 9, 44–45, although Hirsch views Jewish suffering more as an educational means of the Jews themselves, from which other peoples can probably learn something.

⁴⁸ Riesser, *Einige Worte*, 27.

that the Jews have “a more intimate relation to the idea of humanity.”⁴⁹ How much of this conclusion is borne of Riesser’s own, modern interpretation of Judaism and to what extent he discerned Lessing’s true intentions remains to be discussed. In any case, this attempt to invoke Lessing’s theology for the support of a universal mission of the Jewish religion is interesting in itself.

Not surprisingly, Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), one of the rabbinical leaders of the Reform movement, interpreted the message of Lessing’s theological thought in a similar way to Riesser, identifying strongly with Lessing’s perceived call to the religious minority to overcome oppression through theological intellectual creativity.⁵⁰ Already in 1844, Geiger had enthusiastically referred to Lessing’s *Education* in his polemical reply to Bruno Bauer’s anti-Semitic pamphlet *Die Judenfrage* (1842).⁵¹ Later, in 1862, in a short appeal to raise money for another monument of Lessing, this time in Berlin, Geiger wrote that the “obligation for self-preservation” is the central motive that must draw the Jew to Lessing’s ideas. As the smallest of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism can only survive through “inner freedom, the spiritual energy of its believers.” If Judaism is not “constantly progressing on a path of inner development,” Geiger argued, it will soon disappear—while the other two religions are temporarily safe through their relation to political power of the state. For this progress, this eternal striving for truth, Judaism has a “courageous guide in Lessing.”⁵² Evidently, Geiger, as others, saw in Lessing’s thought not the oft-suggested intention to negate Judaism, or positive religion in general, but rather the contrary: It was Lessing, in Geiger’s view, who taught the Jews how to persevere even in the modern age. Like Riesser, Geiger seemed to argue that if Jewish thought were to adopt Lessing’s model of progressively revealed truth, which was in many respects also Geiger’s own way of thinking about revelation, Judaism would not be superseded by Christianity; rather, it would have a better chance of becoming the true religion of the future, for Christianity had become increasingly corrupt through its alliance with state and political power.⁵³

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

⁵⁰ Geiger, like many of his Jewish contemporaries, gave up his university career because he was unwilling to convert to Christianity. Earning his livelihood as a community rabbi, he was one of the most prolific scholars of the *Wissenschaft* movement, publishing influential works on legal, historical, and philosophical aspects of Judaism. His major work on the emergence of the Hebrew Bible was considered heretical, even by other non-Orthodox Jews. For a good overview on Geiger, see the collection of essays *Jüdische Existenz in der Moderne. Abraham Geiger und die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (ed. Christian Wiese, Walter Homolka, and Thomas Brechenmacher; SJ 57; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013).

⁵¹ Abraham Geiger, “Bruno Bauer und das Judentum,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie* 5 (1844) 199–234 and 325–71.

⁵² Abraham Geiger, “Zum Lessing Denkmal,” *Jüdische Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft und Leben* 2 (1862) 85–88, at 88.

⁵³ Geiger quotes in his discussion of revelation a Maimonidean passage that describes revelation as a flash-like epiphany, and he claims that Judaism is “a religion of revelation that had arisen

■ Lessing as the “Founding Father of the Reformation of Judaism”

Geiger’s defense of Judaism against Bruno Bauer from 1844 introduced into the Jewish reception of Lessing a new element: the clear preference that Lessing enjoyed with some Reform theologians over his friend Moses Mendelssohn. It was in fact Lessing who first strictly separated religious orthodoxy from philosophy, Geiger wrote (with reference to a letter from Lessing in 1774), and not Mendelssohn, as widely assumed. Lessing originally feared that confusing religion and philosophy would lead to the “defilement” (*Verunreinigung*) of both and consequently insisted that every attempt to create a *religion of reason* would result in a very unreasonable philosophy, Geiger argued.⁵⁴ And while Mendelssohn later followed Lessing here, and while both theologians, therefore, explicitly defended even some irrational elements of orthodox belief and practice, Lessing soon understood that such a separation was actually impossible to implement. According to Geiger, this was because Lessing had now realized that “the *entire* intellectual and spiritual life must progress by way of homogeneous development and by way of mutual influence of all of its parts”—a position that Geiger’s own Reform theology obviously shared.⁵⁵ Unwilling to retain irrational Jewish ceremonies, Geiger always favored a historical-critical approach to the progressive development, as he saw it, of the countless legal regulations of biblical and talmudic Judaism.⁵⁶

An even more outspoken account of Lessing’s important contribution to the shaping of a modern Jewish theology can be found in the thought of the historian Immanuel Heinrich Ritter (1825–1890). Ritter was a radical Reformer who, in 1860, replaced Samuel Holdheim as the rabbi of the Berlin *Reformgenossenschaft*, one of the most controversial Reform communities in nineteenth-century Germany.⁵⁷ From 1858 to 1865, Ritter published three volumes of an intellectual history of the Reform movement of Judaism, the first of which bears the surprising title, *Mendelssohn and Lessing as the Founding Fathers of the Reformation of Judaism*.⁵⁸ But indeed, for Ritter, Lessing’s share in the origin of the ideas of a reformed Judaism was at least as important as Mendelssohn’s—and actually even greater. It was Lessing, not Mendelssohn, who “found the right starting point” from which a reformation could

from such divine glimpses, and later connects those visions to a whole, to a religion of truth . . .” (Abraham Geiger, *Das Judentum und seine Geschichte* [3 vols.; Breslau: Schletter, 1865] 1:35–36).

⁵⁴ Geiger, “Bruno Bauer,” 364, referring to the same letter to Lessing’s brother Karl (2 February 1774): “macht uns unter dem Vorwande, uns zu vernünftigen Christen zu machen, zu höchst unvernünftigen Philosophen.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

⁵⁶ See Abraham Geiger, “Einleitung in das Studium der jüdischen Theologie,” in *Nachgelassene Schriften* (ed. Ludwig Geiger; 5 vols; Berlin: Gerschel, 1875) 2:4–31.

⁵⁷ On the *Reformgenossenschaft*, see Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 129–31.

⁵⁸ Immanuel Heinrich Ritter, *Mendelssohn und Lessing als Begründer der Reformation im Judentum* (vol. 1 of *Geschichte der jüdischen Reformation*; Berlin: Peiser, 1858). The second volume (1861) deals with David Friedländer, the third with Holdheim (1865). A fourth volume on the history of the Berlin Reform community was published posthumously in 1892.

hold its ground, Ritter claimed already in the preface to this volume.⁵⁹ Lessing, despite being Christian, could be considered one of the “main participants in the founding of the Jewish reformation” (*Hauptteilnehmer am Begründungswerke der jüdischen Reformation*) because his “description of Judaism’s relation to the question of religion in general was a template that later began to become reality through the work of the Jewish reformers—and towards the completion of which we are still working.”⁶⁰

All progress in Christian *and* in Jewish theology since Lessing has drawn upon Lessing himself, Ritter argued. The most momentous idea in Lessing’s theological approach was the absence of all presuppositions—because only on this basis could religions other than one’s own be viewed objectively. Lessing’s approach became an asset of Reform Jewish theology early on, Ritter explained, with the consequence of opening up the possibility for Judaism to receive from Christianity a “happily accepted enrichment.” Freed from its own dogmatic presuppositions, Jewish theology could close the gap with its Christian counterpart, and, indeed, Jewish thought quickly reached the heights of Christian theological research. If there had ever been a historical reason for Christian gratitude toward the theological achievements of biblical Judaism, Ritter concluded, it was Lessing who had ultimately paid off this debt with his writings on religion.⁶¹

Entering upon a lengthy comparison between Mendelssohn and Lessing, Ritter held that, as much as Mendelssohn’s philosophy of Judaism was disappointing for the modern European Jew, Lessing’s account of religion was motivating and eye-opening. The most frustrating aspect of Mendelssohn’s theory for Ritter was that “one feels nowhere compensated” for the enlightened transformation of Jewish belief that we are expected by Mendelssohn to comprehend. His most influential—albeit generally rejected—theory of Jewish belief was that Judaism knew no articles of faith (*Glaubenslehren*) but only revealed legislation (*geoffenbartes Gesetz*).⁶² Following Mendelssohn, Ritter complained, the modern Jew is thus no longer set apart by the particularity of his religious knowledge (*Erkenntnis*), yet he is still “hindered from entering humanity by a particular [ritual] law.” Lessing, in contrast to Mendelssohn, abandoned all dogma: He was “impressed neither by Mount Sinai nor by the Mount of Olives.” For Lessing, reason is constrained neither by revelation nor by law. Mendelssohn, Ritter wrote, begins with the attempt “to faithfully accept all that his religion dictated” and ends with calling everything into doubt. Lessing, for his part, begins with raising doubts about everything and eventually ends with faith—and this faith is all the stronger for being rooted not in the lowly letter but in human reason and passion.⁶³

⁵⁹ Ritter, *Mendelssohn und Lessing*, 6–7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶² See Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism* (trans. Allan Arkush; Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983) 90.

⁶³ Ritter, *Mendelssohn und Lessing*, 70–71. Samuel Holdheim, Ritter’s predecessor in Berlin,

What Ritter presented here as Lessing's theological program is the very approach to a modernization of the Jewish religion that his own Reform movement attempted half a century after Lessing: "A reconciliation with traditional belief, which just needs to be stripped of (*entkleiden*) its original, dogmatic features in order to find it again reasonable and meaningful." Lessing's criticism of religion is fertile and productive, Ritter wrote. Using it today, the result is not that one piece after the other of the old religion sadly disappears, as with the "insipid Enlighteners," but precisely the opposite: one old religious concept after the other is happily reborn, in a youthful, fresh shape.⁶⁴ Like Ritter, many of the first-generation Reform rabbis believed that true reform was, in fact, a return to ancient and authentic Judaism, that reform must be based on traditional Jewish sources, and that it should only introduce changes that reflect the spiritual essence of Jewish concepts as abstracted from the thick, now-useless historical shells.⁶⁵

Ritter was particularly impressed by Lessing's undogmatic reading of the Bible. Religion is not true because it was taught by the apostles and the evangelists, he summarized Lessing's view, "but they taught it because it was true." This axiom could easily be adopted for Judaism, Ritter suggested; one need only replace *apostles* and *evangelists* with *prophets* and *lawgiver*.⁶⁶ Lessing's radical criticism of traditional Judaism in the *Education of the Human Race* has become, in every single detail, "of the most influential importance" for the inner reformation of Jewish thinking but, at the same time, objectively, for the reformation of Judaism itself, Ritter claimed boldly.⁶⁷ What Lessing had described as the mistaken method of the rabbis in interpreting the Torah, that is, "to insert into it more than is really there in it, and extract from it more than it can contain," was precisely what Reform theology came to rectify.⁶⁸ Here, again, Ritter clearly tried to dissociate Reform from the *Haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment—because it was not a universal *Religion of Reason* that was the purpose of his attempt to reform Judaism but a new, albeit reasonable, viable, and living form of the old Jewish faith.⁶⁹

also emphasized Lessing's theological progressiveness, compared to Mendelssohn's. In a footnote to his 1859 study on Mendelssohn, Holdheim called Lessing the trailblazer for historical criticism in religious questions (Samuel Holdheim, *Moses Mendelssohn und die Denk- und Glaubensfreiheit im Judenthume* [Berlin: Huber, 1859] 20–21).

⁶⁴ Ritter, *Mendelssohn und Lessing*, 70–71.

⁶⁵ The 19th-century debate over whether Reform was a restoration or a fundamentally new approach to Judaism, as Orthodox thinkers claimed ("the invention of a new religion"), is far from over today. Still the best discussion of this tension is found in Wiener, *Jüdische Religion*. Wiener unambiguously argued that Reform was a theological revolution.

⁶⁶ Ritter, *Mendelssohn und Lessing*, 78. This, of course, is a form of what is known as Plato's Euthyphro dilemma: "Is what is morally good commanded by God because it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is commanded by God?" (*Euthyphr.* 10a).

⁶⁷ Ritter, *Mendelssohn und Lessing*, 78.

⁶⁸ Compare, for Lessing's critique of the rabbis, *Education*, §§50–51.

⁶⁹ Ritter, *Mendelssohn und Lessing*, 78.

■ Critique “for the Honor of Lessing”

Unlike the Reformers, the “positive-historical” stream of Judaism (which would later develop into what is today Conservative Judaism) was highly critical of Lessing’s theology in the *Education of the Human Race*—despite the fact that many of the adherents of this stream admired the ideas found in *Nathan the Wise*.⁷⁰ The above-mentioned historian, Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), for example, in his typical anti-Christian fervor, insisted that the play “castigated fossilized and paranoid (*verfolgungssüchtig*) Christianity” while glorifying Judaism, at least concerning Judaism’s main representative in the work.⁷¹ But when it comes to the *Education*, Graetz’s almost unrestricted admiration for Lessing suffered its first crack. In his account of Lessing’s thought, stretching over seven full pages of the last volume (1870) of his landmark *History of the Jews*, Graetz arguably appears as the greatest Jewish Lessing-enthusiast of the nineteenth century, calling him nothing less than “the first free man of Germany.”⁷² Had only Lessing taken his own anti-Lutheranism seriously, Graetz daringly averred, he would have been able “to overthrow the entire edifice” of Christianity—an event that apparently would have been much to Graetz’s liking. But, unfortunately, Lessing was biased toward “the deception that pure Christianity was identical with humanity” (*in der Täuschung befangen*).⁷³ Clearly, Graetz found the source for Lessing’s “deception” in the *Education*, where humanist Christianity superseded Judaism, and not in *Nathan*, with its central idea of religious tolerance. As Graetz was not even ready to accept the human value of “pure,” ahistorical Christianity, he was forced to reject the theology of the *Education* as mistaken *ab initio*. Such harsh judgment, however, only follows from Graetz’s lack of appreciation of any Christian contribution to general culture. For example, even medieval Christian scholasticism “is but a

⁷⁰ The Conservative movement of present-day Judaism has its roots in a group of scholars around Rabbi Zacharias Frankel (1801–1875), the first director of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, founded in 1854. While the more radical Reformers around Geiger tried to find theoretical criteria for religious reforms, the Breslau theologians deferred those criteria to the sphere of “living tradition.” For background, see Ismar Schorsch’s “Zacharias Frankel and the European Origins of Conservative Judaism,” in *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994) 255–66.

⁷¹ Graetz taught Talmud and history at the seminary in Breslau. Crucially, Graetz’s major work was much more than the first academic historiography of Judaism; its eleven volumes became the most important source for the modern European Jew’s new self-identification in the 19th century. His anti-Christian views (which he shared with Geiger) were notorious; in 1879, they caused the Germany-wide “Treitschke-Debate” on anti-Semitism (see George Y. Kohler, “German Spirit and Holy Ghost—Treitschke’s Call for Conversion of German Jewry: The Debate Revisited,” *Modern Judaism* 30:2 [2010] 172–95).

⁷² On Graetz and Lessing, see Gabriele von Glasenapp, “‘Vom edlen Freunde.’ Lessing in der jüdischen Historiographie,” in *Lessing und das Judentum. Lektüren, Dialoge, Kontroversen im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (ed. Dirk Niefänger, Gunnar Och, and Birka Siwczyk; Kamenzer Lessig-Studien 1; Hildesheim: Olms, 2015) 176–78.

⁷³ Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, 11:30–37, last quote at 33.

daughter of Judaism,” as he wrote elsewhere, drawing heavy criticism especially from Catholic historians.⁷⁴

The young Jewish *Wissenschaft* scholar on whose research from the 1860s Graetz had based this last-mentioned claim concerning scholasticism was Manuel Joel (1826–1890). Joel, a graduate of the University of Berlin, taught religious philosophy at the Breslau rabbinical seminary where Graetz also had been working and living since 1854.⁷⁵ In 1879, now officiating as the rabbi of the town of Breslau (as the successor of Abraham Geiger), Joel rejected the same radical argument in Lessing’s *Education of the Human Race* that was wholeheartedly endorsed by his Reform colleague Immanuel Ritter, as we saw above: the supposedly flawed interpretation of the Hebrew Bible by the talmudic rabbis.⁷⁶ For Joel, Lessing’s critique of the rabbis was based on an ahistorical reading. Ironically, Joel’s critical response to Lessing appeared in the voluminous *Lessing-Mendelssohn-Gedenkbuch* (memorial book), published by the *Deutsch-Israelitische Gemeindebund* (an umbrella organization for the Jewish communities in Germany). Among all the contributors to the *Gedenkbuch*, Joel was the only one to memorialize Lessing by critiquing him. But the criticism belied his reverence for Lessing, as Joel explained, for “to dispel a prejudice means to work in the spirit of Lessing.”⁷⁷

Once again, Joel’s leveraging of Lessing clearly indicates the perceived currency and relevance of Lessing’s thought for nineteenth-century Jewish theologians— independent of the question of whether Lessing himself had intended to impact discussions of some highly specific aspects of Judaism’s religious worldviews. In this case, the short essay is a (thus-far untouched) document depicting a modern, liberal rabbinical approach to the talmudic exegesis of the Pentateuch, that is, to the very validity of the biblical foundation of practical Jewish law. At the time of Joel’s writing, this subject already had a certain history in modern Jewish thought: In 1844, Abraham Geiger published a groundbreaking and highly controversial article on the “turbidity” of this far-reaching legal justification, as he called it. Geiger’s basic claim concerning the talmudic rabbis is that, in an effort to create

⁷⁴ Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden*, 6:xii. For a discussion, see George Y. Kohler, “‘Scholasticism Is a Daughter of Judaism’: The Discovery of Jewish Influence on Medieval Christian Thought,” *JHI* 78:3 (2017) 319–40.

⁷⁵ Joel was the first historian of philosophy of the *Wissenschaft* movement. He had studied philosophy in Berlin and later published the first academic monograph on the philosophy of Maimonides. Graetz seems to rely on his study on Maimonides and Albert the Great: Manuel Joel, *Verhältnis Albert des Grossen zu Maimonides* (Breslau: Grass, 1863). On Joel, see Görgo K. Hasselhoff, “Manuel Joel and the Neo-Maimonidean Discovery of Kant,” in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought* (ed. James T. Robinson; Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 9; Leiden: Brill 2009) 289–307.

⁷⁶ See David H. Price, who has argued that it was “ultimately impossible for Enlightenment discourse of toleration . . . to defend traditional Judaism without qualification or ambivalence” (David H. Price, “The Philosophical Jew and the Identity Crisis of Christianity in Lessing’s Nathan the Wise,” *ZRGG* 68.2 [2016] 203–23, at 222).

⁷⁷ Manuel Joel, “Ein Wort gegen Lessing zu Ehren Lessings,” in *Lessing-Mendelssohn-Gedenkbuch* (ed. L. Fürst and A. Bodek; Leipzig: Baumgärtner, 1879) 240–54, at 240.

a scriptural basis for their own extra-scriptural law, they distorted the literal meaning of the Bible through turbid exegesis. Yet, these sages truly believed, said Geiger, that this law indeed emerged logically from their interpretation of certain anomalies in the biblical language. In his view, the talmudic rabbis thus imparted to their own law both infinite validity and divine authority that it did not deserve—thereby suppressing the flexibility and adaptability to time and place that the earlier strata of “oral” law still possessed. This adaptability is still found in the Mishnah, according to Geiger, the first code of rabbinical law, apparently dating from the second century.⁷⁸

Inspired by Lessing’s attack on the rabbis in the *Education* concerning this point, Manuel Joel essentially affirmed Geiger’s view.⁷⁹ Nobody would call the talmudic exegeses “exemplary” today, he wrote, thereby dauntlessly ignoring large numbers of Orthodox rabbis of his time, who still saw the Talmud as relevant. Lessing’s error was rather, according to Joel, that he did not take into consideration what historically motivated the rabbis to interpret Scripture the odd way they did. “The abuse of the Bible begins in Alexandria, not in Palestine,” Joel wrote, introducing his argument. It was the Hellenistic philosopher Philo (first century CE) and his school of Greek-speaking Jewish scholars who, because of their ignorance of both the Hebrew language and the subtleties of Jewish thought (especially concerning prophecy), had left the path of a sober, pedestrian reading of the Pentateuch and had given themselves over to the wildest allegorical interpretations. At the very same time, in Palestine, the style and language of the Mishnah proved how prosaically the rabbis could proceed in scriptural exegesis, Joel—like Geiger before him—explains.⁸⁰

Outright “whimsical” (*wunderlich*) rabbinical exegesis only came with Akiva ben Joseph (50/55–135) and his well-known way of “expounding a multitude of laws upon each stroke of the coronets” that sit on the letters of the Torah.⁸¹ But even here, contended Joel, Lessing was wrong to place upon Rabbi Akiva’s school the full onus of historical blame. Already Jesus had spoken of the *Yod* (ἰῶτα), the famous “stroke of a pen” as not disappearing from the Law,⁸² and the early Christian

⁷⁸ See Abraham Geiger, “Das Verhältnis des natürlichen Schriftsinnes zur thalmudischen Schriftdeutung,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie* 1 (1844) 53–81; 2 (1844) 243–59. See the extensive discussion by Jay M. Harris, *How Do We Know This? Midrash and the Fragmentation of Jewish History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1995) 157–65.

⁷⁹ In itself, this is interesting, since both men had previously engaged in several intense theological arguments, especially regarding the status of dogma in Judaism (see Ken Koltun-Fromm, *Abraham Geiger’s Liberal Judaism* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006] 147–49).

⁸⁰ Joel, “Ein Wort gegen Lessing,” 244–46. For an extensive discussion of the debates about the role of the Mishnah in modern Jewish thought, see Chanan Gafni, *The Mishnah’s Plain Sense* (Tel Aviv: Shazar, 2011) (Hebrew).

⁸¹ For his exegetical method, see *b. Menah. 29b*, whence this quote is taken. A good introduction is Barry W. Holtz, *Rabbi Akiva: Sage of the Talmud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); see also Judah Goldin, “Toward a Profile of a Tanna, Aqiba ben Joseph,” *JAOS* 96 (1976) 38–56.

⁸² Matt 5:18: “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not a ἰῶτα, not the least

scholar Origen (third century) was faithful to that message when he read hidden secrets into all those small strokes, as Joel reminded his readers.⁸³ Akiva and his followers were forced by historical necessity to fall back on an exegetical method that retrieved rabbinical law from the authority of Scripture while in true fact it was rather “tradition and daily life” that had made all these laws valid in Israel.⁸⁴ According to Joel, as a defense of authentic, legal Judaism against the onslaughts of the Septuagint, Akiva had to pretend that the entire “oral Torah” was contained in the written Torah. Joel accused the Septuagint of “falsifying and exegetically abusing” Scripture to the point of causing “devastating effects also in Palestine” by talmudic times.⁸⁵ In order to minimize its influence, Joel argued, Rabbi Akiva had to bring extreme measures into play.

Now, it was exactly these exegetical measures that Lessing (and Geiger, for that matter) had characterized as exaggerated, and probably justly so, Joel wrote. However, applying Lessing’s own method of historical analysis would put these hyperbolic rabbinical techniques in a yet slightly different light. It would have shown, Joel seems to indicate here, that at least Rabbi Akiva did not truly ascribe to the logical validity of his own exegesis. But actually, the old question of whether the talmudic rabbis themselves took seriously their scriptural exegesis or whether, “it was but a mnemotechnical approach to the Torah,” as Joel thought—this medieval question was not decisive for Joel. The real exegetical question was not about honesty but about the defense of Judaism against the Hellenistic allegorizing of the divine law.⁸⁶

In his summary, Joel’s anti-Christian sallies and Jewish pride come directly to the fore. Had Lessing only known the talmudic rabbis as well as he knew the church fathers, he would not have participated in “the customary disregard for the achievements of the rabbis.”⁸⁷ Why condemn the rabbis for deviating from the literal sense of the Bible, Joel asked, when the same dubious method of exegesis is explained historically to everybody’s satisfaction in the church fathers? Interestingly, as a modern scholar of Judaism, Joel has such high regard for Lessing’s model of theological progress that he himself falls into the trap of anachronism: He seems to ignore that, in Lessing’s time, half a century prior to Reform Judaism, the legal results of talmudic exegesis of the Torah still held full authority within Judaism. A hundred years before Joel’s own writing, talmudic exegesis was considered timelessly sacrosanct among almost all Jews—as it continues to be in many Orthodox circles today—at least as a legal fiction, and its fruits are the inevitable starting point for all Jewish adjudication. But this is

stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (NIV). Jesus is certainly referring here to the Hebrew letter *Yod*, assuming the form of the stroke of a pen.

⁸³ Joel, “Ein Wort gegen Lessing,” 244, referring to one of Origen’s homilies on Exodus.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

not central to the present study. What is crucial, however, is that Joel understood his critique to be working “for the honor of Lessing,” as his title has it. For Joel, Lessing would have remained even truer to his revolutionary progressive theology had he not attacked the talmudic rabbis. Whatever the merit of this claim, thereby Joel, too, implicitly integrated Lessing’s thought into his own version of liberal and historical-critical Judaism.

■ Conclusion

Ultimately, the widespread Jewish sympathies for *Nathan*,⁸⁸ Lessing’s close connection to Mendelssohn, and, above all, Lessing’s pre-Hegelian, pro-Jewish, progressive Deism from the *Education of the Human Race* spurred some Jewish authors to return to and discuss Lessing’s religious thought within the theological endeavors of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in nineteenth-century Germany. Perhaps the enthusiastic claim that Lessing provided the key ideas for a sustainable theology that would preserve Judaism in the modern age, made by some contemporary authors, is not a tenable one. However, to be able to rely on Lessing, even retroactively, was welcome proof for Jewish Reformers that the humanistic approach to religious problems that stood at the very center of their project was at once Jewish and universal. It was the spirit of Lessing’s *Education* that was appropriated here for Judaism rather than Lessing’s letter. With Lessing in the camp of the Reform movement—even if this positioning was unbeknownst to him—the intended modernization of Judaism was safeguarded against the accusation of political and social egoism on the part of the Jews. It was the universal idea of religious progress that they shared with Lessing, not just the sloughing off of the yoke of outdated talmudic law.⁸⁹

In 1929, a much wider, intra-Jewish debate on Lessing took place in Germany, as research has amply demonstrated.⁹⁰ But the foundations of Reform Jewish theology, as it emerged from the 1830s onwards, indeed rested, at least in part, on Lessing’s revolutionary approach to revelation as perpetual progress, and on the notion of striving for—but not possessing—religious truth.

⁸⁸ See Willi Goetschel, “Lessing, Mendelssohn, Nathan: German-Jewish Myth-Building as an Act of Emancipation,” *Lessing Yearbook* 32 (2000) 341–60.

⁸⁹ Repercussions of this adoption of the idea of progress in religious thought are still noticeable in the works of Hermann Cohen, the most important Jewish philosopher at the turn of the 20th century. See especially his essay, “The Importance of Judaism for Religious Progress,” from 1910 (Hermann Cohen, “Die Bedeutung des Judentums für den religiösen Fortschritt,” in idem, *Werke* [ed. Hartwig Wiedebach; 17 vols.; Hildesheim: Olms, 2009] 15:429–54).

⁹⁰ For the Jewish participation in the Lessing year of 1929, see Elizabeth Petuchowski, “Zur Lessing-Rezeption in der deutsch-jüdischen Presse—Lessings 200. Geburtstag,” *Lessing Yearbook* 14 (1982) 43–59.