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Enacting a "Living Script": Moses Mendelssohn on History, Practice, and Religion

Sacks, Elias Reinhold

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ENACTING A "LIVING SCRIPT":

MOSES MENDELSSOHN ON HISTORY, PRACTICE, AND RELIGION

Elias Sacks

A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the conception of Jewish practice developed in the writings of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). Although this eighteenth-century figure is often described as the "founder" of modern Jewish thought and as a leading philosopher of the late Enlightenment, considerable uncertainty continues to surround basic questions relating to his work. Such uncertainty is especially pronounced with respect to his treatment of Jewish practice, with influential readers expressing confusion regarding, and even doubting the possibility of reconstructing, the details of his views on Jewish law. Against this backdrop, I propose a new reading of Mendelssohn's work, arguing that we can better grasp his approach to Jewish practice if we attend to his conception of history—to his views on historical change and historical knowledge. More specifically, drawing on his well-known German writings, on his little-known Hebrew works, and on neglected developments in early modern thought, I argue that we should read Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice as a response to his views on the nature of history, and that such a reading can contribute to ongoing conversations about modernity and religion. One of Mendelssohn's central goals, I show, is to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing perils grounded in history. His treatment of Jewish practice is animated by an effort to address an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history, an ethico-political danger grounded in social history, and a textual danger grounded in the study of history—the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems, the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony, and the danger that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the scriptural basis of Jewish law. Moreover, I suggest, this reading not only offers a new understanding of a foundational figure in modern Judaism, but also contributes to

broader conversations in a variety of fields—to discussions in the study of history about the emergence of Jewish modernity, and to debates in contemporary religious thought about practice, tradition, and social life.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....iii

Acknowledgements.....vi

Introduction.....1
Jew of Berlin and German Socrates

Chapter 1.....30
The "Living Script": *Jerusalem*'s Perplexing Arguments

Chapter 2.....83
Conceptual "Disfiguring": Jewish Practice and Philosophical History

Chapter 3.....122
"The Felicity of the Nation": Jewish Practice and Social History

Chapter 4.....163
"The Strict Obedience We Owe": Jewish Practice and the Study of History

Chapter 5.....226
Rethinking Mendelssohn

Conclusion.....260
Beyond Mendelssohn

Bibliography.....289

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Introduction
Jew of Berlin and German Socrates

One starting point for conversations about Judaism, modernity, and religion is the work of the German-Jewish thinker Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). Often described as the "founder" of modern Jewish thought and as a leading rationalist philosopher of the late Enlightenment, this eighteenth-century figure devotes considerable attention to questions that would become central to modern philosophy and theology, with such concerns playing an especially prominent role in his treatment of Jewish practice—of the actions required by Jewish law.[1] For example, his best-known work on Judaism—his 1783 *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*—takes a "living script" of "actions" grounded in "divine legislation" to stand at the heart of Jewish life,[2] and defends the value and authority of this "living script" by considering questions that remain relevant today—questions about the relationship between practice and belief, the role of religious commitments in political life, and the authority of texts and norms governing religious behavior. Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice, then, represents an important object of exegetical, historical, and philosophical inquiry. In studying this dimension of his thought, we have an opportunity not only to deepen our understanding of his writings and to explore a foundational moment in Jewish modernity, but also to consider a constellation of issues central to contemporary religious thought.

My dissertation seeks to accomplish these goals. Despite the steady stream of scholarship devoted to Mendelssohn's life and writings, considerable uncertainty continues to surround basic questions relating to his thought—questions such as whether he is best read as a covert Deist or a traditionalist Jew. Such uncertainty is especially pronounced with respect to his treatment of Jewish practice, with influential readers expressing confusion regarding, and even doubting the possibility of reconstructing, the details of his views on Jewish law. Against the

backdrop of this uncertainty, I will propose a new reading of Mendelssohn's work, arguing that we can better grasp his approach to Jewish practice if we attend to his conception of history—to his views on historical change and historical knowledge. More specifically, drawing on his well-known German writings, on his little-known Hebrew works, and on neglected developments in early modern thought, I will argue that we should read Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice as a response to his views on the nature of history, and that such a reading can contribute to ongoing conversations about modernity and religion. One of Mendelssohn's central goals, I will show, is to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing perils grounded in history. His treatment of Jewish practice is animated by an effort to address an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history, an ethico-political danger grounded in social history, and a textual danger grounded in the study of history—the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems, the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony, and the danger that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the scriptural basis of Jewish law. Moreover, I will suggest, this reading not only offers a new understanding of a foundational figure in modern Judaism, but also contributes to broader conversations in a variety of fields—to discussions in the study of history about the emergence of Jewish modernity, and to debates in contemporary religious thought about practice, tradition, and social life.

Mendelssohn's Life and Reception

The story of Mendelssohn's life and reception is, in part, a story of widespread fame and scholarly uncertainty.[3] Born in 1729 in the rural Prussian town of Dessau, he received a traditional Ashkenazic Jewish education focused on the Talmud and other legal texts, while also

exploring non-standard material such as grammatical works and medieval Jewish philosophy: later in life, he would famously blame his hunchback on the rigors involved in this early study of the medieval philosopher Maimonides. Mendelssohn then followed his local rabbi to Berlin at the age of fourteen, finding employment in the household of a wealthy Jewish owner of a silk factory, and forging relationships with Jewish intellectuals as well as non-Jewish thinkers such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Supported by this network, Mendelssohn acquired a variety of European languages and began to study the writings of non-Jewish thinkers, and his first German publications on philosophy and literature appeared during the 1750s. By the late 1760s, he had become a leading figure in German intellectual life and was known as the "German Socrates," defeating Immanuel Kant in a 1763 essay contest focused on epistemological and metaphysical questions, contributing to debates in philosophical aesthetics on topics such as tragedy and the sublime, and publishing a treatise—a rewriting of Plato's *Phaedo*—that defended the rational demonstrability of immortality and was quickly translated into five languages. Indeed, while sometimes dismissed as a "popular philosopher" who merely disseminated the ideas of others, Mendelssohn emerged during these early years as a creative defender of the rationalist metaphysics associated with G.W. Leibniz and Christian Wolff, refining the content of Leibnizian-Wolffian proofs for principles such as God's existence and providence, while recognizing the limits of this rationalist tradition and borrowing insights from figures such as British Empiricists.[4]

Even as Mendelssohn secured his reputation as a leading authority on aesthetics and metaphysics, his life and writings during this early period were deeply shaped by his continued engagement with the Jewish tradition. On one level, his connection to Judaism was reflected in his professional situation: lacking any formal philosophical training and barred as a Jew from

university appointments, he continued to earn a living from the silk enterprise owned by his employer in Berlin, eventually becoming a partner in this business while pursuing his philosophical career. His engagement with Judaism was also expressed in his literary output, with the 1750s and 1760s witnessing the publication of his first writings on the Jewish tradition—works that included the first modern Hebrew journal and a Hebrew commentary on Maimonides, and that marked his emergence as an important figure in what is known as the early Haskalah (or Jewish Enlightenment).[5] Even as Mendelssohn became the "German Socrates," then, he was also active as the "Jew of Berlin" and "Moses son of Rabbi Mendel."[6]

These early decades of Mendelssohn's life were largely free from public conflict. This changed in 1769-1770, however, when he was publicly challenged to convert to Christianity by a young Swiss deacon named Johann Caspar Lavater. Having visited Mendelssohn in Berlin before translating a French defense of Christianity written by the scientist and philosopher Charles Bonnet, Lavater dedicated this translation to the "most honorable" Jewish philosopher, urging Mendelssohn "to refute it publicly" or do "what *Socrates* would have done if he had read this work and found it irrefutable."[7] Mendelssohn responded with a series of German texts, including public letters to Lavater, private correspondence with Bonnet, and an unpublished manuscript—the *Counterreflections*—attacking Christianity and Bonnet's treatise. Rebuking Lavater for his challenge, Mendelssohn defended his loyalty to the Jewish tradition and threatened to publish his critical reflections on Bonnet's work. Mendelssohn also gave public expression to some of the themes that would become central to his thought, including his belief that non-Jews need not convert to Judaism in order to attain "eternal felicity,"[8] and his commitment to defending what is often known as natural religion—to defending the idea that the truths central to a religious life are accessible without the assistance of divine revelation, since

rational inquiry provides grounds for affirming principles such as God's existence, divine providence, and the soul's immortality.[9]

The Lavater affair took a serious physical toll on Mendelssohn, contributing to the development of a "strange" nervous ailment that would plague him for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, he continued to write on Judaism in German and Hebrew throughout the following decades, with his two most important works appearing in the early 1780s: *The Book of the Paths of Peace* (often known as the *Biur* or "Elucidation"), which included a German translation of, and Hebrew commentary on, the books of the Pentateuch;[10] and *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*, which—responding to another call to abandon Judaism—defended the compatibility of the Jewish tradition with Enlightenment philosophy and the modern state. Complementing these literary efforts were his extensive political activities: he frequently came to the assistance of Jewish communities that found themselves in conflicts with local authorities, and he played a central role in emerging debates regarding the role of Jews in non-Jewish society. Finally, in the middle of the 1780s, Mendelssohn found himself at the center of late Enlightenment debates about the status of reason, responding to the critique of metaphysics emerging from Kant's writings,[11] and participating in a public literary dispute known as the Pantheism Controversy. Pitting Mendelssohn against the counter-Enlightenment figure Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, this dispute initially revolved around Jacobi's claim that the recently-deceased Lessing had confessed to being a Spinozist, but soon extended far beyond this biographical point to a variety of broader issues, such as the authority of reason, the nature of human flourishing, and the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.[12] Indeed, Mendelssohn's death in the midst of this dispute led one of his contemporaries to eulogize him as a "martyr" to reason: on the bitterly cold Saturday evening of December 31, 1785, the story ran, the German Socrates was

so eager to submit a manuscript defending reason that he left his home without a coat and hurried on foot to his publisher, only to fall ill upon returning and pass away on January 4, 1786.[13]

If the second half of the eighteenth century witnessed Mendelssohn's meteoric rise to philosophical stardom, the past two centuries have seen him become a canonical yet controversial figure.[14] It has long been common to describe him as the "founder" of modern Jewish thought—as the first thinker to offer a philosophical account of Judaism's relevance in the modern world.[15] Moreover, his works have gained widespread circulation among Jewish readers, initially receiving a favorable reception among broad swaths of European Jewry despite opposition from some traditionalist figures,[16] and contributing to his canonization as a "patron saint" for several generations of German Jews—as a figure whom many German Jews took to embody their own aspirations and values.[17] Indeed, although few philosophers have explicitly described themselves as Mendelssohnians, and although Mendelssohn himself would eventually become the object of attacks by liberal, orthodox, and nationalist Jewish writers,[18] many of the conceptual moves central to his thought recur in the work of subsequent Jewish thinkers, ranging from nineteenth-century Hegelians to twentieth-century neo-Kantians.[19]

Not surprisingly, this enduring fascination with Mendelssohn's life and thought has generated a considerable body of scholarship.[20] For scholars concerned with the history of philosophy, Mendelssohn continues to attract attention as an influential theorist of aesthetics and as a sophisticated defender of pre-Kantian metaphysics.[21] Moreover, for students of Judaism and religion, Mendelssohn's writings on rational theology and the Jewish tradition remain central objects of study, even if they have not generated the volume of secondary literature devoted to thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig. Many leading European Jewish intellectuals published scholarly treatments of Mendelssohn during the early twentieth century, including Julius

Guttmann, Leo Strauss, and Simon Rawidowicz.[22] Similarly, Mendelssohn scholarship continued to flourish in the decades following World War Two, particularly due to the efforts of Alexander Altmann, a pioneering figure in Jewish Studies whose diverse writings on Mendelssohn—including a study of his metaphysics and aesthetics, numerous essays on his politics and theology, and a magisterial intellectual biography—continue to shape scholarly conversations.[23] Most recently, the last two decades have witnessed a striking renaissance in the study of Mendelssohn, with new works in English, German, Hebrew, and French exploring diverse aspects of his thought;[24] with new translations rendering his texts increasingly accessible to English-speaking audiences;[25] and with a growing number of conferences across Europe and North America shedding light on key dimensions of his life and writings.[26]

However, despite illuminating aspects of Mendelssohn's work neglected by earlier commentators, recent secondary literature has generated considerable uncertainty. Most strikingly, interpreters remain divided regarding the basic character of Mendelssohn's thought. For example, influential studies published in the 1990s offer sharply conflicting assessments of his posture towards Judaism, with David Sorkin presenting Mendelssohn as a traditionalist Jew and Allan Arkush casting Mendelssohn as a covert Deist. Sorkin's Mendelssohn is a thinker who uses "novel means for conservative ends," and who is "closer in matter to the Andalusian tradition" than to other views—who uses Enlightenment philosophy to defend revealed religion, and who exhibits continuities with authors belonging to a strand of medieval Jewish thought that "kept philosophy subordinate to piety and observance."[27] By contrast, Arkush's Mendelssohn is a thinker who defends Judaism with arguments that are "more rhetorical than real," who might have been a "pure Deist…merely pretending…to be a believing Jew," and who seeks to "retain his credentials" for the sake of "propagating a version of Judaism suitable to modern times"—

who seeks not to provide adequate reasons for fidelity to Judaism but rather to deflect specific attacks with effective rhetoric, who may have secretly rejected Judaism's claim to preserve a divine revelation, and who feigns loyalty to this tradition in order to maintain his influence and fashion a religion appropriate to modernity.[28] Similarly, Michah Gottlieb has argued that this debate is part of broader dispute regarding the unity of Mendelssohn's thought—regarding the question of how his engagement with Enlightenment philosophy is related to his view of the Jewish tradition. For Sorkin and predecessors such as Julius Guttmann, Mendelssohn's philosophical commitments cohere with his professions of fidelity to Judaism, since the stream of Enlightenment thought he endorses is compatible with, and even conducive to, adherence to the Jewish tradition. For Arkush and predecessors such as Altmann, by contrast, Mendelssohn's philosophical commitments stand in tension with his claims of loyalty to Judaism, since key strands of Enlightenment liberalism and rationalism clash with tenets of the Jewish tradition.[29]

Moreover, just as uncertainty continues to surround the basic character of Mendelssohn's work, so too do scholars remain divided regarding his relevance for contemporary religious thought. On the one hand, many readers continue to echo Michael Meyer's much-cited claim that Mendelssohn provides only an "ephemeral" solution to key problems,[30] with David Novak suggesting that "Jews need to overcome Mendelssohn rather than retrieve him,"[31] and with Jerome Copulsky concluding that Mendelssohn's" philosophical teachings and conception of Judaism may no longer be compelling."[32] On the other hand, some commentators have begun to argue that Mendelssohn's work might contribute to a variety of ongoing conversations. Steven Kepnes and Robert Erlewine have suggested that Mendelssohn might offer resources for thinkers who are committed to the importance of tolerance and wish to emphasize God's concern for all of humanity, but who nevertheless seek to affirm God's election of specific communities and

emphasize the particularity of religious traditions.[33] Similarly, Bruce Rosenstock and Michah Gottlieb have argued that Mendelssohn's philosophy might enrich contemporary thinking about religion and society, pointing to a "democratic, redemptive politics" that reimagines "the relationship between revelation and the state,"[34] and enabling us to better conceptualize the role of religion in today's "cosmopolitan, diverse society."[35] The character and relevance of Mendelssohn's philosophy thus remain plagued by considerable uncertainty.

Mendelssohn on Jewish Practice

My dissertation seeks to develop a new reading of Mendelssohn's thought against the backdrop of these debates. More specifically, I will explore an aspect of his writings that has been particularly conducive to perplexity: his account of Jewish practice—of the actions required by Jewish law. Jewish life has often been seen as revolving around a legal system known as *halakha* or Jewish law—a set of norms, traditionally seen as divinely endorsed, that are outlined most centrally in the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic literature of late antiquity, and that govern diverse realms of behavior such as worship, diet, and business conduct.[36] Mendelssohn discusses these laws throughout his writings, frequently noting that these norms require actions even in seemingly mundane areas of life such as diet and dress, and forcefully insisting on the enduring value and authority of this legal system.[37] Consider the following passage from the *Biur*:

> Behold, the Eternal, Blessed be He…gave to us the Torah and commandments, to purify our hearts from the impurity of idolatry and to awaken us always, by means of particular practices and actions [*ma'asim u'peulot*],[38] to the cornerstones of the true faith and its foundations. He commanded us to perform signs and symbolic reminders regarding [that faith and those foundations] by means of our flesh, our homes, and everything visible and perceptible to us, so that these elevated matters would never depart from our eyes: these are the commandment of circumcision and the commandment [to affix] a *mezuzah* to the openings of our homes and courtyards. Moreover, He commanded [us] to place the sign of the *tefillin* on our heads and left arms, and issued the commandment [to place] *tzitzit* on our garments, so that we would remember Him every time we look upon them.[39]

Mendelssohn refers to various "practices" that Jews are "commanded…to perform," suggesting that these "actions" are valuable because they "awaken us…to cornerstones of the truth faith," and offering four examples of the actions he has in mind: the practice of circumcising male Jews at the age of eight days; the practice of affixing a *mezuzah*, or case containing biblical verses, to the doorposts of Jewish homes; the practice of tying *tefillin*, or boxes containing biblical verses, to an individual's head and arm during morning prayers; and the practice of wearing garments with *tzitzit*, or fringes with knots and colored thread, throughout the day. Indeed, other passages in the *Biur* offer further examples of actions required by *halakha*, such as the consumption of particular foods rather than others,[40] the celebration of the Sabbath and various holidays,[41] and the enactment of specific judicial procedures in cases of interpersonal conflict.[42]

Discussions of Jewish practice appear not only in Hebrew texts such as the *Biur*, but also in Mendelssohn's German writings. For instance, referring to the "customs and ceremonies that are in practice among us [*die bey uns in Uebung sind*]" and outlined by the "Old Testament…and all our Talmudic books,"[43] the *Counterreflections* identifies such "customs" and "ceremonial" elements with the "duties of action" and the "many religious actions" required by Jews' "laws,"[44] and insists that Jews "*must* distinguish themselves" by performing these "customs and religious practices [*gottesdienstliche Uebungen*]."[45] In fact, he argues, such actions are not only binding but also valuable, serving "the concomitant purposes of visibly singling this nation out from all others and ceaselessly reminding it…of those holy truths that should be unforgettable."[46] Similarly, a 1782 Mendelssohnian text invokes the "laws" which "Jews regard as divine commandments," and cites as an example of the "practices [*Uebungen*]" required by such norms the sacrificial offerings that "our rabbis…prescribed."[47] Finally, and most famously, taking Jewish life to revolve around a "ceremonial law" which can be traced back to the Bible and is

explicated more fully in rabbinic literature,[48] *Jerusalem* invokes "actions" and "performances" such as modes of food preparation and consumption,[49] presents the "practice [*Ausübung*]" of these required actions as incumbent upon modern Jews,[50] and devotes considerable effort to arguing that this "divine *legislation*" which determines how Jews "should conduct themselves" can "rous[e] the heart and mind" to religious reflection.[51] Indeed, although terms such as "ceremonial" might give the impression that Mendelssohn is concerned primarily with acts such as synagogue worship, his writings make it clear that his focus lies with norms that require actions even in seemingly mundane areas of life: *Jerusalem* insists that the "ceremonial law" governs "men's everyday [*alltäglichen*] activities"[52] and thus "shapes what an individual "did and saw being done from morning till night,"[53] and an earlier treatise uses a similar phrase—"ritual laws [*Ritualgesetze*]"—to refer to norms that regulate behavior in matters relating to inheritance, wills, and marriage.[54] Mendelssohn's Hebrew and German writings thus return again and again to the topic of Jewish practice—to the actions required by Jewish law.

Nevertheless, if Mendelssohn's interest in Jewish practice is well known,[55] the content of his arguments remains a source of perplexity. Although scholars have typically presented *Jerusalem* as a founding work of modern Jewish thought,[56] influential commentators have expressed confusion regarding this text's account of Judaism's "actions," confessing uncertainty regarding the content of the reasoning behind some of this treatise's central conclusions. For example, Arnold Eisen has lamented the fact that "we have…seen nothing" of the rationales justifying key claims regarding Judaism's "ceremonial law,"[57] and—as we will learn in Chapter 1—central statements in *Jerusalem* regarding Jewish practice have remained unexplicated or generated divergent readings.[58] Arkush has gone even further and raised questions about the very project of attempting to clarify Mendelssohn's position, suggesting that "it is probably not

possible to determine for sure" the details of *Jerusalem*'s arguments regarding Jewish practice, and that Mendelssohn may not actually intend to offer a detailed account of this topic:

> His intentions in treating this subject were rather limited. It does not seem that he was striving to formulate, for coming generations of Jews, a new rationale for continuing to perform the commandments. He was simply seeking to deflect earlier criticisms of the law as being devoid of religious significance…The very nebulousness of his presentation could advance this purpose by leaving uncertain, and therefore unassailable, the precise but evidently limited relationship between the commandments and religious truths.[59]

On this view, if *Jerusalem*'s arguments are marked by "nebulousness," it may be because Mendelssohn does not mean to offer a detailed position—because he hints at Jewish practice's value to "deflect" attacks on the Jewish tradition, but avoids presenting detailed views open to critique. A key element of Mendelssohn's thought thus remains obscure for many readers.[60]

It is this obscurity that forms the primary target of my dissertation, which will explore Mendelssohn's perplexing account of Jewish practice in order to develop a new reading of his thought—in order to propose a new understanding of the goals that animate his treatment of Judaism, and in order to address the confusion surrounding the character and relevance of his work. That is, exploring the writings and context of modern Jewish thought's founding figure, I will seek to offer answers to the following questions: how should we understand Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice, and what do we learn from offering a reconstruction of his position? What does this German-Jewish philosopher intend to argue when he presents many of his central claims regarding Jewish practice,[61] and what broader implications follow from successfully clarifying his reasoning?

The key sources for this project will be Mendelssohn's German and Hebrew writings. His German texts were generally written for non-Jewish readers or for mixed audiences of Jews and non-Jews,[62] and have been widely studied over the past two centuries. By contrast, his Hebrew works were generally composed for Jewish readers (primarily individuals with

grounding in pre-modern Jewish literature but little knowledge of intellectual developments outside the Jewish world, such as Leibnizian thought and European biblical scholarship),[63] and have received considerably less attention in the secondary literature:[64] in fact, 2011 marked the first time that a broad selection of these Hebrew writings has appeared in English translation.[65] Insofar as these Hebrew texts are likely to be unfamiliar to many of this dissertation's readers, then, it is worth outlining three principles that will inform my treatment of these sources:

1. Scholars such as Edward Breuer, Sorkin, and Gottlieb have shown that Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings draw heavily on pre-modern Jewish literature, on some occasions referring explicitly to classical and medieval Hebrew texts, and in other cases borrowing, without explicit comment, language from such writings.[66] As we read Mendelssohn's Hebrew works, then, it will often be important to identify the sources on which he draws —for example, to identify textual allusions that he might expect some readers to grasp.
2. Commentators such as Sorkin and Breuer have also noted that Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings do not merely borrow, but also attempt to update, Hebrew vocabulary inherited from earlier sources. For example, his Hebrew writings on the Bible offer original definitions of technical terms central to pre-modern exegetical literature, and find new uses for terms of art employed by medieval philosophical texts.[67] Even as we attend to Mendelssohn's use of pre-modern sources, then, it will also be important to consider the idiosyncrasies of his Hebrew style—to explicate *his* usage of key Hebrew terms.
3. Raphael Jospe has suggested that Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings sometimes pursue the project of "philosophic Bible exegesis." Common in pre-modern Jewish sources, this genre shares elements of, but also differs considerably from, what we might typically take to be philosophical or interpretive writing. For example, while we might hope for

works of philosophy to clarify the key steps behind central arguments, an author who engages in philosophic Bible exegesis will often write in a more elliptical and allusive manner, presenting her conclusions and reasoning in the highly terse style of pre-modern Jewish exegetical texts. Similarly, while we might expect works concerned with the interpretation of Scripture to delve into the Bible's textual features, an author who engages in philosophic Bible exegesis will often go beyond or leave aside such inquiries, presenting claims that extend beyond the issues explicitly at stake in the Bible, and relying on extra-textual philosophical commitments to defend her conclusions.[68] Of course, I do not mean deny that Mendelssohn often presents clear arguments and explores the Bible's textual details.[69] As we turn to Hebrew material such as the *Biur*, however, we should keep in the mind the possibility that these writings, at least in some passages, might turn out to exhibit features of the genre described above. That is, we should assume neither that we will *always* encounter detailed accounts of Mendelssohn's reasoning, nor that his arguments will *always* confine themselves to the Bible's textual features. Rather, we should be prepared to reconstruct his arguments and conclusions on the basis of subtle clues and extra-biblical conceptual commitments.

By following this approach and reading Mendelssohn's Hebrew works alongside his German writings, I will uncover aspects of his thought that have gone unnoticed by other readers.[70]

Beyond attending to Mendelssohn's own words, my dissertation will explore his historical context. In addition to discussing aspects of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political and intellectual life that have been explored by other readers,[71] I will emphasize two developments in early modern thought that have received little attention in Mendelssohn scholarship. First, I will highlight work by his Christian predecessors on issues relating to

religious epistemology—on possible grounds for affirming propositions about entities such as God and for ascribing authority to texts such as the Bible. These issues play an important role in the work of thinkers who deeply influence Mendelssohn's philosophy, and attending to such questions will shed crucial light on texts such as *Jerusalem*. Second, I will call attention to debates in early modern theology surrounding the decline of Aristotelian natural philosophy. The replacement of an Aristotelian account of nature with new categories generated fierce debates among early modern Christian thinkers, and recognizing Mendelssohn's familiarity with these controversies will illuminate his views on Jewish practice.

My Argument

Chapter 1 sets the stage for my project by identifying problems that emerge from a close reading of *Jerusalem*. Initially, this text's account of Jewish practice seems relatively straightforward: describing adherence to Jewish practice as the enactment of a "living script," Mendelssohn suggests that the actions required by Jewish law generate reflection on "eternal truths" accessible through reason, such as God's existence, divine providence, and the soul's immortality. Upon further scrutiny, however, three of *Jerusalem*'s central claims resist explication. More precisely, it is not clear what Mendelssohn has in mind when he insists that Jewish practice enables adherents to avoid "disfiguring" their religious beliefs, that Jewish practice serves to promote "the felicity of the nation," and that modern Jews have not been freed "from the strict obedience we owe to the law." This confusion raises questions about the character and significance of Mendelssohn's writings on Judaism, providing grounds for suspecting that he seeks merely to deflect, with effective rhetoric, attacks on the Jewish tradition, and that his claims are simply too vague to contribute to contemporary debates. An encounter

with *Jerusalem* thus raises fundamental questions about Mendelssohn's thought. Can we glean from his writings a more precise account of what he has in mind when he presents his theory of Jewish practice? Can we reconstruct the details of his approach to Judaism's "living script," or should we harbor doubts about the sincerity and relevance of his philosophy of Judaism?

The core chapters of my dissertation address these questions, employing an approach that Richard Rorty describes as *historical reconstruction*—an approach that involves explicating a thinker's views on an issue he addresses or could have addressed, and grounding this explication in vocabulary and commitments this thinker accepts or could have accepted. That is, relying on language Mendelssohn could employ and on beliefs he endorses, I will reconstruct the claims he intends to advance when he discusses Jewish practice.[72] Chapter 2 shows that when he invokes "disfiguring," he is taking Jewish practice to address an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history—the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems. More specifically, he is responding to what he calls "the changeability of philosophical systems"—to the idea that history has been characterized by, and may continue to involve, the rise and fall of conceptual frameworks such Aristotelian and Cartesian philosophy. Recognizing that religious communities often draw on such models to lend determinate content to terms such as "God," and that these communities often express their convictions in fixed verbal formulas such as creedal statements, Mendelssohn worries that a requirement to affirm such formulas amid shifting philosophical frameworks will lead us to distort our beliefs. He worries that formulas composed under the influence of one model might be incompatible with beliefs generated by later systems, and that we might therefore reject commitments we should accept for the sake of affirming communally sanctioned words—that a requirement to affirm preexisting creedal formulas might impede our ability to revise our views,

and thus that we might distort our beliefs by rejecting emerging commitments which we have grounds to endorse. Mendelssohn's claim is that Jewish practice can address this danger, for by leading adherents to privilege actions over specific sets of words and thereby discouraging fixed verbal formulas, Jewish practice secures conceptual flexibility in light of the dynamic nature of philosophical history. Jewish practice permits adherents to revise their understandings of key principles in light of shifting philosophical systems—to employ the most compelling account of reality available in a given context to lend determinate content to categories such as providence.

Chapter 3 turns to Mendelssohn's claim about "the felicity of the nation," showing that he takes Jewish practice to be capable of addressing an ethico-political danger grounded in social history—the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony. The crucial factor here is his philosophical anthropology, which ascribes to the individual the task of pursuing a condition of "perfection" or "flourishing," insists that this project of self-cultivation requires the existence of societies, but acknowledges that these societies might threaten the very pursuit which they are supposed to enable. While maintaining that societies can evolve in ways that promote the pursuit of perfection, Mendelssohn worries that societies might also evolve in ways that prove to be corrupting and destabilizing. His claim about Jewish practice, in turn, is that this system can dispose adherents to identify and combat these types of perilous changes, for by generating recurring reflection on God, Jewish practice can orient adherents' cognition and desire in a way that impedes the development of harmful social conditions. Jewish practice, Mendelssohn argues, can cultivate the emergence of Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving society.

Chapter 4 examines Mendelssohn's insistence that the norms governing Jewish practice remain binding for modern Jews, arguing that he seeks to develop an account of Jewish practice

capable of addressing a textual danger grounded in the study of history—the danger that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the scriptural basis of Jewish law. The background here is Mendelssohn's engagement with the historical study of Scripture, a scholarly approach that emerges in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and that takes as its starting point a view of the Bible as a historically conditioned text. Recognizing that such scholarship casts doubt on the version of the biblical text preserved by the Jewish tradition and on the interpretive claims advanced by Jewish exegetes, Mendelssohn worries that this approach will deprive the laws grounding Jewish practice of the biblical basis crucial to their authority—that this approach will undermine both the biblical text to which key norms are traced and the exegesis by which those norms are derived. My claim, in turn, is that he seeks to address these challenges by mobilizing for the defense of Jewish law an epistemological model developed to secure Christian doctrine. Implicitly relying on an epistemology deployed by thinkers such as Leibniz to defend the Christian mysteries, Mendelssohn holds that an affirmation of Jewish practice's scriptural basis depends on a prior assessment of Jewish life, and that this assessment provides adequate grounds for dismissing challenges posed by biblical scholarship.

Chapter 5 begins to consider the implications of my arguments in Chapters 2-4, synthesizing these claims to advance my core interpretive thesis, and addressing ongoing debates about the character of Mendelssohn's thought. The key conclusion emerging from these chapters, I will argue, is that we should read his conception of Jewish practice as a response to his views on the nature of history—that one of his central goals is to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing perils grounded in history.[73] Moreover, I will show, my analysis sheds light on the question of whether Mendelssohn is best read as a covert Deist or a traditionalist Jew, as well as the question of how his engagement with Enlightenment thought is

related to his view of the Jewish tradition. My answer to the first question is that Mendelssohn is best understood neither as a Deist, nor as a traditionalist, but rather as an innovative thinker who at times adopts conservative positions. My answer to the second question is that Mendelssohn presents Judaism as a path out of dilemmas associated with Enlightenment thought.

My conclusion goes beyond the project of historical reconstruction to perform what Rorty describes as *intellectual history* and *rational reconstruction*, developing an account of what "intellectuals were up to" within a specific spatiotemporal context, and imagining how a philosopher might address debates that he could not have confronted—more specifically, seeking both to deepen our understanding of the ways in which modern Jews have wrestled with the concept of history, and to imagine Mendelssohn's contributions to ongoing conversations in religious thought.[74] I will begin by suggesting that my reading can advance discussions in the study of history about the emergence of Jewish modernity, illuminating the rise of the "historical consciousness" often taken to be central to modern Jewish life. I will then argue that my analysis reveals Mendelssohnian claims that might contribute to contemporary religious thought—to conversations about the relationship between practice and belief, the development of religious traditions, and the capacity of religious communities to cultivate socially relevant beliefs and dispositions. My reading, I will conclude, not only offers a new understanding of a foundational figure in modern Judaism, but also contributes to broader conversations in a variety of fields.

Altmann once described *Jerusalem* as a "strange, powerful" book.[75] My goal in this dissertation is to address both the strangeness and the power of Mendelssohn's thought—to confront perplexing aspects of his work, clarify the arguments he means to present, and reflect briefly on his contemporary relevance. My goal, in other words, is to offer a textually and contextually faithful recovery of an eighteenth-century voice that still merits our attention.

[1] When I use the phrase "Jewish practice" in this sense, I am following Mendelssohn, who—as we will see—refers to "practice" and "practices" when discussing the actions required by the legal system traditionally known as *halakha* or Jewish law. See pages 9-11 in this introduction. I am *not* attempting to suggest that the phrase "Jewish practice" could not, in other contexts, be applied to other systems of praxis—for example, to systems of praxis endorsed by contemporary Jewish groups that do not recognize the binding authority of Jewish law.

[2] Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 89-104; for the German, see *Jerusalem, oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*, in *Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Fritz Bamberger, Alexander Altmann et al., 24 vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: F. Frommann, 1971-), 8:156-170. Further references will follow the format of Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, English/German; I will identify cases in which I alter Arkush's translation. I will use "*JubA*" to refer to the *Jubiläumsausgabe* edition of Mendelssohn's works.

[3] The classic Mendelssohn biography—and the central source for this overview—is Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1973); see note 24 below for studies by Dominique Bourel and Shmuel Feiner.

[4] On Mendelssohn's reputation as a "popular philosopher," as well as his complicated relationship with Leibnizian-Wolffian thought, see pages 85-86 and note 9 in Chapter 2.

[5] The Haskalah was a movement of cultural renewal that emerged in Prussia but eventually spread throughout Europe. While it was once common to see Mendelssohn as the founder of a formal movement, recent scholarship has suggested that he is better understood as one important figure in the early stages of the Haskalah—albeit a figure who was treated with special reverence by later individuals. See Shmuel Feiner, "Mendelssohn and 'Mendelssohn's Disciples': A Re-Examination," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 40 (1995): 133-167. On the Haskalah more generally, and in particular on Mendelssohn's place in this movement's early stages, see, e.g., David Sorkin, "The Early Haskalah," in *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, ed. Feiner and Sorkin (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), 9-26; Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, trans. Chaya Naor, Jewish Culture and Contexts (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Mendelssohn's involvement in the Haskalah should also be placed alongside his relationships with leading rabbinical figures, most notably Jacob Emden.

[6] The phrase "Jew of Berlin"—more precisely, the French *Juif de Berlin*, as well as *Juif à Berlin*—appears in a variety of eighteenth-century sources—texts written by non-Jewish authors who were in all likelihood unfamiliar with Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings, but who were deeply interested in the fact that one of the Enlightenment's leading figures was a Jew. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 194-195, 790n4. The phrase "Moses son Rabbi Mendel" is Mendelssohn's own: see the letter cited in 412-413, as well as an inscription cited in 14. Another example is Mendelssohn's introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch: he concludes by signing his name "Moses son of Rabbi Menahem Mendel the scribe, may his memory be for life in the world to come" (see Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, in *JubA*, 14:267).

[7] See Johann Caspar Lavater, *Zueignungsschreiben Johann Caspar Lavaters an Moses Mendelssohn*, in *JubA*, 7:3. I follow Curtis Bowman's English translation in "Lavater's Dedication to Mendelssohn," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, trans. Arkush, Curtis Bowman, and Elias Sacks, ed. Michah Gottlieb, Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 5.

[8] As we will see, "eternal felicity" refers to the happiness that emerges as an individual pursues perfection after her death. See pages 48-52 in Chapter 1 and note 101 in Chapter 4.

[9] See page 32 and note 11 in Chapter 1. Although Mendelssohn emphasizes the possibility and importance of offering philosophical demonstrations of these principles, he holds that individuals can come to rationally endorse these beliefs even in the absence of such proofs.

[10] Two points are worth noting. First, strictly speaking, the title "*Biur*" applies only to the Hebrew commentary. However, for the sake of simplicity, I will use this title to refer to the work as a whole—to the Hebrew commentary and German translation. Second, Mendelssohn composed much, but not all, of the *Biur*. More specifically, in addition to writing the text's introduction, he composed the German translation of all five books, the Hebrew commentary on the book of Exodus, and sections of the Hebrew commentary on the other books; the remaining material was written by various assistants. On this issue, see Perez Sandler, *Habiur Latorah shel Mosheh Mendelssohn V'siato* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1940). When I cite a passage in Mendelssohn's commentary from sections other than the introduction and the commentary on Exodus, I will explain why we should treat the relevant text as a Mendelssohnian composition.

[11] While it was once common to present Mendelssohn as failing to respond to Kantian challenges, recent scholarship has shown that his 1785 *Morning Hours* addresses the critical philosophy. See, e.g., Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 105-107; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 90-91. For a further discussion of Mendelssohn and Kant, see pages 95-96 in Chapter 2.

[12] For recent attempts to clarify the philosophical issues at stake in the Pantheism Controversy, see, e.g., Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 44-108; Bruce Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question: Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig, and Beyond* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 79-161; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 59-111.

[13] The description of Mendelssohn as a "martyr" appears in a 1786 review by Karl Philipp Moritz, and is quoted in Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 745.

[14] For some recent overviews of Mendelssohn's reception history, see, e.g., Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 148-155; Dominique Bourel, *Moses Mendelssohn: la naissance du judaïsme moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 21-43; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 3-9.

[15] The view of Mendelssohn as the first thinker to offer a philosophical account of Judaism's modern relevance already appears in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies of Jewish history and philosophy. For two classic examples, see Heinrich Graetz, "The Structure of Jewish History," in *The Structure of Jewish History, and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Ismar Schorsch (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1975), 119-122; Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism: The History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. David W. Silverman (New York: Holt, Rinhart and Winston, 1964), 289-303. For some examples of recent works that describe Mendelssohn as "the founder of modern Jewish thought," see Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment*, SUNY Series in Judaica (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), xii; Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 13.

[16] While opposition to Mendelssohn was not confined to traditionalist quarters, he was generally held in higher regard outside such circles, at least through the end of the nineteenth century: see Jacob Katz, "Moses Mendelssohns schwankendes Bild bei der jüdischen Nachwelt,"

in *Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit*, ed. Michael Albrecht, Eva J. Engel, and Norbert Hinske, Wolfenbütteler Studien zur Aufklärung 19 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994), 349-362. On his favorable reception even among more traditionalist figures, see Moshe Samet, "M. Mendelssohn, N.H. Weisel, V'rabbanei Doram," in *Mekhkarim B'toldot Am Yisrael V'eretz Yisrael*, ed. A. Gilboa et al. (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1970), 233-257; Meir Hildesheimer, "Moses Mendelssohn in Nineteenth-Century Rabbinical Literature," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 55 (1988): 79-133. On Mendelssohn's best known traditionalist opponent (the Hatam Sofer, the Hungarian founder of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism), see Hildesheimer, "The Attitude of the Hatam Sofer toward Moses Mendelssohn," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 60 (1994): 141-187.

[17] See Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn as the Archetypal German Jew," in *The Jewish Response to German Culture*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1985), 17-31.

[18] For attacks on Mendelssohn from diverse critics, see Michael Brenner, "The Construction and Deconstruction of a Jewish Hero: Moses Mendelssohn's Afterlife in Early Twentieth-Century Germany," in *Mediating Modernity: Challenges and Trends in the Jewish Encounter with the Modern World. Essays in Honor of Michael A. Meyer*, ed. Brenner and Lauren B. Strauss (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 274-289. For one of the best known attacks on Mendelssohn—the critique leveled by the Eastern European writer Peretz Smolenskin—see Isaac E. Barzilay, "Smolenskin's Polemic against Mendelssohn in Historical Perspective," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 53 (1986): 11-48

[19] On the ways in which many of Mendelssohn's critics remain deeply indebted to, or at least echo central elements of, his writings on the Jewish tradition see, e.g., Gershon Greenberg, "Die Symbiose deutsch-jüdischer Philosophie: Mendelssohn und das Christentum," *Judaica* 52, no. 2 (1996): 82-115; Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion*.

[20] For works published through 1980, see Herrmann M. Z. Meyer, *Moses Mendelssohn Bibliographie: Mit einigen Ergänzungen zur Geistesgeschichte des ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts,* Veröffentlichungen der historischen Kommission zu Berlin beim Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut der Freien Universität Berlin 26 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967); Albrecht "Moses Mendelssohn: Ein Forschungsbericht, 1965-1980," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 57, no. 1 (1983): 64-159.

[21] The work of Frederick Beiser offers an instructive example: see, e.g., Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 44-108; *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 196-243.

[22] See, e.g., the source by Guttmann in note 15, as well as his "Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* and Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," trans. Alfred Jospe, in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), 361-386; Leo Strauss, "Einleitung zu 'Morgenstunden' und 'An die Freunde Lessings,'" in *JubA*, 3.2:xi-xcv; Simon Rawidowicz, "Einleitungen: zum Lavater-Mendelssohn Streit, zu den 'Gegenbetrachtungen über Bonnets Palingenesie,' zu 'Ritualgesetze der Juden,' zur 'Reform des Judeneides,'" in *JubA*, 7:xi-clxxxiii. The bicentennial of Mendelssohn's birth also saw the publication of volumes that included essays by figures such as Franz Rosenzweig: see, e.g., *Gedenkbuch für Moses Mendelssohn* (Berlin: M. Poppelauer, 1929).

[23] See, e.g., Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zur Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969); *Moses Mendelssohn*; *Die trostvolle Aufklärung: Studien zur Metaphysik*

und politischen Theorie Moses Mendelssohns, Forschungen und Materialien zur deutschen Aufklärung (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1982). For two examples of other influential studies published during this period, see Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749-1824* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 11-56; Yizhak Heinemann, *Ta'amei Hamitzvot B'sifrut Yisrael*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Hahistadrut Hatzionit, 1956-1966), 2:9-47.

[24] For some recent books devoted wholly or substantially to Mendelssohn, see, e.g., Albrecht, Engel, and Hinske, eds. *Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit*; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*; Edward Breuer, *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-Century Study of Scripture*, Harvard Judaic Monographs 7 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*; Carola Hilfrich, *"Lebendige Schrift": Repräsentation und Idolatrie in Moses Mendelssohns Philosophie und Exegese des Judentums* (Munich: Fink, 2000); Albrecht and Engel, eds. *Moses Mendelssohn im Spannungsfeld der Aufklärung* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 2000); Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine*, Studies in German Jewish Cultural History and Literature (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Bourel, *Moses Mendelssohn*; Feiner, *Mosheh Mendelssohn* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2005; an English translation has appeared as *Moses Mendelssohn: Sage of Modernity*, trans. Anthony Berris, Jewish Lives [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010]); Robert Erlewine, *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question*; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*; Reiner W. Munk, ed., *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics* (New York: Springer, 2011). I should also mention Gideon Freudenthal's recently published *No Religion Without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment*, which appeared too late to be incorporated into this dissertation: I do, however, consult an essay in which Freudenthal outlines some of his key claims (see, e.g., note 45 in Chapter 1 and notes 1 and 3 in Chapter 5 below). On this recent scholarship, see Gottlieb "Between Judaism and German Enlightenment: Recent Work on Moses Mendelssohn in English." *Religion Compass* 4, no. 1 (2010): 22-38.

[25] Beyond the edition of *Jerusalem* cited earlier, recent translations include Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Phädon, or on the Immortality of the Soul*, trans. Patricia Noble (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence*, trans. and ed. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck, Studies in German Idealism 12 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011); *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*. I look forward to the publication of Rosenstock's *Moses Mendelssohn: Last Works*.

[26] Recent examples include a 2009 conference in Amsterdam on "Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics," a 2010 Princeton University symposium on "The Question of Unity in Mendelssohn's Thought," a 2011 Center for Jewish History symposium on "Moses Mendelssohn and the Legacy of the Enlightenment," and a 2011 University of Maryland conference on "Moses Mendelssohn, Religious Enlightenment, and Enlightened Religion."

[27] The lines I quote appear in Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, xxii-xxiii, 155. Sorkin has in mind medieval thinkers such as Saadia Gaon, Judah Halevi, and Nahmanides. On Sorkin's sources, as well as a (possible) recent nuancing of his view, see note 13 in Chapter 5.

[28] The lines I quote appear in Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, xiv-xv, 260. On a (possible) recent nuancing of Arkush's view, see note 13 in Chapter 5.

[29] Gottlieb outlines this debate in "Between Judaism and German Enlightenment," 22-38. See Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*; Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 291-303; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*; Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Concept of Judaism Re-examined," in *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung: Studien zur jüdischen Geistesgeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 248. See also note 50 in Chapter 5 for the views of other scholars.

[30] See Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew*, 56.

[31] David Novak, *The Jewish Social Contract: An Essay in Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 187.

[32] Jerome E. Copulsky, "The Martyr of Reason," *Jewish Review of Books* 2, no. 2 (2011): 9. Copulsky notes that "there is still much to learn from Moses Mendelssohn's noble life and philosophical texts," but the emphasis remains on the limits of Mendelssohn's thought.

[33] Kepnes links Mendelssohn to postliberal thought: Steven D. Kepnes, "Moses Mendelssohn's Philosophy of Jewish Liturgy: A Post-Liberal Assessment," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (2004): 185-212. Erlewine reads Mendelssohn as part of a tradition in modern philosophy committed to monotheism and tolerance: see Erlewine, *Monotheism and Tolerance*.

[34] See Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question*, 5. For Rosenstock, the key is to combine Mendelssohn's political theory with Franz Rosenzweig's philosophy of revelation.

[35] See Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 116. This claim is part of Gottlieb's broader argument that Mendelssohn offers a "religious humanism" that might be relevant today.

[36] A survey of scholarship on Jewish law, of course, lies far beyond the scope of this dissertation. For a concise introduction, see Louis Jacobs and Benjamin De Vries, "Halakhah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 22 vols. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 8:251-258. For one influential overview, see Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles*, trans. Bernard Auerbach and Melvin J. Sykes, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994).

[37] It is important to note that for Mendelssohn, an "action" required by Jewish law can involve performing a specific activity or refraining from a specific activity—for example, eating a specific food or avoiding a specific food. The idea here seems to be that both following a requirement to perform a specific activity, and following a requirement to refrain from a specific activity, involve choosing to behave in a particular manner, and thus can be understood as the performance of an action. See, e.g., the way in which Mendelssohn, when giving examples of how Jewish law requires "actions [*Handlungen*]" and "performances [*Verrichtungen*]," takes this system to require "doing and not doing [*Thun und Lassen*]" and to insist that adherents "do or not do [*thun, oder nicht thun*]" (Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 119/8:184, 100-102/8:166-168; I have slightly altered Arkush's translation). Indeed, Mendelssohn at one point seems to suggest that with respect to Jewish law, the concept of "doing and not doing" is interchangeable with the concept of performing "actions": according to *Jerusalem*, "the law…prescribed only actions, only doing and not doing [*blos Handlungen, blos Thun und Lassen*]" (118/8:184).

[38] On *ma'asim* as "practices" in Hebrew philosophical literature, see Jakob Klatzkin, *Thesaurus Philosophicus Linguae Hebraicae et Veteris et Recentioris*, 4 vols. (Berlin: Eshkol, 1928-1933), 2:242-243. See also Mendelssohn's use of the term *ma'aseh* in the *Biur* on Exodus (Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in *JubA*, 16:406) to indicate a contrast to the *iyyun*, which refers to "speculation" or "theorizing"—terms whose German equivalents are often contrasted with "practice [*Ausübung*]" or "practical [*praktische*]. See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 133/8:198; "On the question: what does 'to enlighten' mean?" in *Philosophical*

Writings, 313; for the German, see *Ueber die Frage: was heißt aufklären*, in *JubA*, 6.1:115; further references will follow the format Mendelssohn, "To Enlighten," English/German; I will indicate cases in which I alter Dahlstrom's translation.

[39] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Numbers 15:39, in *JubA*, 18:133. While Mendelssohn is not the lead author of the *Biur* on Numbers, these remarks appear in one of his parenthetical insertions.

[40] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 23:19, in *JubA*, 16:226.

[41] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 13:8, in *JubA*, 16:107; *Biur* on Exodus 20:2, in *JubA*, 16:187-188; *Biur* on Exodus 20:8, in *JubA*, 16:191; *Biur* on Deuteronomy 5:12, in *JubA*, 18:339 (Mendelssohn writes the *Biur* on this section: see Sandler, *Habiur Latorah*, 153).

[42] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 21:24, in *JubA*, 18:206-207. According to Mendelssohn, the procedure at issue in this passage—the imposition of monetary fines—is no longer followed since the collapse of the ancient Hebrew state. See *Jerusalem*, 130/8:195.

[43] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen über Bonnets Palingenesie*, 7:101; I have altered Bowman's translation in "From 'Counterreflections to Bonnet's *Palingenesis*,'" in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 26. Mendelssohn's use of the term "customs [*Gebräuchen*]" might seem to suggest that he is referring to what the Jewish tradition has traditionally described as *minhagim* or "customs"—that is, to actions which Jews have traditionally performed but, strictly speaking, possess a less substantial legal grounding. Elsewhere in his German writings, however, Mendelssohn explicitly uses the term *Gebräuche* to refer to actions *required by Jewish law*: see, e.g., *Jerusalem*, 119/8:184. Moreover, as indicated below, Mendelssohn's focus in the *Counterreflections* itself lies with Judaism's' "laws."

[44] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7.91-98; I have altered Bowman's translation in "Counterreflections," 16-23.

[45] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:105; I have altered Bowman's translation in "Counterreflections," 30.

[46] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen,* 7:98; I follow Bowman's translation in "Counterreflections," 23.

[47] I am referring to the 1782 *Preface* to a work on Jews' civic status: on this text, see page 34 in Chapter 1. This quotation appears in Mendelssohn, *Vorrede zur Manasseh Ben Israel Rettung der Juden*, in *JubA*, 8:16-22; I follow Bowman's translation in "From the Preface to *Vindiciae Judaeorum*," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 44-49. Mendelssohn states that he is concerned both with laws explicitly outlined in the Bible and with laws presented in rabbinic literature as deriving from text (see page 55 in Chapter 1 of this dissertation). While the reference to "practices" that are "prescribed" makes it clear that he is concerned with actions required by Jewish law, he seems *also* to be concerned with other religiously significant actions sanctioned by the Jewish community, since his examples include forms of worship envisioned by the ancient King Solomon.

[48] References to the "ceremonial law" appear throughout *Jerusalem*, including in the passages cited in notes 52 and 53 of this chapter. While Mendelssohn at times seems to be referring primarily to norms outlined explicitly in the Pentateuch, a careful examination of his language makes it clear that he sees the "ceremonial law" as including not only norms outlined explicitly in the Pentateuch, but also norms presented in rabbinic literature of late antiquity (norms which, as we will see later in this dissertation, Mendelssohn takes to be largely derivable from the Bible). The key here is that when Mendelssohn discusses the "ceremonial law" in *Jerusalem*, he uses some of the same terminology that one of his earlier texts—the *Ritual Laws*

of the Jews—uses to refer to laws presented in rabbinic texts. More precisely, just as the *Ritual Laws* takes rabbinic literature to articulate "orally" transmitted norms which constitute "explanations [*Erklärungen*]" and "more precise determinations [*nähere Bestimmungen*] of the written laws" outlined in the Pentateuch (Mendelssohn, *Ritualgesetze der Juden, betreffend Erbschaften, Vormundschaftsssachen, Testamente und Ehesachen, in so weit sie das Mein und Dein angehen*, in *JubA*, 7:115), so too does *Jerusalem* take the "ceremonial law" to include "orally" transmitted "laws" that "explain [*erklären*]…and determine more precisely [*näher bestimmen*] what…remained undetermined in the written law (*Jerusalem*, 119/8:185; I have slightly altered Arkush's translation). Indeed, similar language also appears later in *Jerusalem*, with Mendelssohn taking the Jews' "laws, precepts, commandments and rules of life" to include "orally" transmitted "explanations [*Erläuterungen*]…and more precise determinations [*näheren Bestimmungen*]" of the Pentateuch's norms (*Jerusalem*, 127/8:192-193).

[49] Terms such as "actions [*Handlungen*]" and "performances [*Verrichtungen*]" recur throughout Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102-139/8:168-204. Dietary practices are briefly invoked on 135/8:200, which states that Jews who follow "the ceremonial law…will not eat" with non-Jews—a reference to norms governing food preparation and consumption.

[50] Mendelssohn frames the contrast between reflecting on this system and acting in accordance with its laws as a contrast between "speculation and practice." See Ibid., 133/8:198.

[51] Ibid., 89-90/8:156-157, 102-103/8:169.

[52] Ibid, 118/8:184.

[53] Ibid., 103/8:169.

[54] While there are moments in which this text—the *Ritual Laws of the Jews*—seems to use "ritual" to refer to a specific subset of laws, this treatise generally subsumes all norms—even those concerning matters such as property—under "ritual laws." Indeed, although some readers have described the use of "ritual" in the work's title as "misleading" and a "misnomer" (see, e.g., Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 470; Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 105, 187n44), Mendelssohn seems to have no qualms about employing this language. Indeed, he repeats the phrase "ritual laws" at the end of his introduction and even uses a similar Latin term, referring to disputes involving halakhic norms concerned with matters of property as "legal cases that depend upon Jewish *rites* [*von jüdischen Ritibus abhängen*]" (Mendelssohn, *Ritualgesetze*, 7:127).

[55] Although I will discuss some sources in notes 57 and 59-60 below, many of the key works will be cited later in this dissertation: see notes 63-66 and 68 in Chapter 1. Some important works that are not cited in those discussions (but do appear elsewhere in this dissertation) include Heinemann, *Ta'amei Hamitzvot*, 2:9-47; Amos Funkenstein, "The Political Theory of Jewish Emancipation from Mendelssohn to Herzl," in *Deutsche Aufklärung und Judenemanzipatio*n, ed. Walter Grab (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Institute for Germany History, 1980), 13–28; 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*, ed. Wolfson, Alfred Ivry, and Arkush (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 423-456; Freudenthal, "Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast," in *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics*, 351-372. See also the discussions of Jewish law in the sources cited in notes 22-24 above. While many of these texts refer to Mendelssohn and Jewish *law*, this theory of law—given Mendelssohn's view that the law requires action—is a theory of practice.

[56] See the sources cited in notes 15 and 24 above.

[57] This phrase appears in Arnold Eisen, "Divine Legislation as 'Ceremonial Script': Mendelssohn on the Commandments." *AJS Review* 15, no. 2 (1990): 256; Eisen is referring to the passage quoted on page 41 in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Similar worries appear in the writings of Altmann, who describes *Jerusalem*'s claims regarding idolatry and Jewish practice as "the least substantiated of all theories [Mendelssohn] ever advanced" (Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 546; for a recent approach to this issue, see note 45 in Chapter 1).

[58] See pages 40-65 in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[59] Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 218.

[60] To be sure, some careful and influential readers of *Jerusalem* do *not* describe this text as obscure: see, e.g., the discussion of *Jerusalem* in Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 120-146. My point is simply that some of *Jerusalem*'s most important readers—scholars such as Altmann, Eisen, and Arkush—express confusion about what Mendelssohn has in mind in key passages.

[61] As I note in Chapter 1 (page 33), my focus for much of this dissertation lies with claims about Jewish practice that figure prominently in *Jerusalem* but have generated considerable confusion. I discuss other aspects of his argument in Chapters 1 and 5.

[62] An example of a German text intended for non-Jewish readers is the *Ritual Laws of the Jews*, which was written for the use of Prussian governmental officials. For background on this text, (especially Mendelssohn's status as the author), see Rawidowicz, "zu 'Ritualgesetze der Juden,'" cvi-clvii; see also Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 470; Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 104-107. An example of a text directed at a mixed audience—or, at least, written with the possibility of a mixed audience in mind—is *Jerusalem*: while this treatise is a response to challenges leveled by non-Jewish authors (see pages 34-36 in Chapter 1), Mendelssohn imagines it as generating reactions among both Jews and non Jews (see Mendelssohn to Herz Homberg, 14 June 1783, in *JubA*, 13:113). One exception is the German translation of the Pentateuch included in the *Biur*: Mendelssohn intends this translation for Jewish readers. (While it was once common to hold that his primary goal was to introduce Jews to German, recent scholarship has shown that he was also attempting to produce a translation for German-speaking Jews unable to access the Hebrew original.) See Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 147-175.

[63] While some Jewish readers of these Hebrew works might have been familiar with broader trends in European thought, Mendelssohn's intended audience would have been largely made up of individuals unfamiliar with European philosophy and biblical scholarship. Moreover, as various scholars have noted, his use of ancient and medieval language in many of these works would have made them intelligible primarily to the Jewish intellectual elite. On Mendelssohn's audience, see, e.g., Breuer, *Limits*, 147-175, et al.; Breuer and Sorkin, eds., "Moses Mendelssohn's First Hebrew Publication: An Annotated Translation of the *Kohelet Mussar"* trans. Breuer, *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 48 (2003): 4; Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 51-55, 74-76, et al. (I should add that a text associated with Mendelssohn's Hebrew commentary on the Pentateuch—his German translation of the Pentateuch—seems to have been directed, at least in part, at Jewish readers with less grounding in pre-modern Jewish sources: on this translation, see my previous note.) Of course, he also imagines that some non-Jews might read his Hebrew works: for example, he sends a copy of the *Biur* on Genesis and Exodus to the non-Jewish scholar Robert Lowth (see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 412-413). The key point, though, is that these Hebrew writings are composed *primarily* for Jews.

[64] On the neglect of Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings, see Sorkin, "The Mendelssohn Myth and its Method," *New German Critique* 77 (1999): 7-28. This is not to say that a concern

with these texts is entirely absent from existing scholarship. One mid-twentieth-century attempt to integrate his German and Hebrew texts is Heinemann, *Ta'amei Hamitzvot*, 2:9-47. Studies of specific Hebrew works include, e.g., Sandler, *Habiur Latorah*; Edward Richard Levenson, "Moses Mendelssohn's Understanding of Logico-Grammatical and Literary Construction in the Pentateuch: A Study of His German Translation and Hebrew Commentary (the Bi'ur)," (Ph.D., Brandeis University, 1972); Meir Gilon, *Kohelet Mussar L'Mendelssohn al Reka Tekufato* (Jerusalem: Ha'akademyah Haleumit Hayisraelit Lemadaim, 1979). Some more recent studies that address Mendelssohn's Hebrew works, sometimes alongside his German texts, include, e.g., Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*; Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*; Kaplan, "Maimonides and Mendelssohn," 423-456; Hilfrich, *"Lebendige Schrift"*; Jonathan Karp, "The Aesthetic Difference: Moses Mendelssohn's *Kohelet Musar* and the Inception of the Berlin Haskalah," in *Renewing the Past, Reconfiguring Jewish Culture: From Al-Andalus to the Haskalah*, ed. Ross Brann and Adam Sutcliffe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 93-120; Warren Zev Harvey, "Mendelssohn and Maimon on the Tree of Knowledge," in *Sepharad in Ashkenaz: Medieval Knowledge and Eighteenth-Century Enlightened Jewish Discourse*, ed. Resianne Fontaine, Andrea Schatz, and Irene Zwiep (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2007), 185-192; Freudenthal, "Moses Mendelssohn," 351-372.

[65] See my translations in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*. Some texts appear, with annotations, in Levenson, "Moses Mendelssohn's Introduction to the Ten Commandments," *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies* 7 (1978): 13-22; Breuer and Sorkin, "Moses Mendelssohn's First Hebrew Publication," 3-23. Earlier collections omit these works or offer very limited selections: see *Jerusalem, and Other Jewish Writings*, trans. and ed. Alfred Jospe (New York: Schocken Books, 1969); *Moses Mendelssohn: Selections from His Writings*, trans. and ed. Eva Jospe, Jewish Heritage Classics (New York: Viking, 1975).

[66] See Sorkin and Breuer in "Moses Mendelssohn's First Hebrew Publication," 8-23. See also Gottlieb's notes in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*.

[67] See, e.g., Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 184-195. See also the account of his style and language in Breuer and Sorkin, eds., "Moses Mendelssohn's First Hebrew Publication," 4.

[68] See Raphael Jospe, "Biblical Exegesis as a Philosophic Literary Genre: Abraham Ibn Ezra and Moses Mendelssohn," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy,* ed. Emil L. Fackenheim and Raphael Jospe (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 48-92

[69] Indeed, as we will see, Mendelssohn takes a focus on the Bible's textual details to be one of the great strengths of classical rabbinic exegesis: see pages 179-180 in Chapter 4.

[70] All translations of Mendelssohn's Hebrew texts in this dissertation are my own. In some cases, I have also published translations of the relevant passages in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*. While my English renderings in this dissertation generally follow the versions in that volume, I occasionally introduce minor changes to emphasize points central to my arguments. When I have published a translation of a passage quoted in this dissertation, I also cite the volume cited above, noting cases in which I alter the published version. (With respect to Mendelssohn's German writings, I cite existing translations but often introduce substantial changes based on the German original; I also explore and translate numerous German texts for which no English version has been published.)

[71] For example, I am hardly the first reader to note Mendelssohn's awareness of assaults on Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysics (Chapter 2), involvement in debates surrounding Jews' civic status (Chapter 3), and familiarity with modern biblical scholarship (Chapter 4).

[72] See Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 49-75.

[73] It was once common to present Mendelssohn as uninterested in history, in part because of this remark: "I always yawn when I must read something historical" (Mendelssohn to Thomas Abbt, 16 February 1765, in *JubA*, 12.1:75). Recent scholarship, however, has shown that the category of history plays an important role in Mendelssohn's thought. See, e.g., Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 538-543; Hans Liebeschütz, "Mendelssohn und Lessing in ihrer Stellung zur Geschichte," in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe (University: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 167-182; Michael L. Morgan, "History and Modern Jewish Thought: Spinoza and Mendelssohn on the Ritual Law," *Judaism* 30, no. 4 (1981): 467-478; "Overcoming the Remoteness of the Past: Memory and Historiography in Modern Jewish Thought," *Judaism* 38, no. 2 (1989): 160-173; "Jewish Philosophy and Historical Self-Consciousness," *Journal of Religion* 71, no. 1 (1991): 36-49; Dov Schwartz, "Hahitpathut shel Hamin Haenoshi B'mishnato Shel Mendelssohn—Perek B'toldotav shel Hara'ayon Hameshihi," *Da'at* 22 (1989): 109-121; Breuer, "Politics, Tradition, History: Rabbinic Judaism and the Eighteenth-Century Struggle for Civil Equality," *Harvard Theological Review* 85, no. 3 (1992): 357-383; "Of Miracles and Events Past: Mendelssohn on History," *Jewish History* 9, no. 2 (1995): 27-52; *Limits of Enlightenment*; "Rabbinic Law and Spirituality in Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 86, no. 3-4 (1996): 299-321; Christoph Böhr, "Johann Jakob Engel und die Geschichtsphilosophie Moses Mendelssohns," in *Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit*, 157-174; Hinske, "Das stillschweigende Gespräch: Prinzipien der Anthropologie und Geschichtsphilosophie bei Mendelssohn und Kant," in *Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit*, 135-156; Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 78-87, 128-135, et al.; Matt Erlin "Reluctant Modernism: Moses Mendelssohn's Philosophy of History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 1 (2002): 83-104; Feiner, *Haskalah and History: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Historical Consciousness*, trans. Naor and Sondra Silverston (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002), 26-28, 40-43; Jonathan M. Hess, "Moses Mendelssohn and the Polemics of History," in *Modern Judaism and Historical Consciousness: Identities, Encounters, Perspectives*, ed. Andreas Gotzmann and Christian Wiese (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 3-27; Irene Kajon, "*Madness of Mankind*: Moses Mendelssohn as a Critic of Sabbateanism," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 3, no. 2 (2009): 205-227. On the originality of my reading with respect to scholarship on Mendelssohn and history, see pages 231-232 in Chapter 5.

While history is central to this dissertation, my goal is not to give a comprehensive account of Mendelssohn's approach to this concept. Instead, I will show that his views on historical change and knowledge animate his account of Jewish practice; therefore, I only briefly discuss aspects of his position that are not crucial to my argument (for example, his rejection of the idea of moral progress or of a progressive education of humanity: that said, this rejection is implicit in the cyclical-dialectical model outlined in Chapter 3; see also pages 89-97 and note 8 in Chapter 2). This is a dissertation that is primarily concerned with Mendelssohn's account of Jewish practice and draws on his conception of history, rather than a dissertation that is centrally focused on his theory of history but also addresses his view of Jewish practice.

[74] See Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy," 49-75.

[75] Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 552.

Chapter 1
The "Living Script": *Jerusalem*'s Perplexing Arguments

Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism is a book that Mendelssohn would have preferred not to write. Composed and published over the span of several months in 1782 and 1783, this text responds to what its author describes as a type of claim that "ought to be banished forever"[1]—to a pamphlet that accuses him of covertly rejecting central aspects of the Jewish tradition, and that calls upon him to abandon Judaism and convert to Christianity.[2] Such challenges were hardly new to Mendelssohn, whose professions of loyalty to the Jewish tradition had long puzzled many of his contemporaries.[3] Nevertheless, this renewed attack on his fidelity to Judaism greatly angered the aging philosopher, eliciting a fierce denunciation of his opponents' behavior: "it is," he writes, "harsh and offensive to impute to me…the odious intention of overthrowing the religion I profess and of renouncing it surreptitiously."[4]

Jerusalem's origins in a public challenge to convert make for a poignant historical narrative, illustrating the difficulties that "the Jew of Berlin" confronted as he sought to participate in European intellectual life, and inspiring subsequent generations of Jews to treat him as a "patron saint" who refused to abandon the Jewish tradition.[5] Nevertheless, if *Jerusalem*'s origins have often left readers inspired, *Jerusalem*'s arguments have also left readers perplexed, for this work has frequently seemed to be more influential than intelligible. As we saw in my introduction, while commentators have typically presented this text as a founding work of modern Jewish thought,[6] diverse scholars have expressed confusion regarding this text's account of Jewish practice—of the actions required by Jewish law. For example, scholars have expressed uncertainty regarding the content of the reasoning behind *Jerusalem*'s conclusions, lamenting the fact that "we have…seen nothing" of the rationales justifying key claims.[7] Arkush, we saw, has gone even further, suggesting not only that "it is probably not possible to

determine for sure" the details of *Jerusalem*'s arguments regarding Jewish practice, but also that Mendelssohn may not actually intend to offer a detailed account of this topic:

> His intentions in treating this subject were rather limited. It does not seem that he was striving to formulate, for coming generations of Jews, a new rationale for continuing to perform the commandments. He was simply seeking to deflect earlier criticisms of the law as being devoid of religious significance…The very nebulousness of his presentation could advance this purpose by leaving uncertain, and therefore unassailable, the precise but evidently limited relationship between the commandments and religious truths.[8]

On this view, if *Jerusalem*'s arguments are marked by "nebulousness," it may be because Mendelssohn does not mean to offer a detailed position—because he hints at Jewish practice's value to "deflect" attacks on the Jewish tradition, but avoids presenting detailed views open to critique. A key element of Mendelssohn's thought thus remains obscure for many readers.[9]

My dissertation seeks to develop a new reading of Mendelssohn's thought by shedding light on this perplexing account of Jewish practice. Chapter 1 sets the stage for this project by identifying problems that emerge from a close reading of *Jerusalem*. Initially, we will see, *Jerusalem*'s account of Jewish practice seems relatively straightforward: describing adherence to Jewish practice as the enactment of a "living script," Mendelssohn suggests that the actions required by Jewish law generate reflection on "eternal truths" accessible through reason, such as God's existence, divine providence, and the soul's immortality. Upon further scrutiny, however, three of *Jerusalem*'s central claims turn out to resist explication. More precisely, it is not at all clear what Mendelssohn has in mind when he insists that Jewish practice enables adherents to avoid "disfiguring" their religious beliefs, that Jewish practice serves to promote "the felicity of the nation," and that modern Jews have not been freed "from the strict obedience we owe to the law." Indeed, this confusion raises questions about the basic character and significance of Mendelssohn's writings on Judaism, providing grounds for suspecting that he defends this tradition with arguments which are "more rhetorical than real,"[10] and that he discusses Judaism

in terms which are too elusive to be relevant for contemporary thinkers—that he seeks merely to deflect, with effective rhetoric, attacks on the Jewish tradition, and that his claims are too vague to contribute to contemporary debates. Our encounter with *Jerusalem* thus raises fundamental questions about Mendelssohn's thought. Can we glean from his writings, read in their historical context, a more precise account of what he has in mind when he presents his theory of Jewish practice? Can we reconstruct the details of his approach to Judaism's "living script," or should we harbor doubts about the sincerity and relevance of his philosophy of Judaism?

Two preliminary remarks are in order. The first concerns the phrase "eternal truths [*ewige Wahrheiten*]." As I noted in my introduction, Mendelssohn is a defender of natural religion—of the idea that truths central to a religious life are accessible without the assistance of divine revelation. More specifically, for Mendelssohn, rational inquiry provides grounds for affirming three core religious principles: God's existence, divine providence, and the soul's immortality.[11] The key for us, in turn, is that *Jerusalem* uses the phrase "eternal truths" to refer to these rationally accessible principles.[12] For example, this text suggests that we would encounter "eternal truths" in a statement that God is "the necessary independent being, omnipotent and omniscient, that recompenses men in a future life."[13] Similarly, this treatise links the affirmation of an "eternal truth" to belief in "a *unique, eternal Deity* that rules the entire universe…and discerns men's most secret thoughts in order to reward their deeds…if not here, then in the hereafter."[14] In Chapter 2, we will explore Mendelssohn's position in greater detail, distinguishing between *principles* or *truths* such as divine providence, our determinate *understandings* or *concepts* of such truths, and the *sentences* or *verbal formulas* with which we express such views.[15] For now, I wish merely to note that when *Jerusalem* invokes "eternal truths," Mendelssohn is referring, in part, to the rationally accessible principles outlined above.

My second remark concerns this chapter's focus. As noted above, my goal in this section is to highlight perplexing aspects of *Jerusalem* in order to set the stage for the broader project this dissertation pursues—the project of reconstructing Mendelssohn's account of Jewish practice. In the following pages, then, I will leave aside dimensions of *Jerusalem* that are not directly relevant to this goal. On the one hand, I will devote little attention to arguments that have provoked controversy but are separable from Mendelssohn's views on Jewish practice: for example, I will touch only briefly on his widely discussed account of Judaism and coercion.[16] On the other hand, this chapter will also devote little attention to arguments that deal with Jewish practice but do not seem particularly opaque: for example, I will discuss but then leave aside *Jerusalem*'s claims regarding Jewish practice and idolatry, since these arguments have been persuasively explicated in recent scholarship.[17] I will return to these dimensions of *Jerusalem* in Chapter 5, considering the relationship between these arguments and my reconstruction of Mendelssohn's position. In this chapter, however, my concern lies with aspects of *Jerusalem* that provide a starting point for my reconsideration of this thinker—with claims about Judaism's "living script" that figure prominently in this text but have generated considerable confusion.

We can now turn to *Jerusalem* itself. I will begin by reviewing this treatise's background and core arguments. I will then show that existing scholarship leaves us uncertain about three of this text's key claims—about the sense in which Jewish practice protects against the distortion of beliefs, about the sense in which Jewish practice promotes collective well-being, and about the grounds on which the laws governing Jewish practice remain binding despite challenges posed by biblical scholarship. I will conclude by posing the question that animates subsequent chapters: can we glean from Mendelssohn's writings, read in their historical context, a more precise account of what he has in mind when he presents his theory of Jewish practice?

Jerusalem: An Introduction

To understand *Jerusalem*, we must begin with a text published one year earlier: Mendelssohn's *Preface* to a German translation of the *Vindication of the Jews*, a 1656 work by the Dutch rabbi Menasseh ben Israel urging the readmission of Jews to England. Appearing in 1782, the *Preface* addresses an emerging debate among German intellectuals surrounding Jews' civic status—surrounding the question of whether German states should grant Jews the civic rights available to non-Jews.[18] More specifically, the *Preface* is Mendelssohn's response to arguments advanced by the Prussian bureaucrat Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, who insists that Jewish *individuals* should be granted "equal rights with all other subjects," and that Jewish *communities* should retain privileges such as the authority to excommunicate dissident members.[19] While praising Dohm's support for bestowing civic rights on individual Jews, the *Preface* rejects the proposal that Jewish communities retain the power of excommunication, arguing that this authority—along with any form of religious coercion—is inconsistent both with a proper understanding of religion and politics, and with the teachings of the Jewish tradition.[20]

The *Preface* generated considerable debate, with the most influential response being *The Search for Light and Right in a Letter to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn*.[21] Published anonymously by the satirist August Friedrich Cranz,[22] this pamphlet begins by discussing Judaism and coercion:

> The faith of your fathers is simply the particular Jewish ecclesiastical system that comprises all the determinations from both scripture and rabbinic scriptural exegesis…You tore away the cornerstone of that latter particularist faith because…you rob the synagogue of its foremost power, by denying it the right of excommunicating…But as rational as all that you say about the subject may be, it directly contradicts the faith of your fathers… Moses attaches coercion and punishments to the failure to observe the duties associated with divine service…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?[23]

The claim here is that if religious "coercion" is central to the Jewish "faith," then Mendelssohn's willingness to "clear away" this "cornerstone" undermines his capacity to "persist in the faith of

[his] fathers." That is, if the Hebrew Bible endorses the punishment of offenses such as blasphemy, then Judaism's foundational document permits coercion in religious matters, and Mendelssohn's rejection of such coercion commits him to breaking with the Jewish tradition—at least to reforming Judaism by eliminating the punishments endorsed since the time of Moses, and perhaps to rejecting Judaism altogether in favor of Christianity.[24] For Cranz, then, the *Preface*'s rejection of religious coercion should lead Mendelssohn to alter or abandon Judaism.

While Cranz's focus lies with Mendelssohn's discussion of coercion, the *Search* also addresses a second aspect of the *Preface*. The target here is a series of statements in which the *Preface* expresses a positive attitude towards the role of reason in religious life—more specifically, statements which call for the toleration of "adherents of natural religion" who derive religious truths from rational reflection, and which describe religious worship as participation in "*reason's* house of devotion."[25] In a postscript to the *Search*, the Christian chaplain Daniel Ernst Mörschel raises the following concern about this favorable treatment of reason:

> I have found signs leading me to believe that you are just as removed from the religion into which you were born as from the one that I received…Your considered response led us to conclude that you are equally indifferent to Judaism and Christianity because you are, in your sense [of the term], "a despiser of all revelation." As proof of my suspicion, aside from [statements that defend adherents of natural religion],[26] I quote the following passage verbatim from your preface: "Reason's house of devotion requires no locked doors."[27]

Mörschel argues that if the *Preface* places "reason" at the center of "devotion" and defends adherents of natural religion, then we have grounds to suspect that Mendelssohn is a "despiser of all revelation" and "removed from the religion into which" he was "born." That is, according to this postscript, if Mendelssohn makes moves such as defending adherents of natural religion who derive religious truths from rational reflection, then he believes that reason can replace revelation as a source of religious content, and he therefore *must* have decided to reject religions such as Judaism and Christianity—religions that treat revelation as a source of norms and beliefs.

Mörschel's point, then, is that we can infer from the *Preface*'s positive attitude towards reason Mendelssohn's rejection of the Jewish tradition. While Cranz claims that the *Preface*'s rejection of coercion reveals a Mendelssohn who *should* alter or abandon Judaism, Mörschel insists that the *Preface*'s emphasis on reason reveals a Mendelssohn who *has already* rejected this tradition.

Jerusalem is Mendelssohn's attempt to respond to these challenges.[28] With respect to the charge that an attack on religious coercion entails the reform or rejection of Judaism, *Jerusalem* suggests that this accusation misunderstands the status of punishment in the Jewish tradition. What Cranz fails to realize, Mendelssohn argues, is that Jewish sources permit the punishment of offenses such as blasphemy *only* in the ancient Israelite state described by the Hebrew Bible:

> God, the Creator and Preserver of the world, was at the same time the King and Regent of the nation…Every sacrilege against the authority of God, as the lawgiver of the nation, was a crime against the Majesty, and therefore a crime of state. Whoever blasphemed God committed lese majesty…Under this constitution these crimes could and, indeed, had to be punished civilly, not as erroneous opinion, not as *unbelief*…This clearly shows how little one must be acquainted with the Mosaic law and the constitution of Judaism to believe that according to them *ecclesiastical right* and *ecclesiastical power* are authorized, or that temporal punishments are to be inflicted for unbelief or erring belief.[29]

Mendelssohn argues that insofar as God was the "King and Regent" of the Israelite polity, offenses such as blasphemy were "punished civilly" as "crime[s] of state" rather than religiously as "unbelief," and it is therefore incorrect to take "the constitution of Judaism" to permit "temporal punishments…for unbelief or erring belief"—that insofar as God was the *political* ruler of the Hebrew commonwealth, offenses such as blasphemy constituted *political* crimes against the state's government, and the permissibility of punishing such misdeeds does not imply the permissibility of coercion in purely *religious* matters. Indeed, Mendelssohn continues, once the Israelite commonwealth collapsed and God was no longer a political ruler, such offenses were no longer political crimes and thus no longer subject to punishment: in *Jerusalem*'s words, "*all corporal and capital punishments…have ceased to be legal*."[30] Mendelssohn responds to

Cranz, then, by providing an account of Judaism's approach to punishment. *Jerusalem* suggests that if Judaism permitted the punishment of offenses such as blasphemy *only* in the Hebrew commonwealth, then there is no basis for thinking that this tradition sanctions *religious* coercion, and thus no basis for treating an attack on the latter as a break with the former.

Moreover, just as *Jerusalem* responds to Cranz by claiming to outline Judaism's approach to punishment, so too does *Jerusalem* respond to Mörschel by claiming to outline Judaism's conception of revelation. While agreeing that the *Preface* expresses a positive attitude towards reason, Mendelssohn insists that this attitude does not indicate a rejection of the Jewish tradition:

> It is true 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.* Yet Mr. Mörschel is misled by an incorrect conception of Judaism when he supposes that I cannot maintain this without departing from the religion of my fathers. On the contrary, I consider this an essential point of the Jewish religion…The Israelites possess a divine *legislation*—laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity. Proposition and prescriptions of this kind were revealed to them by Moses in a miraculous and supernatural manner.[31]

According to Mendelssohn, Judaism understands revelation as transmitting a "divine *legislation*" which determines how Jews "should conduct themselves"—norms that *Jerusalem* goes on to describe as requiring actions whose "practice" remains obligatory.[32] That is, on his account, Judaism treats revelation as transmitting what we encountered in my introduction as *halakha* or *Jewish law*—norms that are understood to be endorsed by God and specify the actions involved in Jewish practice.[33] Mendelssohn's claim, in turn, is that he can ascribe importance to this type of revelation even though he emphasizes the importance of reason—even though he takes "eternal truths" to be known through rational reflection. After all, he argues, even if we take this *theoretical* content to be accessible through reason, we can still affirm the existence of *practical* content accessible only through "miraculous" communication, and we can therefore remain

faithful to what Judaism teaches regarding revelation: in his words, even if we "recognize no eternal truths other than those…demonstrated and verified by human powers," we can still treat revelation as a source of "divine *legislation*," and we can therefore accept "an essential point of the Jewish religion."[34] *Jerusalem*'s response to Mörschel thus rests on a view of revelation as a revelation of Jewish *law*. Mendelssohn argues that if Judaism treats revelation as a source of practical norms, then Judaism's conception of revelation can be endorsed by individuals who adopt a positive attitude towards reason—who treat reason as a source of theoretical content.

It is at this point—after responding to Mörschel—that *Jerusalem* develops the position that will occupy our attention in this dissertation.[35] Mendelssohn's argument begins as follows:

> Although the divine book that we received through Moses is, strictly speaking, meant to be a book of laws containing ordinances, rules of life, and prescriptions, it also includes, as is well known, an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines that are so intimately connected with the laws that they form but one entity. All laws refer to, or are based upon, eternal truths of reason, or remind us of them, and rouse us to ponder them. Hence our rabbis rightly say: the laws and doctrines are related to each other, like body and soul. I shall have occasion to say more about this below.[36]

This passage's central claim, repeated throughout *Jerusalem* and Mendelssohn's other writings,[37] is that Judaism's "laws refer to, or are based on, eternal truths of reason, or remind us of them, and rouse us to ponder them"—that adherence to the norms governing Jewish practice generates reflection on rationally accessible principles, such as God's existence, divine providence, and the soul's immortality. Although *Jerusalem* is not entirely clear about the mechanism by which such reflection arises,[38] Mendelssohn might be suggesting that the "rules" of Jewish law can be traced back to the "divine book…received through Moses," that this book "also includes…an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths,"[39] and that these truths are therefore "so intimately connected with the laws that they form but one entity." The claim here would be that insofar as Jewish law can be traced back to the Bible,[40] these norms can be traced back to a text which

affirms rationally accessible truths such as God's existence,[41] and this association between norms and truths results in the former calling attention to the latter. Put differently, Mendelssohn would be claiming that if Jews trace their laws to a text which repeats truths already known through rational reflection, then Jews are likely to associate these norms with those religious principles, and the performance of actions required by the one is likely to yield reflection on the other.

However we understand the details of Mendelssohn's reasoning, the key point for us is that this claim about Jewish law and "pondering" leads to one of *Jerusalem*'s best known statements:

> The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and to provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction. What a student himself did and saw being done from morning till night pointed to religious doctrines and convictions.[42]

For Mendelssohn, if "what a student did…pointed to religious doctrines" and was able "to inspire contemplation," then the law requiring such actions can be described as a "living script." That is, if the actions required by Jewish law call to mind core principles, then these actions function as signs in the sense of pointing beyond themselves to ideas, and the legal system requiring these actions functions as a "living script"—as a "script" because this system, like an alphabet, enables the emergence of meaningful signs, and as "living" because these signs, unlike the ones generated by an alphabet, are lived deeds rather than written words. Beyond addressing Cranz and Mörschel, then, *Jerusalem* outlines an account of Jewish practice. *Jerusalem* suggests that Jewish practice is best understood as the enactment of a "living script"—that the actions required by Jewish law generate reflection on eternal truths accessible through reason.[43]

Unfortunately, interpretive problems emerge once we explore the details of Mendelssohn's arguments. More specifically, problems emerge once we turn to his claims regarding the value and authority of Jewish practice—regarding the benefits secured by enacting a "living script," and regarding the grounds on which this "script" remains binding for modern Jews.

Jerusalem on Conceptual "Disfiguring"

Let us begin with *Jerusalem*'s approach to the value of Jewish practice. As is well known, one of *Jerusalem*'s claims is that Jewish practice combats the emergence of idolatry. According to Mendelssohn, religious traditions must employ signs that point to core principles, since adherents might forget or misunderstand key truths without concrete reminders. On the one hand, he notes, while some traditions employ "images" or "hieroglyphics" to point to such truths, these pictorial symbols run the risk of generating idolatry. For example, while words such as "God" and "Deity" bear only a conventional relation to the entity they signify, pictorial depictions of God acting in history would in some sense resemble, and thus seem to bear an essential relation to, this divine being, and these images might therefore be seen as sharing in this being's holiness and thus as meriting veneration—as meriting a share of the worship properly reserved only for God.[44] On the other hand, Mendelssohn continues, the signs generated by Judaism's "living script" are unlikely to become the focus of such veneration, for while the actions required by Jewish law point to truths such as divine providence, actions "disappear" once performed and thus are insufficiently enduring to become objects of worship. For example, insofar as Jewish practice involves eating meals while expressing gratitude to God, Jewish practice involves actions that direct attention to the deity without producing enduring objects that might be venerated; after all, the act of eating—as well as the food consumed—is no longer present once a meal is complete. For *Jerusalem*, then, Jewish practice is valuable, in part, because it combats the emergence of idolatry—because it replaces pictorial symbols that might be venerated with meaningful actions unlikely to be worshipped.[45]

There are, of course, reasons to wonder whether this position is tenable.[46] The key for us, however, is *Jerusalem*'s insistence that Jewish practice addresses problems beyond idolatry:[47]

> Images and hieroglyphics lead to superstition and idolatry, and our alphabetical script makes man too speculative. It displays the symbolic knowledge of things and their relations too openly on the surface; it spares us the effort of penetrating and searching, and creates too wide a division between doctrine and life. In order to remedy these defects the lawgiver of this nation gave the *ceremonial law*.[48]

As we saw in my introduction, Mendelssohn uses "ceremonial law" to refer to the legal system that governs Jewish practice.[49] His claim in this passage, then, is that Jewish practice is valuable —that God chose to "g[i]ve" the "law" governing this system—not only because actions replace pictorial symbols that can generate "idolatry," but also because actions replace "alphabetical signs" that can yield additional "defects." Mendelssohn then elaborates on this point:

> Religious and moral teachings were to be connected with men's everyday activities…The great maxim of this constitution seems to have been: *Men must be impelled to perform actions and only induced to engage in reflection*…The truths useful for the felicity of the nation as well as of each of its individual members were to be utterly removed from all imagery…They were to be connected with actions and performances, and these were to serve them in place of signs, without which they cannot be preserved. Man's actions are transitory; there is nothing lasting, nothing enduring about them that, like hieroglyphic script, could lead to idolatry through abuse or misunderstanding. But they also have the advantage over alphabetical signs of not isolating man, of not making him to be a solitary creature, poring over writings and books. They impel him rather to social intercourse, to imitation, and to oral, living instruction [*lebendigen Unterricht*]…In everything a youth saw being done, in all public as well as private dealings, on all gates and on all doorposts, in whatever he turned his eyes and ears to, he found occasion for inquiring and reflecting.[50]

Mendelssohn makes three moves. He suggests, first, that if we perform actions which point to truths, we will find ourselves in a community of "living" individuals to whom we can turn for "instruction"—that Jewish practice creates a community of adherents who engage in reflection because of the actions they perform, and who might thus engage one another in conversation to explore the principles being contemplated. He argues, second, that members of a community which enacts this "living script" will not be primarily concerned with tasks such as "poring over writings"—that such individuals will ascribe diminished importance to "alphabetical signs," since insofar as Jewish practice creates a communal life oriented around reflection and

"instruction" grounded in required deeds, this system leads adherents to view the actions which generate contemplation and discussion of truths, rather than written formulations of those truths, as the central feature of religious life.[51] He suggests, finally, that Jewish practice thereby has "the advantage over alphabetical signs of not isolating man, of not making him to be a solitary creature," since "our alphabetical script makes man too speculative" by creating "too wide a division between doctrine and life." That is, by leading adherents to engage in conversation and ascribe diminished importance to alphabetical signs, Jewish practice protects adherents from dangers arising from a preoccupation with this type of symbol, such as the danger of a "solitary" and "speculative" existence linking "doctrine" to texts rather than "life"—the danger of being so preoccupied with written texts which purport to clarify religious principles that we fail to interact with other individuals and learn from communal "life."[52] *Jerusalem* thus presents distinct lines of reasoning regarding the value of Jewish practice.[53] This treatise argues that Jewish practice is valuable both because it replaces the use of pictorial symbols capable of generating idolatry, and because it diminishes the importance of alphabetical writing capable of generating other dangers.

It is when we explore this second line of reasoning—the claim that Jewish practice fosters "living instruction" and avoids dangers associated with writing[54]—that our interpretive difficulties begin to take shape. In the passage cited above, Mendelssohn explores *one* danger associated with alphabetical signs—namely, the danger of social isolation. However, if we consider *Jerusalem*'s initial remarks on the theme of written signs and "living instruction," we discover that an additional concern figures prominently in his arguments on this topic:

> Doctrines and laws, convictions and actions. The former were not bound [*gebunden*] to words or written characters which always remain the same, for all men and all times, amid all the revolutions of language, morals, manners, and conditions, and which always present the same rigid forms, into which we cannot force [*einzwängen*] our concepts without disfiguring [*zerstümmeln*] them. They were entrusted to living, spiritual instruction [*lebendigen, geistigen, Unterrichte*], which can keep pace with all changes of

> time and circumstances…The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and to provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction. What a student himself did and saw being done from morning till night pointed to religious doctrines and convictions.[55]

We have already seen that this passage represents a key moment in *Jerusalem*, introducing not only the phrase "living instruction," but also the notion of a "living script"—the notion which stands at the center of Mendelssohn's account of Jewish practice. The claim advanced at this crucial moment, in turn, seems to be that insofar as the "actions" required by Jewish law point to eternal truths and foster "living… instruction," adherents of Jewish practice avoid a situation in which "doctrines" are "bound [*gebunden*] to words or written characters which always remain the same." What is Mendelssohn suggesting? What idea is he advancing at this key moment?

As various scholars have suggested,[56] we can begin to understand Mendelssohn's argument if we read this text against the backdrop of other passages in *Jerusalem*. The language of "binding" beliefs to words reappears when he discusses efforts to create a "union of faiths"—to create a unified religious community in which all individuals might participate:

> Shall we say that all of you would think just alike concerning religious truths?…The agreement, therefore, could lie only in the words, in the formula…Begin only by binding [*bindet*] the faith to symbols, the opinion to words, as modestly and pliantly as you please; only establish, once and for all, the articles: then woe to the unfortunate, who comes a day later, and who finds something to criticize even in these *modest, purified* words![57]

In this passage, "binding" beliefs to "words" involves treating a specific "formula" expressing "opinion" as central to a community's religious life, and therefore requiring the affirmation of these sentences while discouraging the revision of the "words" in question; put more simply, "binding" beliefs to "words" involves developing fixed verbal formulas, such as creedal statements, that must be affirmed.[58] If Mendelssohn uses *binden* consistently, then, his claim that Jewish practice avoids a situation in which "doctrines" are "bound to words or written

characters which always remain the same" implies that Jewish practice constitutes a means to avoid the emergence of fixed verbal formulas—of sentences that individuals are required to affirm without introducing revisions. Indeed, *Jerusalem* elsewhere advances a similar point, stating that Judaism refuses to require the affirmation of "articles of faith" and "religious oaths,"[59] and defining such oaths as "propositions of metaphysics and religion, clothed, as they were, centuries ago, in words"[60]—as formulas we must affirm without revision. Mendelssohn's account of Jewish practice, writing, and "living instruction," then, focuses not only on avoiding social isolation, but also on discouraging creedal formulas. He claims that insofar as Jewish practice creates a communal life oriented around reflection and conversation grounded in required deeds, Jewish practice leads adherents to view the actions generating contemplation and discussion of truths, rather than any specific written formulations of those truths, as the central feature of religious life, and that this privileging of actions over specific sets of words renders unlikely the emergence of "rigid" formulas—that this posture will discourage adherents from treating any specific formula as indispensable to Jewish life, and that these individuals will therefore refrain from demanding that any such sentences be affirmed without revision.[61]

Unfortunately, our interpretive efforts begin to founder once we delve further into the details of this claim, for commentators remain uncertain regarding the content of danger that Jewish practice avoids by discouraging fixed formulas—regarding the problem that would emerge if a community were to require the affirmation of creedal statements. According to *Jerusalem*, by generating reflection on eternal truths, Jewish practice allows adherents to avoid formulas which "always remain the same…amid all the revolutions" and "all changes of time and circumstances," and which thus "always present the same rigid forms, into which we cannot force our concepts without disfiguring them." The idea here seems to be that Jewish practice

enables adherents to avoid "disfiguring" their religious beliefs—that we will in some sense distort religious "concepts"[62] if we are required to affirm the same sentences amid "changes of time," and that a system which discourages the rise of such formulas therefore avoids this type of "disfiguring." But what does this mean? In what sense do "rigid" formulas "disfigure" beliefs amid "changes of time and circumstances"? What problem does Jewish practice avoid by protecting adherents from a requirement to affirm fixed formulas amid historical "revolutions"?

Attempts to resolve these questions have been unsuccessful.[63] Arnold Eisen has suggested that *Jerusalem* is addressing dangers associated with *all* verbal formulas—that Mendelssohn denies the capacity of *any* verbal formula to adequately express eternal truths, and that he thus presents Jewish practice as avoiding distortion which accompanies *any* use of words.[64] The problem with Eisen's interpretation, however, is that his account does not cohere with Mendelssohn's other writings, which repeatedly *affirm* the capacity of some formulas to adequately express religious principles.[65] Other scholars take *Jerusalem* to be claiming that Jewish practice discourages formulas which distort our beliefs by leading us to engage in idolatry—that requiring the affirmation of fixed formulas involves venerating something other than God, since if we treat words as unrevisable and indispensable, we ascribe to them such perfection and importance that we inadvertently treat them as replacements for the deity.[66] The problem with this reading, however, is that Mendelssohn presents the argument outlined in the passage cited above as separate from his arguments about idolatry. After all, this passage focuses on the way in which Jewish practice promotes "living…instruction," and we have seen that Mendelssohn distinguishes his treatment of this theme from his arguments about idolatrous worship.[67] Finally, some readers take Mendelssohn to be claiming that Jewish practice prevents distortion by discouraging the rise of formulas that might be misinterpreted—that if words

acquire new meanings over time, a formula employing a fixed set of terms might signify different concepts during different eras, and individuals who rely on such formulas might form beliefs which differ from, and thus distort, the ones intended by the words' authors.[68] However, while this reading may be correct, it also seems incomplete, for insofar as Mendelssohn invokes "*all* the revolutions of language, morals, manners, and conditions," he does not seem to be concerned *only* with linguistic shifts. We are thus left wondering what Mendelssohn has in mind when he invokes conceptual "disfiguring." In what sense does Jewish practice protect against distortion linked to "revolutions" and creedal formulas? What does Mendelssohn mean when he discusses Jewish practice and fixed verbal formulas at this key moment in *Jerusalem*?

Jerusalem on the "Felicity of the Nation"

Of course, some readers might not be troubled by this uncertainty. After all, these readers might argue, even if an opaque claim about conceptual "disfiguring" appears at a crucial moment in *Jerusalem*, the other Mendelssohnian claims considered above seemed not to pose difficulties. Perhaps, then, the confusion we have just encountered is relatively insignificant. Perhaps *Jerusalem*'s account of Jewish practice, with one exception, is largely transparent.

This assessment of *Jerusalem* becomes difficult to maintain once we plunge more deeply into Mendelssohn's arguments. Recall, for a moment, one of the passages cited above:

> Religious and moral teachings were to be connected with men's everyday activities…The truths useful for the felicity of the nation as well as of each of its individual members [*zur Glückseligkeit der Nation sowohl als der einzelnen Glieder derselben*] were to be utterly removed from all imagery…They were to be connected with actions and performances, and these were to serve them in place of signs, without which they cannot be preserved. Man's actions are transitory; there is nothing lasting, nothing enduring about them that, like hieroglyphic script, could lead to idolatry through abuse or misunderstanding. But they also have the advantage over alphabetical signs of not isolating man, of not making him to be a solitary creature, poring over writings and books. They impel him rather to social intercourse, to imitation, and to oral, living instruction…In everything a youth saw

> being done, in all public as well as private dealings, on all gates and on all doorposts, in whatever he turned his eyes and ears to, he found occasion for inquiring and reflecting.[69]

As we saw in the introduction to this dissertation, Mendelssohn takes Jewish practice to require actions even in seemingly mundane areas of life, ranging from the consumption of specific types of food to the wearing of specific types of garments.[70] The text cited above draws on this point, arguing that if "truths…were to be connected to actions and performances," then insofar as the relevant actions include "men's everyday activities," adherents will find "occasion for inquiring and reflecting" in "everything a youth saw being done"—that if the actions involved in Jewish practice direct attention to religious principles, then insofar as these actions occur even in areas of life such as diet and dress, adherents will frequently perform behavior that generates religious reflection, and they will therefore frequently find themselves contemplating principles such as God's existence. Mendelssohn then discusses the benefits of this recurring reflection, suggesting that the principles which Jewish practice leads adherents to contemplate are "useful for the felicity of the nation as well as of each of its individual members"—that by generating frequent reflection, Jewish practice not only combats dangers associated with "imagery" and "alphabetical signs," but also fosters the achievement of individual and collective *Glückseligkeit*. Indeed, this point figures prominently in *Jerusalem*, for Mendelssohn repeatedly employs similar language throughout this treatise:[71] (1) he claims that the Jewish "nation" received "rules of life…through the observance of which it should arrive at national felicity [*Nationalglückseligkeit*], as well as personal felicity [*persönlichen Glückseligkeit*] for each of its individual members";[72] (2) he states that Judaism's "laws have directly, as *prescriptions for action* and rules of life, public and private felicity [*öffentliche und Privatglückseligkeit*] as their ultimate aim";[73] and (3) he insists that what God "demands" of Jews—adherence to Jewish practice[74]—"advances the felicity of the state [*Glückseligkeit des Staats*]."[75] What is Mendelssohn suggesting when he presents these

claims? What does he mean when he repeatedly insists that Jewish practice promotes the "felicity" of individuals along with the "felicity" of a nation or state?

We can begin with the claim that Jewish practice promotes the *Glückseligkeit* of individuals. The key background here is Mendelssohn's philosophical anthropology, which ascribes to the human being the "vocation" of pursuing the *telos* of "perfection" or "flourishing," understood as a condition—ultimately unattainable—in which an individual has properly cultivated and rendered harmonious the faculties, or *Kräfte*, of her body and soul.[76] For the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition from which Mendelssohn draws this view, personal *Glückseligkeit* refers to the happiness that emerges as an individual engages in this project of cultivation—to what Wolff calls a "condition of continuous joy" that accompanies "progress towards greater perfection."[77] When Mendelssohn claims that Jewish practice fosters "personal felicity," then, he is claiming that Jewish practice is a path to the "continuous joy" we attain through the pursuit of perfection. Indeed, this view follows from the psychology outlined elsewhere in his writings, which identify as one faculty we are called to develop a capacity for rational reflection,[78] and which therefore imply that adherence to Jewish practice results in self-cultivation and personal felicity. After all, if the actions required by Jewish law generate frequent contemplation of rationally accessible truths, then these actions provide recurring opportunities to practice such reflection, and these actions thus enable the cultivation of a key capacity and yield a condition of felicity. When invoking personal *Glückseligkeit*, then, Mendelssohn is insisting that adherence to Jewish practice results in the happiness associated with the pursuit of perfection.

Let us now turn to Mendelssohn's repeated insistence that Jewish practice fosters the *Glückseligkeit* of collective entities: the "felicity of the nation," "national felicity," "public felicity," and the "felicity of the state." We should not be surprised to discover that he uses a

term associated with self-cultivation when he discusses entities such as states, for he posits a close relationship between social life and the pursuit of perfection, insisting that many activities which cultivate our *Kräfte*—such as aesthetic pursuits and benevolence towards others—become possible only in social settings.[79] But what, precisely, does this usage of *Glückseligkeit* denote? What collective condition is Mendelssohn presenting as a result of adherence to Jewish practice?

While I know of no text in which Mendelssohn explicitly defines collective *Glückseligkeit*, an initial indication of this notion's content emerges from the 1782 *Preface*, which notes that "material and spiritual goods belong…to the felicity of the state [*Glückseligkeit des Staates*]," and which offers the following examples of such "goods": the commerce produced by a "merchant," the "peace and security" provided by a "soldier," and the "advice" and "instruction" offered by a "scholar."[80] Mendelssohn here links "the felicity of the state" to conditions such as "peace and security" and to opportunities for self-cultivation—in this instance, for receiving guidance from a "scholar," and thus for developing our capacity for rational reflection.[81] For the *Preface*, then, "the felicity of the state" exists when a society's activities not only yield material benefits, but also offer opportunities to pursue perfection.

Moreover, Mendelssohn uses a second phrase—"national felicity"—to denote similar "goods." Consider his 1784 essay *On the Question: What Does it Mean to Enlighten*:

> An educated nation [*ein gebildete Nation*] knows in itself no danger other than the *excess* of its *national felicity* [*das Uebermaaß ihrer Nationalglückseligkeit*] which, in and for itself, like the most perfect health of the human body, can already be called a sickness, or a transition to sickness. A nation which has come through *education* to the highest pinnacle of national felicity [*durch die Bildung auf den höchsten Gipfel der Nationalglückseligkeit*] is, precisely because of that, in danger of falling, since it can climb no higher.[82]

Mendelssohn suggests that "the highest pinnacle of national felicity" emerges "through education." A few paragraphs earlier, in turn, he links the presence of this *Bildung* to material conditions such as civic order, suggesting that a society in which the components of "education"

are absent also suffers from "anarchy."[83] Moreover, elsewhere in this same essay, he links the presence of *Bildung* to a situation in which citizens[84] possess opportunities for self-cultivation:

> The more that the social condition of a people has been brought into harmony with the vocation of a human being through art and hard work, the more *education* does this people possess. Education breaks down into *culture* and *enlightenment*. The former seems to apply more to the *practical*, that means—objectively—to excellence, finesse, and beauty in trades, arts, and society's mores, and—subjectively—to proficiency, hard work, and skill at those trades, arts, and mores…The more these [dimensions] within a people correspond to the vocation of a human being, the more culture and cultivation are ascribed to it…*Enlightenment* seems, by contrast, to refer more to the *theoretical*. It seems to refer—objectively—to rational knowledge and—subjectively—to proficiency at rationally reflecting upon things of human life, in terms of their importance and influence upon the vocation of a human being.[85]

The first sentence presents the *Bildung* associated with national felicity as a condition in which a society's activities offer opportunities for pursuing perfection. After all, if "education" exists when "the social condition of a people is in harmony with the vocation of a human being," and if this vocation involves the pursuit of perfection through self-cultivation, then "education" exists when society's activities allow individuals to develop their faculties. For example, "education" would exist when commercial activities are treated not merely as opportunities to maximize wealth, but also as opportunities to rationally determine which of the objects we crave actually merit our pursuit, and thus as opportunities to cultivate our faculties of cognition and desire;[86] similarly, "education" would exist when artistic pursuits are oriented not merely towards the acquisition of fame and fortune, but also towards producing beautiful objects, and thus allow individuals to refine their capacity for assessing beauty as well as various physical skills. Indeed, the claim that *Bildung* involves "culture" and "enlightenment" also points to a link between "education" and the pursuit of perfection, since if "culture" involves "trades, arts, and society's mores…correspond[ing] to the vocation of a human being," and if "enlightenment" involves "rationally reflect[ing] upon things of human life, in terms of their… influence upon

[our] vocation," then "education" emerges when "trades" and "arts" allow for self-cultivation, and when we assess those "things" to ensure that they continue to promote this end. It seems to me, then, that if Mendelssohn links "national felicity" to "education," and if he links "education" to material benefits and opportunities for self-perfection, he is presenting "national felicity" as combining these elements. He uses *Nationalglückseligkeit*, like the phrase *Glückseligkeit des Staates*, to denote a condition in which a society's activities—from economic endeavors to aesthetic pursuits—both yield material benefits and offer opportunities for self-cultivation.

Indeed, further evidence for this interpretation of "national felicity" emerges if we look beyond Mendelssohn's published writings. Insofar as *To Enlighten* presents "the highest pinnacle of national felicity" as existing immediately prior to a nation's "fall" and "sickness," we can treat the conditions obtaining at such a moment as instantiating a high degree of *Nationalglückseligkeit*. An account of these conditions emerges, in turn, from an unpublished text entitled *On the Best Constitution*, written during the same years as *To Enlighten*:[87]

> If fathers have acquired honor and wealth and bequeathed them to children, there remains nothing for the latter but mere *enjoyment without acquisition*. If the fathers have fought for freedom and secured it against every attack, then *idleness* [and] *slavishness* emerge among the children. If all prejudices have been disputed and eradicated, then the love of truth wanes and grows cold and the children have no spur to enlightenment. With respect to entire states [*ganze Staaten*], then, where felicity [*Glückseligkeit*] departs from the fathers [as we move] towards children, a condition of stasis or a collapse seems inevitable ...The children no longer found the same opportunity for the exercise of faculties.[88]

Mendelssohn describes a society that will soon "collapse"—the type of society which instantiates "the highest pinnacle of national felicity"—as a society that is characterized by a high degree of peace and prosperity, and that has offered abundant opportunities for self-cultivation. That is, in such a society, individuals have acquired "wealth" and had an "opportunity for the exercise of the faculties," even though "children" will "no longer" possess the "same opportunity" for the pursuit of perfection. Put more simply, in such a society, members have enjoyed numerous

material benefits and diverse opportunities to pursue perfection, even though future generations will be so wealthy and secure that they will have little motivation to engage in commerce or politics, and thus will lack the opportunities for cultivation offered by such pursuits.[89] It seems to me, then, if "the highest pinnacle of national felicity" exists in a society that will soon transition to "sickness," and if such a society is characterized by material success and numerous opportunities for self-cultivation, then "the highest pinnacle of national felicity" corresponds to "the highest pinnacle" of these "material and spiritual goods"; indeed, for the passage cited above, *Glückseligkeit* has existed in such a society but will soon "depart." This text thus provides further evidence for our interpretation of collective *Glückseligkeit*, suggesting that this condition exists when a society's activities not only yield material benefits such as harmony and prosperity, but also offer opportunities for the cultivation of faculties. Collective felicity exists in a society that is characterized by peace and economic success, and that enables participation in activities conducive to self-perfection—for example, aesthetic endeavors that cultivate a capacity for assessing beauty along with diverse physical skills, and economic activities that involve assessing the objects we crave and thereby cultivate cognition and desire. By contrast, collective felicity is absent from a society that is characterized by strife and poverty, and that possesses a practical life no longer conducive to self-cultivation—for instance, a society in which aesthetic efforts are oriented towards the acquisition of fame and fortune and thus distract us from refining our artistic judgment, and in which commercial endeavors are pursued with a single-minded commitment to maximizing wealth that leads us to neglect physical and intellectual cultivation.

We can now return to *Jerusalem*. If Mendelssohn understands collective felicity in the manner outlined above, then when he claims that the "everyday" actions required by Jewish law promote the "felicity of the nation," he means that by requiring actions even in seemingly

mundane areas of life and thereby generating frequent reflection, Jewish practice can contribute to the "material and spiritual" well-being of society—to the emergence of society in which diverse activities, from economic endeavors to aesthetic pursuits, are conducive to conditions such as harmony and provide opportunities for self-cultivation. But *how* precisely is Jewish practice supposed to yield collective well-being? By what mechanism does this system generate "material goods" such as peace and render "trades" and "arts" conducive to perfection? Moreover, we might wonder, *when* is Jewish practice supposed to yield this result? Mendelssohn typically uses "nation" to refer to the inhabitants of a society and "state" to refer to institutions governing those individuals.[90] But what nation or nations, and what state or states, are relevant here? Did Jewish practice promote felicity *only* for the nation of Israelites gathered in the ancient Hebrew state, or is Jewish practice *also* capable of playing this role in a modern society—of conferring *Glückseligkeit* upon a nation of Jews and non-Jews in a German state? Is Mendelssohn *merely* claiming that material success and opportunities for cultivation emerged when all the Hebrew state's citizens followed Jewish law, or is he *also* arguing that such results can still emerge when a Jewish minority in a modern society enacts the "living script"?[91]

Existing scholarship has not resolved these questions. I know of only two readers who explicitly[92] discuss *Jerusalem*'s references to collective felicity, and neither claims to reconstruct the details behind this claim. On the contrary, noting that *Jerusalem* "pays remarkably little attention" to collective felicity, these commentators conclude that Mendelssohn fails to clarify the sense in which Jewish practice promotes this condition, perhaps because of the historical context in which he writes.[93] We are thus left wondering about the link between Jewish practice and the "felicity of the nation." What does Mendelssohn mean when he repeatedly posits this connection? How and when do actions required by Jewish law yield collective *Glückseligkeit*?

Jerusalem on "The Strict Obedience We Owe"

It should be clear that the confusion surrounding conceptual "disfiguring" is not an isolated case of perplexity, for uncertainty also plagues *Jerusalem*'s recurring claims about collective felicity. Our confusion now intensifies when we turn from Mendelssohn's views on the *value* of Jewish practice to his views on the *authority* of Jewish practice—to his account of the grounds on which the laws governing Jewish practice remain binding for modern Jews.

Let us begin by revisiting *Jerusalem*'s declaration that the Jews possess a "divine legislation—laws, commandments…instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves."[94] The idea here is that norms[95] governing Jewish practice are "divine" commands in the sense that they are endorsed by God—in the sense that they reflect God's "will" regarding the way in which Jews should "conduct themselves." *Jerusalem* insists, in turn, that it is precisely this divinely endorsed status that renders these laws enduringly binding:[96]

> 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…here and there, where the lawgiver gave no reason, to surmise a reason which, *perhaps*, depended upon time, place, and circumstances, and which, *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 gave 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…If in things human I may not dare to act contrary to the law on the mere strength of my own surmise and legal sophistry, without the authority of the lawgiver or custodian of the law, how much less may I do so in matters divine?[97]

Mendelssohn argues that modern Jew have not been freed "from the strict obedience we owe to the law," since "God "gave" these norms but has not repealed them in a "clear" and "public" manner—that these norms remain binding because they have been endorsed by a divine lawgiver who has not issued their repeal.[98] Indeed, *Jerusalem* immediately repeats this point, describing Jewish law as "a case of 'what God has joined together man may not tear asunder'"—as a system

which has been rendered binding by an act of divine sanction, and which remain authoritative until an act of divine revocation.[99] For *Jerusalem*, then, the norms governing Jewish practice remain binding insofar as they are seen as "divine legislation"—as commands endorsed by God.

Now, if Mendelssohn links the binding nature of laws governing Jewish practice to these norms' status as divine commands, it will be important for him to specify the grounds that entitle us to affirm this status—that permit us to view norms[100] as divinely endorsed. *Jerusalem* indicates that the key is the possibility of tracing norms back to God's words in the Pentateuch, for Mendelssohn states that this "divine *legislation*" can be extracted from "prescriptions… revealed by Moses"[101] and "the divine book we received through Moses"[102]—that laws count as "divine" if linked to the "divine book" recorded by this prophet. A similar point appears in texts written during the period surrounding *Jerusalem*'s composition, with the *Biur*—composed over several years between the mid-1770s and the early 1780s[103]—stating that while Christians "do not accept the words of the Torah in order to observe and perform all that is written there," Jews draw on the Pentateuch "to know what the Eternal our God has commanded us."[104] The idea here is that what "is written" in the Pentateuch enables Jews to "know what…our God has commanded"—that if norms can be traced to God's words in the five books of Moses, we have grounds to regard these norms as divinely endorsed. Consider, also, this text from the *Preface*:

> The Jews regard as divine commandments both the written laws of Moses…as well as the inferences, explanations, and interpretations of them, which have been preserved through oral tradition or derived by means of correct argumentation.[105]

When Mendelssohn invokes "written laws," he is referring to laws explicitly outlined in the Pentateuch: to quote his *Ritual Laws of the Jews*, "the written law is contained in the five *books of Moses*."[106] For example, the requirement to avoid eating pork counts as a "written law," since Leviticus 11 explicitly prohibits consuming this type of meat. Moreover, when he invokes "the

inferences, explanations, and interpretations…preserved through oral tradition or derived by means of correct argumentation," he is referring to laws which are not explicitly outlined in the Pentateuch, but which are presented by rabbinic literature of late antiquity as derivable from that text: to quote the *Ritual Laws*, rabbinic works such as the Babylonian Talmud "have been accepted as the source" of "(1) explanations and (2) more precise determinations of the written laws, coming through oral tradition" or "derived through *argumentation* in accordance with the traditionally established rules of scriptural explication."[107] For example, the Babylonian Talmud presents a threefold prohibition on combining milk and meat—on cooking these products together, on consuming these products together, and on deriving any economic benefit from using or selling such a mixture—as derivable from the Pentateuch's threefold repetition of a prohibition on cooking a young goat in its mother's milk.[108] Similarly, the Babylonian Talmud links a requirement to engage in prayer at specific times—in the morning, afternoon, and evening—to narratives and rules in the Pentateuch dealing with the patriarchs and sacrificial offerings.[109] For Mendelssohn, then, we are entitled to regard norms as "divine commands" if they can be traced back to God's words in the Pentateuch—if they are explicitly outlined in, or rabbinically presented as derivable from, the Hebrew Bible's first five books.[110]

Mendelssohn's position now emerges. *Jerusalem* links the binding nature of Jewish law to a belief that norms have been endorsed by God. Moreover, this text suggests that we can affirm these norms' divinely endorsed status if we trace them back to God's words in Pentateuch, with other works clarifying that this tracing can occur in at least two ways—that laws can be treated as biblically grounded if they are explicitly outlined in, or rabbinically presented as derivable from, the words of the biblical text. As he writes *Jerusalem*, then, Mendelssohn holds that the authority of the norms governing Jewish practice depends on their scriptural basis.

The problem with Mendelssohn's position is that the authority of Jewish practice ends up resting on beliefs which he takes to be under attack from the study of history. More specifically, this authority rests on beliefs which he recognizes as being under attack from what we can call the historical study of Scripture[111]—biblical scholarship which begins from an affirmation of the Bible's historically conditioned nature, arguing that the Scripture's text has been subject to corruption over time, and insisting that Scripture's meaning emerges from attending to the text's plain sense in the Bible's historical context. Emerging in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from diverse developments in early modern thought, this approach came to enjoy widespread support among non-Jewish thinkers, winning adherents not only among critics of revealed religion who expected this approach to enable an assault on the Bible, but also among defenders of Christianity who expected this approach to enable a clarification of this work—who hoped that acknowledging textual corruption would be a prelude to reconstructing the Bible's original content, and who viewed literal exegesis as a method which would uncover the Bible's true meaning.[112] More importantly for our purposes, this approach was well known to Mendelssohn, who owns copies of works by prominent biblical scholars such as Benjamin Kennicott and Robert Lowth, discusses the writings of these figures in his correspondence and literary reviews, and maintains personal relationships with influential researchers such as Johann David Michaelis.[113] Indeed, the German scholar Johann Salomo Semler dedicates a copy of a work he edits on the biblical text "to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn in Berlin,"[114] and Michaelis sends works such as his monumental *Mosaic Laws* to Mendelssohn soon after their publication.[115]

Let us return to *Jerusalem* with this background in mind. If the authority of the norms governing Jewish practice rests on the scriptural basis of Jewish law, and in particular if these norms' status as binding divine commandments depends on a link to God's words in the

Pentateuch, then it is crucial to hold that the version of the Bible which Jews possess accurately preserves those words—that this version is largely free from scribal errors and post-biblical insertions, since the existence of such corruptions would raise the possibility that laws traced back to this edition are not grounded in the Bible's actual text, and thus that such norms lack the scriptural basis which would establish their binding status. Indeed, although not raising this issue in *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn acknowledges this point during the years surrounding the composition of this treatise, with the key passage appearing in the *Biur*'s introduction:

> Since the Christian translators neither possess the rabbinic tradition, nor heed the words of the Masoretic text, nor even accept the vowels and accents that we possess, they treat the words of the Torah as a broken wall, before which each individual rises and which each individual treats as he desires. They add to, subtract from, and alter the Eternal's Torah, [changing] not only the vowels and accents, but sometimes even the letters and words…However, if this is plausible for Christian scholars and their students, it is not plausible for us, the house of Israel. For us, this Torah is an inheritance…to know what the Eternal our God has commanded us to study, teach, observe, and perform: it is our life and the length of our days. In order that our life not hang by the hairbreadth of reasoning and by the thread of reflection alone, our sages, may their memories be for a blessing, established the Masoretic text for us…so that we would not grope like blind men in the dark.[116]

When Mendelssohn refers to "the Masoretic text," he is referring to the version of the Hebrew Bible preserved by the Jewish tradition—a version which was finalized by editors known as the Masoretes between the sixth and tenth centuries, and which advances claims about numerous features of the biblical text. More precisely, the Masoretic edition advances claims about the Bible's *consonantal text*, *vocalization*, and *accentuation*—the consonants that should be included in the biblical text, the vowels that should be added to those consonants, and the accents that should govern the syntax and liturgical recitation of the resulting words.[117] For example, the Masoretic edition states that Exodus 21:8 includes a word with the consonants *lamed* and *aleph* (meaning "not"), rather than a word with the consonants *lamed* and *vav* (meaning "for himself"), and thus that this verse presents a law concerning a man who does "not" select a woman for

marriage, rather than a law concerning a man who selects a woman "for himself."[118] The *Biur* claims, in turn, that treating "the words of the Torah as a broken wall…is not plausible for us, the house of Israel"—that Jews would confront a serious problem if they were to treat their edition of Torah as corrupt. More specifically, the *Biur* suggests that without the Masoretic text, "our life" would "hang by the hairbreadth of reasoning" and we would be forced to "grope like blind men in the dark," since "this Torah is an inheritance…to know what the Eternal our God has commanded us." The claim here is that worries regarding the Masoretic edition would leave the "life" of Jews "hang[ing]" without a firm basis, since Jews "know what God has commanded" by relying on "this" version of the Torah—that if Jews can recognize laws as binding divine commandments by tracing these norms to the biblical text, then suspicions regarding the reliability of this text would deprive these laws of the foundation they require. For example, if laws governing marriage are traced to features of the Masoretic rendering of key verses, then classifying those features as scribal errors would deprive those laws of their scriptural basis, and these rules would no longer be connected to God's authority-conferring words.[119] During the years surrounding *Jerusalem*'s composition, then, Mendelssohn recognizes that the type of position which he outlines links Jewish law's authority to the Masoretic edition. He recognizes that if the authority of Jewish practice rests on the scriptural basis of Jewish law, then it is crucial to affirm a belief in the reliability of the Masoretic text—a belief that the version of the Bible preserved by the Jewish tradition is largely free from scribal errors and post-biblical insertions.

The problem, however, is that Mendelssohn *also* recognizes that this belief is under sustained attack from the historical study of Scripture. The passage from the *Biur* cited above acknowledges the work of non-Jewish scholars who reject the "Masoretic text" and treat it "as a broken wall"—who present the Masoretic edition as corrupt, refusing to accept its claims about

"words," "vowels," and "accents." As commentators such as Breuer have shown, the reference here is to scholars pursuing the historical study of Scripture who deny the reliability of the Masoretic edition. More specifically, the reference here is to scholars who insist that the Bible is historically conditioned in the sense that its text has been corrupted over time, and who therefore argue that the text finalized by the Masoretes does not preserve the original text recorded by Moses—that this edition's consonantal text is plagued by mistakes and interpolations, and that this edition's vowels and accents are innovations that emerge after the Bible's composition.[120] To cite just two examples, Kennicott insists that "the Masora[121]…*has not prevented the Heb. text from being greatly corrupted*,"[122] and Michaelis denies that a text can "remain free of all mistakes in writing for a few thousand years"[123] and that we should "follow the opinions of the Jewish Masoretes or a reading corrupted by a copyist's error."[124] When recognizing that the type of position outlined in *Jerusalem* links Jewish law's authority to the Masoretic edition, then, Mendelssohn is acknowledging that his view leaves the authority of Jewish practice resting on a contested commitment.[125] He is acknowledging that he takes the authority of Jewish practice to rest on a conviction attacked by biblical scholarship—a conviction that in tracing their laws to the Masoretic edition, Jews are tracing their laws to a text that is largely free from corruption.

Moreover, just as Mendelssohn's position links the authority of Jewish practice to a contested belief regarding the Masoretic text, so too does his position link the authority of Jewish practice to a disputed claim regarding rabbinic interpretation. If the authority of norms governing Jewish practice rests on the scriptural basis of Jewish law, and more specifically on rabbinic claims that norms are derivable from the biblical text, then it is crucial to hold that rabbinic hermeneutics provides an accurate account of the Bible's message—that rabbinic interpretive claims identify meanings which we can plausibly treat as arising from the biblical

text, since doubts regarding the rabbis' exegesis might lead us to reject their claims regarding the biblical derivability of Jewish law, and thus to conclude that key norms lack the biblical basis which establishes their status as binding divine precepts. Indeed, while not explicitly raising this issue in *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn confronts this point shortly before composing this treatise, for a letter he receives in 1782 advances the following claim about the *Preface*—about the lines which take rabbinic "interpretations" to establish the status of laws as "divine commandments":[126]

> With respect to the "inferences, explanations, and *interpretations* derived by means of *correct argumentation*," which [Jews] similarly accept as "*divine commandments*"—it might be difficult to hold this before the bench of sound criticism in all cases. Yet…the proof of the latter proposition would deserve the effort of the learned defender of Judaism.[127]

The idea here is that if we rely on "interpretations derived by correct argumentation" to establish laws "as divine commandments," we must be able to provide a "proof" for this view "before the bench of sound criticism"—that if we rely on rabbinic readings to present laws as "divine," we must possess grounds for treating these readings as "correct." To revisit an earlier example, if the biblical grounding of prohibitions on combining milk and meat is established by rabbinic interpretive claims, then it is crucial for Jews to hold that these exegetical moves merit our continued acceptance—that when the rabbis present the Bible's ban on cooking a goat in its mother's milk as indicating a broader ban on combining milk and meat, this interpretation constitutes a plausible reading of the relevant biblical verses. Moreover, Mendelssohn himself addresses this issue when discussing Judaism's "laws" in the *Biur* on Exodus 21:

> In every place where what appears to be Scripture's *peshat* contradicts rabbinic tradition with respect to laws and precepts, the one who elucidates must either completely abandon the approach of *peshat* to follow the path of the true tradition, or broker a compromise between them, if possible.[128]

Mendelssohn suggests that when dealing with Judaism's "laws and rules," our interpretation of Scripture "must…follow the path of the true tradition" by accepting "rabbinic tradition with

respect to laws and precepts." That is, the *Biur* holds that a proper attitude towards Jewish law depends on an endorsement of rabbinic exegesis—on affirming rabbinic claims regarding the norms emerging from the biblical text.[129] Indeed, using the term *peshat* to refer to a reading that focuses on Scripture's plain sense,[130] Mendelssohn even insists that we should "abandon the approach of *peshat*" when this approach "contradicts rabbinic tradition"—that we should reject a straightforward reading of Scripture if such a reading would be incompatible with its rabbinic counterpart.[131] For example, with respect to the demand in Exodus 21 that punishments for physical injury follow the pattern "eye for eye," the *Biur*'s position entails that we should accept the rabbinic view that the Bible is permitting *only* the imposition of monetary fines, even though a straightforward reading seems to suggest that the Bible is requiring the imposition of physical punishment.[132] During the years surrounding *Jerusalem*'s composition, then, Mendelssohn recognizes that the type of position which he outlines links Jewish law's authority to rabbinic hermeneutics. He recognizes that if the authority of Jewish practice rests on the scriptural basis of Jewish law, it is crucial to affirm a belief in the reliability of rabbinic exegesis—a belief that the rabbis of antiquity provide an accurate account of Scripture's meaning.

Consider, however, this passage from the prospectus announcing the *Biur*'s publication:

> What shall we do for youths among the children of Israel, who wander about, seeking the Eternal's word in order to understand Scripture's books?…They satisfy themselves with the creations of foreign peoples, seeking the translations of gentile scholars who turn their back but not their face on the elucidations of the trustworthy sages, may their memories be for a blessing, and who refuse to accept their pure tradition, instead elucidating according to what occurs to their own minds, and ruining the vineyard of the Eternal of Hosts.[133]

Mendelssohn acknowledges the work of non-Jewish scholars who "refuse to accept elucidations of the trustworthy sages"—who reject rabbinic claims regarding the Bible's meaning.[134] As commentators have shown, the reference here is to scholars pursuing the historical study of Scripture who reject rabbinic hermeneutics. More precisely, the reference here is to scholars

who insist that the Bible is historically conditioned in the sense that its meaning emerges from attending to Scripture's plain sense in its historical context, and who argue that the rabbis' failure to meet this standard disqualifies them as exegetes—that insofar as rabbinic interpreters ascribe to the Bible layers of meaning which differ sharply from the text's plain sense, these interpreters cannot be treated as reliable guides to Scripture's message.[135] The targets here are the types of rabbinic readings outlined above, which take a narrow ban on one mode of food preparation to indicate a far broader prohibition, and which treat an insistence on physical punishments as an allusion to monetary compensation. To cite two examples of attacks on such readings, Lowth rejects rabbinic claims after indicating that they fail to capture "the plain literal and grammatical sense of [the Bible's] author,"[136] and Michaelis concludes that the "oral traditions of the somewhat ignorant rabbis, which we encounter collected in the Talmud, can instruct us about the customary law of the Jews at the time that these men lived, but not Moses's meaning."[137] When recognizing that the type of position outlined in *Jerusalem* links Jewish law's authority to rabbinic exegesis, then, Mendelssohn is recognizing that his view leaves the authority of Jewish practice resting on a second contested commitment.[138] He is recognizing that he takes this authority to rest on a second conviction attacked by biblical scholarship—a conviction that the rabbis of antiquity provide an accurate account of Scripture's meaning.

Later in this dissertation, we will consider other intellectual developments that Mendelssohn *might* have seen as posing a threat to Jewish practice, including the critique of revelation associated with Spinoza.[139] For now, however, the significance of my analysis should be clear. When *Jerusalem* discusses the "obedience" Jews "owe" to Jewish law, Mendelssohn is linking the authority of the norms governing Jewish practice to their biblical basis, arguing that if laws outlining Jewish practice can be traced to the Bible, these laws count as divine norms and

remain enduringly binding. However, even as he advances this argument, he recognizes that the historical study of the Bible threatens to leave Jewish practice without this scriptural basis, portraying as unreliable both the Masoretic text to which laws are traced and the rabbinic exegesis by which they are derived.[140] We are thus left wondering what Mendelssohn has in mind when he insists that modern Jews have not been freed "from the strict obedience we owe to the law." Does he take himself to have addressed threats to Jewish practice emerging from the study of history? Does he clarify the grounds on which Jewish law remains binding despite challenges posed by biblical scholarship?

Previous studies have not resolved these questions. Readers have noted that Mendelssohn affirms Masoretic and rabbinic reliability in the face of attacks, with the *Biur*'s introduction insisting that the Pentateuch has been "has been spared what befalls secular books, which scribes and copyists change over time,"[141] and that we should follow the interpretive "path…received and transmitted to us from the sages."[142] However, commentators remain divided regarding the question of whether Mendelssohn intends this affirmation as a *substantive* argument—whether he takes his affirmation to provide sufficient grounds for rejecting attacks by biblical scholars, or whether he sees his arguments as conceptually inadequate but capable of diverting attention from threats. For example, while Sorkin does not express doubts about the substance of Mendelssohn's reasoning,[143] Breuer remains skeptical about Mendelssohn's treatment of the Masoretic text, suggesting that he "never sought to engage European scholarship in any serious or substantive way," and instead attempted merely "to shield his coreligionists" from emerging threats—that his goal is less to provide "serious" reasons for rejecting attacks on the Masoretic edition, and more to divert attention from assaults by misrepresenting or ignoring key issues.[144] Indeed, Arkush extends this claim to include Mendelssohn's affirmation of

rabbinic exegesis, doubting that the Jewish thinker took himself to have "discovered the means" for defending rabbinic interpretive claims.[145] We are thus left wondering whether Mendelssohn seeks to substantively engage threatening developments in the study of history. Does he strive to provide what he sees as adequate grounds for rejecting attacks on the Masoretic text and rabbinic exegesis? Does he seek to address, in a serious manner, developments that might deprive the norms governing Jewish practice of the scriptural basis crucial to their authority?

Emerging Questions

Let us review. *Jerusalem*'s account of Jewish practice initially seemed relatively straightforward: describing adherence to Jewish practice as the enactment of a "living script," Mendelssohn suggests that the actions required by Jewish law generate reflection on "eternal truths" accessible through reason. Upon further scrutiny, however, three of *Jerusalem*'s central claims turned out to resist explication. More specifically, it was not at all clear what Mendelssohn has in mind when he claims that Jewish practice enables adherents to avoid "disfiguring" their religious beliefs, that Jewish practice serves to promote "the felicity of the nation," and that modern Jews have not been freed "from the strict obedience we owe to the law." Our encounter with *Jerusalem* thus leaves uncertain the prospects for explicating Mendelssohn's position. Does the founder of modern Jewish thought advance claims which are likely to remain opaque? Can we glean from his writings, read in their historical context, a more precise account of what he has in mind when he presents his theory of Jewish practice, or should we conclude that he presents a position destined to remain more influential than intelligible?

These are not trivial questions. As we saw earlier, Arkush suggests that Mendelssohn is best understood as defending Judaism with arguments that are more "rhetorical than real"—with

arguments that are intended less to provide adequate reasons for fidelity to Judaism, and more to deflect, with effective rhetoric, specific attacks on this tradition. It seems to me that an inability to reconstruct Mendelssohn's arguments would lend strong support to this reading. If we are unable to clarify the details behind Mendelssohn's claims regarding the value of Jewish practice, we might suspect that these claims are best read as sophisticated rhetorical moves—that he is seeking *only* to give the impression that Judaism confers benefits such as the avoidance of "disfiguring" and the promotion of "felicity," but that he has not actually worked out the connection between Jewish practice and these ends, and thus does not take himself to have provided adequate grounds for regarding this system as valuable. Similarly, if we are uncertain about whether Mendelssohn seeks to substantively address developments that might undermine the authority of Jewish practice, we might suspect that his affirmation of this authority is best read as a rhetorical tactic—that he is seeking *merely* to give the impression that Jewish law still merits "strict obedience," but that he has not actually addressed developments that undermine this position, and thus does take himself to have provided adequate grounds for continuing to accept this system's authority. Indeed, Arkush offers this type of evidence on behalf of his reading, citing the "nebulousness" of Mendelssohn's arguments on the one hand, and their failure to address key threats on the other.[146] It seems to me, then, that the manner in which we answer the question raised above—the question of whether we can reconstruct Mendelssohn's reasoning—will shape our understanding of the goals which animate his thought. Our answer will help determine whether we have grounds to doubt the sincerity of his defense of Judaism.[147]

Moreover, recall the uncertainty outlined in this dissertation's introduction regarding Mendelssohn's relevance to contemporary religious thought—regarding the question of whether his work can offer resources to constructive philosophical projects.[148] It seems to me that an

inability to clarify Mendelssohn's reasoning would lend strong support to readers who express doubts regarding his ongoing relevance, for this result might suggest that he discusses Judaism in terms which are too elusive to advance contemporary discussions. For example, if we cannot clarify the sense in which Jewish practice combats conceptual "disfiguring," we might wonder whether this aspect of *Jerusalem* has much to offer contemporary thinkers. Similarly, if we cannot clarify the sense in which Jewish practice contributes to a society's health, we might wonder whether this dimension of *Jerusalem* is relevant for readers in the twenty-first century. It seems to me, then, that the manner in which we answer the question outlined above—the question of whether we can reconstruct Mendelssohn's reasoning—will have implications not only for our understanding of the goals which animate his thought, but also for our assessment of the significance which this thought possesses today. What is at stake here, in other words, is not only a determination of whether Mendelssohn's arguments are "more rhetorical than real," but also a determination of whether these arguments offer resources for contemporary philosophical projects. Our encounter with *Jerusalem* thus raises fundamental questions about the character and significance of Mendelssohn's thought. Can we glean from his writings, read in their historical context, a more precise account of what he has in mind when he presents his theory of Jewish practice? Can we reconstruct the details of his approach to Judaism's "living script," or should we harbor doubts about the sincerity and relevance of his philosophy of Judaism?

The following chapters will address these questions. Chapters 2-4 will explore the aspects of *Jerusalem* outlined above, showing that we *can* clarify Mendelssohn's perplexing claims. Chapter 5 and my conclusion will then consider the implications of this analysis, reflecting on Mendelssohn's philosophical goals, intervening in debates surrounding his work, and suggesting that my reading contributes to broader conversations about modernity and religion.

[1] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 86/8:153.

[2] For a discussion of this pamphlet, see pages 34-36 below.

[3] Indeed, as we saw in my introduction, some of his contemporaries were so puzzled that they publicly challenged him to convert to Christianity: see pages 4-5.

[4] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 86/8:153.

[5] On Mendelssohn as the "Jew of Berlin," see pages 3-4 in my introduction. On Mendelssohn as the "patron saint" of German Jewry, see page 6 in my introduction.

[6] On Mendelssohn's reception, and in particular on the respects in which texts such as *Jerusalem* have been influential (for example, by marking the emergence of modern Jewish thought, finding echoes in the work of subsequent thinkers, and inspiring numerous attacks), see pages 6-7 in my introduction. Of course, as noted in that discussion, it remains the case that few subsequent Jewish thinkers have explicitly described themselves as Mendelssohnians.

[7] See page 11 above; this phrase appears in Eisen, "Divine Legislation," 256.

[8] See pages 11-12; this passage appears in Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 218.

[9] As I noted earlier, some careful and influential readers of *Jerusalem* do *not* describe this text as obscure. My point is simply that some of *Jerusalem*'s most important readers express confusion about what Mendelssohn has in mind. See notes 57-60 in my introduction.

[10] This phrase is borrowed from Arkush: see page 7 in my introduction.

[11] See pages 4-5. Although a full overview of Mendelssohn's rational theology lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, it will be helpful to note two points. First, Mendelssohn affirms the demonstrability of core principles throughout his career, appropriating, refining, and supplementing with new arguments inherited proofs for these truths. For example, he rewrites Plato's account of immortality in light of Leibnizian-Wolffian thought, and devotes considerable attention to the ontological, cosmological, and teleological proofs for God's existence; moreover, as I indicate in note 11 of my introduction, he makes an effort, late in life, to respond to Kant's critique of rationalist metaphysics. Second, although Mendelssohn emphasizes the possibility and importance of offering demonstrations of these principles, he holds that individuals can come to endorse these beliefs even in the absence of such proofs. That is, drawing on his notion of common sense (as well as his conception of God's goodness), he holds that while it is crucial that philosophers be able to develop rigorous proofs for core religious truths, individuals possess adequate grounds—on the basis of indistinct inferences—to endorse these principles. On Mendelssohn's rational theology, see, e.g., Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Proofs for the Existence of God," in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*, 135-151; "Moses Mendelssohn on Miracles," in *Die Trostvolle Aufklärung*, 152-163; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 37-97; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*. For Mendelssohn's views on the determinate content of principles such as providence and immortality, see page 86 in Chapter 2. On the question of whether Mendelssohn abandons speculative metaphysics at the end of his career, see note 30 in Chapter 2.

[12] To be sure, Mendelssohn does not identify these principles as the *only* examples of "eternal truths"; on the contrary, he also invokes "the propositions of pure mathematics and of the art of logic," as well as additional principles, when discussing this epistemological category. For *Jerusalem*'s account of the various types of eternal truths, as well as this text's discussion of "*temporal, historical truths*," see Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 90-94/8:157-161. For the Leibnizian background of this position, as well as the changes which Mendelssohn introduces into the views he inherits from his predecessor, see Altmann, "Commentary," in *Jerusalem*, 206-208.

[13] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 97/8:164.

[14] Ibid., 98/8:164-165.

[15] As we will see, Mendelssohn holds that the determinate understandings or conceptions of "eternal truths" have changed over time. On his view, although there is only one *correct* understanding of a principle such as divine providence, many thinkers have not affirmed that conception of the relevant truth, with alternate views gaining acceptance—and then suffering rejection—over the course of time. In effect, then, what is "eternal" about an "eternal truth" is the validity of the principle's *proper* understanding, rather than the content of the principle's interpretation throughout history. See pages 85-86 and note 6 in Chapter 2.

[16] See pages 36-37 below. For problems associated with this issue (and with *Jerusalem*'s account of the ancient Hebrew state in which coercion seems to have been operative), see Ron Sigad, "Mosheh Mendelssohn—Yahadut, Politikah Elohit, U'medinat Yisrael," *Da'at* 7 (1981): 93-103; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 224-229; Harvey, "Mendelssohn's Heavenly Politics," in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, 403-412; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 58.

[17] See page 40 below. As we saw in note 57 in my introduction, this argument causes problems for interpreters such as Altmann. However, recent work has shed important light on Mendelssohn's reasoning: see, e.g., Freudenthal, "Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast," 351-372.

[18] On this debate (and Mendelssohn's role), see, e.g., Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770-1870* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 421-552; "The Philosophical Roots of Moses Mendelssohn's Plea for Emancipation," in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*, 217-228; "Moses Mendelssohn on Excommunication: The Ecclesiastical Law Background," in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*, 229-243; Breuer, "Politics, Tradition, History," 357-383; Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 108-146; Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 25-135. On Jews in Germany more broadly, see Werner E. Mosse, "From 'Schutzjuden' to 'deutsche Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens': The Long and Bumpy Road of Jewish Emancipation in Germany," in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*, ed. Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 59-93.

[19] See Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, "Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews (1781)," trans. Helen Lederer, in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 28-36. On Mendelssohn's relationship with Dohm and role in the publication of the German bureaucrat's arguments, see the sources cited in the previous note.

[20] See Mendelssohn, *Vorrede*, in 8:3-25. For Bowman's translation of selected passages, see "From the Preface to *Vindiciae Judaeorum*," 40-52.

[21] See "The Search for Light and Right in a Letter to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn, on the Occasion of his Remarkable Preface to Menasseh ben Israel" and "Mörschel's Postscript," trans. Bowman, in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 55-69; for the German, see *Das Forschen nach Licht und Recht in einem Schreiben an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn, auf Veranlassung seiner merkwürdigen Vorrede zu Manasseh Ben Israel* and *Nachschrift*, in *JubA*, 8:73-92. Further references will follow the format of Cranz, "The Search," English/German; Mörschel, "Postscript," English /German. For background on this text, see, e.g., Altmann, "Introduction," 3-13.

[22] Cranz's authorship would remain unknown until the late twentieth century. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 502-506.

[23] Cranz "The Search," 57-60/8:77-80.

[24] Ibid., 60-67/8:81-87.

[25] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Vorrede*, 8:3, 21.

[26] Mörschel cites, but does not quote, these statements.

[27] Mörschel, "Postscript," 68-69/8:92.

[28] This is the project of *Jerusalem*'s second section; the first section develops, in greater detail, the political theory which undergirds the *Preface*'s rejection of coercion. For an overview of this treatise's arguments, see, e.g., Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 514-552.

[29] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 128-130/8:193-195

[30] Ibid., 130/8:195.

[31] Ibid., 89-90/8:156-157.

[32] Ibid., 133/8:198. See page 11 in my introduction

[33] See pages 9-11 in my introduction.

[34] It is important to avoid a common misunderstanding. Many interpreters take *Jerusalem* to be claiming that revelation does not communicate theoretical content—that Judaism's revelation communicates *only* practical norms. Mendelssohn's point, however, is that revelation does not communicate theoretical content *which is indispensable and otherwise inaccessible*. That is, Mendelssohn's point is that revelation does not communicate eternal truths which are crucial to a religious life but unattainable through rational inquiry—a point which does not preclude the possibility that revelation communicates (we might say "repeats") eternal truths that are *also* known through reason. Indeed, as we will see, this notion—that revelation repeats rationally accessible truths alongside its disclosure of practical content—may be important for Mendelssohn's account of the way in Jewish law functions as a "living script" (see below). On this issue, see Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 56-58; see also "Aesthetics and the Infinite: Moses Mendelssohn on the Poetics of Biblical Prophecy," in *New Directions in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Aaron W. Hughes and Wolfson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 326-353.

[35] Strictly speaking, Mendelssohn articulates this position after responding to Mörschel but before fully presenting *Jerusalem*'s reply to Cranz.

[36] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 99/8:165-166.

[37] For other invocations of this claim in *Jerusalem*, see Ibid., 102-103/8:168-169, 118-119/8:184-185, 127-128/8:192-193 et al. For references elsewhere in Mendelssohn's German and Hebrew writings, see, e.g., the passages from the *Counterreflections* and *Biur* cited at several points throughout this dissertation: the first references appear in pages 9-10 in my introduction, For a passage that *might seem* to cast doubt on this claim (but that I argue *should not* be read in this manner), see note 43 below.

[38] It seems to me that Mendelssohn's language—which emphasizes the importance of the Bible's "inexhaustible treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines" being "intimately connected with the laws"—strongly suggests the type of reading I develop in this paragraph—a reading which takes Mendelssohn to positing an association between truths and laws which enables adherence to the latter to generate reflection on the former. At the same time, however, *Jerusalem's* language is sufficiently vague to leave the door open to other readings.

Consider in this light Mendelssohn's forceful insistence, throughout his writings, that reflection on a principle such as God's existence allows us to derive additional principles—for example, that once we grasp that God is an infinitely good being whose existence does not depend upon other entities, we possess sufficient grounds to generate a conception of God's providence and, in turn, of the soul's immortality. (On the move from God's existence to divine

providence, see, e.g., Mendelssohn, "On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences," in *Philosophical Writings*, 279-280; for the German, see *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysichen Wissenschaften*, in *JubA*, 2:297-299; further references will follow the format of Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," English/German; I will identify cases in which I alter Dahlstrom's translation. On the move from divine providence to the soul's immortality, see, e.g., *Phädon*, 135-146; for the German, see *Phaedon, oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, in *JubA*, 3.1:114-128; further references will follow the format of Mendelssohn, *Phädon*, English/German). This position entails that if Jewish practice is capable of leading individuals to reflect on God's existence, Jewish practice is capable of generating contemplation of principles such as providence and immortality, since reflection on God's existence will lead us to these truths. Perhaps, then, Mendelssohn holds that adherence to Jewish practice leads us to a variety of principles by initially directing attention to God's existence:

(a) Mendelssohn might hold that insofar as many actions required by Jewish law are supposed to be accompanied by the recitation of blessings which invoke God, the performance of such actions will generate reflection on the God being mentioned.

(b) Mendelssohn might hold that that insofar as individuals take Jewish practice to be grounded in legislation endorsed by God, the performance of these required actions might bring to mind their divine legislator. Indeed, I take Mendelssohn to be relying on such reasoning in the conclusion of the *Biur* on Exodus: see pages 140-141 in Chapter 3. (This reading gains further support from Mendelssohn's insistence on our uncertainty regarding the reasons for many of the specific norms associated with Jewish law: see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Biur* to Exodus 23:19, 16:226. If the reasons for performing a specific action are unclear, then adherents would have a strong reason to engage in reflection on the action's divine commander—to reflect on the purpose of these acts, and thus on the type of being that would mandate such behavior.)

Nevertheless, however we understand the details of Mendelssohn's arguments, his basic point is clear: Jewish practice generates reflection on rationally accessible "eternal truths."

[39] On the role of theoretical content in divine revelation, see note 34 above.

[40] See pages 54-56 below

[41] Indeed, Mendelssohn's biblical commentaries argue that the Bible, properly understood, expresses a variety of such principles. See the sources cited in note 34 above.

[42] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102-103/8:169. See also pages 42-43 below.

[43] Three points are worth noting. First, later in *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn introduces a new element into this argument, suggesting that Jewish practice fosters reflection not only on eternal truths, but also on historical truths—truths such as the belief that God led the Israelites out of slavery (see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 128/8:193). However, insofar as this point is absent from *Jerusalem*'s argument until this brief allusion at a late moment, we can see this claim as a less central aspect of Mendelssohn's theory; I have therefore relegated this point to my notes.

Second, I leave aside, for the moment, Mendelssohn's views on the determinate content of the truths to which Jewish practice points—on whether this system points to specific propositions which endure over time, or to principles which Jews reinterpret throughout history. This issue represents a point of dispute: see Morgan, "History and Modern Jewish Thought," 476-477; Eisen, "Divine Legislation," 240-260. For my view, see note 72 in Chapter 2.

Finally, there is one passage in Mendelssohn's writings that *might* be read as expressing doubts about the capacity of Jewish practice to generate reflection on religious truths. In a letter to his Jewish colleague Herz Homberg written several months after *Jerusalem*'s publication,

Mendelssohn offers this statement: "We are not of the same opinion regarding the necessity of ritual laws. Even if their significance as a kind of script or sign language were to lose their usefulness, their necessity as a unifying bond would not come to an end. And, in my opinion, this union itself will have to be preserved by the plan of providence as long as polytheism, anthropomorphism, and religious usurpation dominate the world. As long as these tormentors of reason are unified, must [not] genuine theists also allow some kind of connection to develop among themselves if these tormentors are not to trample everything underfoot?" (Mendelssohn to Homberg, 22 September 1783, in *JubA*, 13:134; I follow Bowman's translation in "From Letter to Naphtali Herz Homberg," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 124). Mendelssohn seems to be outlining an alternate account of Jewish practice's value, suggesting that adherence to Jewish law can serve as a "unifying bond" for Jewish theists.

This passage does not undermine the view that Mendelssohn takes Jewish practice to generate reflection on rationally accessible truths. He argues not that Jewish practice *is* incapable of generating such reflection, but rather that if such an incapacity *were to* arise, this system would remain valuable: in his words, "even if their significance as a kind of script or sign language *were to* lose their usefulness, their necessity as a unifying bond would not come to an end." Moreover, Mendelssohn goes on to insist that, in such a scenario, "our efforts should actually be bent only on abolishing the prevailing abuse and imbuing the ceremonies with real, genuine significance, once again making legible and intelligible the script" (Ibid.). The idea here is that if adherence to Jewish practice were no longer to generate reflection, individuals should take steps to restore this capacity—to recover Jewish law's capacity to function as a "script." For example, individuals might remind other Jews that Jewish law is outlined in a text which also repeats rationally accessible truths, thereby creating an association between these norms and those religious principles, and thus enabling the performance of actions required by the one to yield reflection on the other (see pages 38-39 above). Far from denying that Jewish practice can generate reflection, then, Mendelssohn is claiming that Jewish practice can serve an additional function, and that a temporary disruption in this capacity should be just that—a temporary disruption which is remedied such that practice again sparks contemplation. (Mendelssohn's language suggests that this letter's goal is less to outline a definitive argument, and more to respond to an objection advanced by Homberg in a now-lost letter. Insofar as Mendelssohn begins by stating that "we are not of the same opinion regarding the necessity of ritual laws" and then imagines a scenario in which "their significance as a kind of script or sign language were to lose their usefulness," he seems to be responding to a letter in which Homberg denies that Jewish law can function as a "living script"—to be suggesting that *even if* we were to accept Homberg's claim, Jewish law remains valuable. That is, it seems that Mendelssohn's goal is less to retract a point he repeats throughout his career, and more to respond to a claim from a specific figure.)

[44] Mendelssohn's problem with hieroglyphics, in turn, revolves around the mysteriousness of such signs. On *Jerusale*m's view, hieroglyphics are so mysterious that a community might give up on the task of understanding their meaning and instead treat them with "superstition"—that they might be treated less as symbols of a powerful deity and more as powerful objects in their own right, and thus as objects we should approach with the awe and reverence we would otherwise direct exclusively to God. See pages 229-230 in Chapter 5.

[45] My reconstruction of this Mendelssohnian argument relies heavily on the interpretation developed in Freudenthal, "Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast," 351-372.

[46] For example, we might wonder whether the actions involved in Jewish practice require the use of enduring objects that can be venerated—that is, ritual objects such as prayer shawls and phylacteries. Similarly, we might wonder whether the impermanence of actions is an adequate protection against idolatry—whether actions can themselves be treated as holy and thus eventually be worshipped. On such issues, see Ibid., 370-371; Eisen, "Divine Legislation," 248.

[47] This distinction—between Mendelssohn's claims about idolatry and his other lines of reasoning—is an important but often overlooked point. See also note 53 below.

[48] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 118/8:184.

[49] See pages 10-11 (and especially note 48) in my introduction. As we saw, this term refers to norms that are outlined most centrally in the Hebrew Bible and in rabbinic literature of late antiquity, and that require actions even in seemingly mundane areas of life.

[50] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 118-119/8:184-185. I slightly alter Arkush's translation.

[51] Mendelssohn does not mean to suggest, of course, that a community which enacts this "living script" will be *entirely unconcerned* with written texts. After all, as we have seen, Mendelssohn himself produces, for Jewish readers, commentaries on written texts—on the books of the Bible. Instead, Mendelssohn is suggesting that a community which enacts this living script will take actions to stand at the heart of religious life—that such a community will view the actions which generate contemplation and discussion of core religious truths, rather than written formulations of those truths, as the central feature of religious life.

[52] Part of Mendelssohn's worry seems to be a fear that "alphabetical script…displays the symbolic knowledge of things and their relations too openly on the surface" and therefore "spares us the effort of penetrating and searching"—that written texts create an aura of intelligibility, convincing us that we have grasped key principles and thus need not make "the effort of…searching" (especially when this effort might involve consulting other individuals).

[53] Mendelssohn's language is telling. He states: "Man's actions are transitory; there is nothing lasting, nothing enduring about them that, like hieroglyphic script, could lead to idolatry through abuse or misunderstanding. But they also have the advantage [*Sie haben aber auch den Vorzug*] over alphabetical signs of not isolating man, of not making him to be a solitary creature, poring over writings and books. They impel him rather to social intercourse, to imitation, and to oral, living instruction." Mendelssohn explicitly declares that avoiding the dangers associated with "alphabetical" writing is an "advantage" that Jewish practice "also" possesses—an *additional* function that this system can serve, beyond combatting idolatry.

[54] For the sake of simplicity, I will use "writing" and "written signs" to refer to alphabetical script, since the remainder of this section is concerned with this type of symbol.

[55] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102-103/8:168-169. I have altered Arkush's translation.

[56] For some treatments of this argument, see the sources cited in notes 63-68 below.

[57] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 137-138/8:202.

[58] It is worth noting that Mendelssohn employs language which closely resembles the language of the passage cited above—as well as language used elsewhere in connection with fixed verbal formulas—when he discusses a specific creedal formula: the Athanasian creed. Cp. the texts cited above, as well in pages 97-99 in Chapter 2, with Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:99-103 (for Bowman's English, see "Counterreflections," 24-28).

[59] Indeed, Mendelssohn insists that "Judaism has no symbolic books" and that "no one has to swear to symbols" (Ibid., 100-101/8:167). I leave aside as beyond this chapter's scope the historical accuracy of these claims: Mendelssohn addresses this history in the cited passages.

[60] Ibid., 67/8:135.

[61] There are, of course, a variety of questions we might raise about this reasoning—for example, questions about whether Mendelssohn fails to adequately account for the fixed formulas which *do* play a role in Jewish practice, and whether the contrast between actions and creedal formulas is *actually* sustainable. On these issues, see note 81 in Chapter 2.

[62] The German shows that "them"—the object of "disfiguring"—refers to "concepts."

[63] Some readers do not explore these textual details, specifying neither the precise sense in which concepts might be "disfigured," nor the "revolutions" that generate this "disfiguring." See, e.g., Jeffrey S. Librett, *The Rhetoric of Cultural Dialogue: Jews and Germans from Moses Mendelssohn to Richard Wagner and Beyond*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 65-67; Peter D. Fenves, *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 80-97; David Martyn, "Nachwort," in Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*; *Vorrede zu Manasseh ben Israels 'Rettung der Juden*,' ed. Martyn (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2001), 151-154.

[64] Eisen, "Divine Legislation," 243-255; he also suggests that, for *Jerusalem*, some truths defy expression *and* comprehension. See also Hilfrich, "*Lebendige Schrift*."

[65] For critiques of Eisen's reading, see Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 212-218; Gottlieb, "Mendelssohn's Metaphysical Defense of Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 2 (2006):): 210-211. Gottlieb acknowledges that for Mendelssohn, *some* (but not all) metaphysical principles may lie beyond language and comprehension.

[66] For one version of this view, see Elizabeth Weber, "Fending Off Idolatry: Ceremonial Law in Mendelssohn's 'Jerusalem,'" *Modern Language Notes* 122, no. 3 (2007): 535. See also Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 135; Kepnes, "Moses Mendelssohn's Philosophy of Jewish Liturgy," 194-197; Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question*, 54-78.

[67] See pages 41-42 (and especially note 53) in this chapter.

[68] See Gottlieb, "Mendelssohn's Metaphysical Defense," 210-211. See also Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 162-164, which takes Mendelssohn to be concerned with additional historical revolutions but does not specify their identity.

[69] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 118-119/8:184-185. I slightly alter Arkush's translation.

[70] See pages 9-11 in this dissertation's introduction.

[71] Three points are worth noting here. First, there are moments, beyond the passages cited here, where Mendelssohn *may* be advancing similar claims. See, e.g., the reference to Jewish law promoting "temporal…felicity" in Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 90/8:157; see also the reference to the Jews becoming a "felicitous nation in the land" they receive from God (98/8:165; I have altered Arkush's translation). Second, while the additional allusions cited in the body of my chapter all appear in the same discussion within *Jerusalem*, these three references appear in separate paragraphs focusing on distinct themes, and thus seem to constitute three separate "occasions"—three distinct moments in which Mendelssohn, reflecting on the purpose of Judaism's "living script," repeats the claim that this script promotes collective well-being. Finally, I would note that the notion of collective "felicity" seems to be important to Mendelssohn as he writes *Jerusalem*, for this concept repeatedly appears not only in texts written during the years surrounding the treatise's composition (see pages 48-52 below as well as Chapter 3), but also in numerous passages in *Jerusalem* beyond the ones cited in the body of this chapter: see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 43/8:112, 62-63/8:130-131, 71/8:138, et al.

[72] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 127/8:192.

[73] Ibid., 128/193.

[74] Mendelssohn makes it clear that when he refers to what God "demands" of the Jews, he is referring what God "demands" as the Jews' "Lawgiver and Regent"—namely, adherence to Jewish law, and thus to Jewish practice. See Ibid., 128/8:194.

[75] Ibid.

[76] For key primary sources, see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffend*, in *JubA*, 6.1:19-25; *Anmerkungen zu Abbts freundschaftlicher Correspondenz*, in *JubA*, 6.1:29-65; *Ueber die beste Staatsverfassung*, in *JubA*, 6.1:145-148; et al. While Mendelssohn's German writings often refer to *Vollkommenheit* ("perfection"), his Hebrew writings also invoke *hatzlahah* ("flourishing"): see Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Genesis 2:9 and 2:18, in *JubA*, 15.2:23, 26. See also Altmann, "Das Menschenbild und die Bildung des Menschen nach Moses Mendelssohn," in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*, 13-27; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 100-111; Erlin, "Reluctant Modernism," 86-92; Anne Pollok, *Facetten des Menschen: zur Anthropologie Moses Mendelssohns* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2010).

[77] See Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zur Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit*, §44, 52, in Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Jean École et al. (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1962), 1.4. This is not to say that Mendelssohn fails to introduce changes Wolff's account of perfection and felicity; on the contrary, Mendelssohn grants freedom a role in self-cultivation largely absent from Wolff's account. See Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 100-111. On Mendelssohn and Leibnizian-Wolffian thought, see Chapter 2 (especially note 9), Chapter 4, and pages 245-250 in Chapter 5.

[78] More specifically, Mendelssohn frequently invokes the existence of a "faculty of cognition" or "knowledge." See, e.g., *Biur* on Genesis 2:9, in 15.2:23; "On the ability to know, the ability to feel, and the ability to desire," in *Philosophical Writings*, 309-310 (for the German, see *Über das Erkenntnis-, das Empfindungs-, and das Begrehrungsvermögen*, in *JubA*, 3.1:276-277; further references will follow the format of Mendelssohn, "On the Ability," English/German); *Morgenstunden, oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes*, in *JubA*, 3.2:61-65. On the evolution of this theory of the faculties over the course of Mendelssohn's career, see note 9 in Chapter 3.

[79] On the social dimension of Mendelssohn's anthropology, see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Sendschreiben an den Herrn Magister Lessing in Leipzig*, in *JubA*, 2:81-96; *Biur* on Genesis 2:18, in 15.2:26; *Jerusalem*, 40-75/8:109-142; *Ueber die beste Staatsverfassung*, 6.1:145-148. See also Altmann, "Prinzipien politischer Theorie bei Mendelssohn und Kant," in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*, 192-216; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 99-127; Erlin, "Reluctant Modernism," 86-92. Later in this dissertation, it will be important to recognize that Mendelssohn sees societies as capable of threatening the very pursuit of perfection to which they are crucial.

[80] Mendelssohn, *Vorrede*, 8:13-14.

[81] Mendelssohn elsewhere suggests that military and economic activities can also provide opportunities for the pursuit of perfection: see, e.g., the sources cited in notes 79 and 86.

[82] Mendelssohn, "To Enlighten," 317/6.1:118-119. I have altered Dahlstrom's translation. On this essay, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 660-664.

[83] Mendelssohn, "To Enlighten," 316/6.1:118.

[84] Following Mendelssohn, I will use the term "citizen"—a translation of the German *Bürger*—to refer to a member of a society. See, e.g., Ibid., 314-316/6.1:116-117.

[85] Ibid., 313-314/6.1:115. I have altered Dahlstrom's translation.

[86] For texts that link economic pursuits to the exercise and cultivation of faculties, see, e.g., Mendelssohn to August Hennings, 25 June 1782, in *JubA*, 13:65-66; *Ueber die beste Staatsverfassung*, 6.1:145; *Sonderung der Ämter und Stände*, in *JubA*, 6.1:152; indeed, *Ämter und Stände* explicitly describes economic pursuits as potential paths to "virtue and wisdom." It is worth remembering here that Mendelssohn earns his living as a partner in a silk enterprise.

[87] On this text, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 665.

[88] Mendelssohn, *Ueber die beste Staatsverfassung*, 6.1:145-147.

[89] See also Mendelssohn to Hennings, 13:65-66.

[90] See Mendelssohn's use of these terms in, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 40-45/8:110-114, 78-80/8:146-147, 112-114/8:177-180, 120-133/8:185-198, et al. See also "To Enlighten," 313-317/6.1:115-119; *Ueber die Gründsätze der Regierung*, in *JubA*, 6.1:133-135; et al.

[91] While one of the references to collective felicity is specifically concerned with the ancient Hebrew commonwealth (the reference cited in note 75 above), the broader focus of Mendelssohn's argument is far less clear. First of all, the terminology Mendelssohn uses seems to apply to both historical contexts, suggesting that he *may* be advancing a claim about ancient *and* modern Jews: for example, while he sometimes uses *Staat* and *Nation* to refer to the ancient Israelites (see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 120-133/8:185-198), he also writes about himself and other Jews living in a Prussian "state" where the "nation" as a whole—Jews and non-Jews—"has become so much accustomed to tolerance" (78-79/8:146-147). Second, *Jerusalem* on various occasions seems to focus on ancient Israelite society in order to illuminate the ongoing relevance of Jewish practice, suggesting that Mendelssohn *may* intend for claims about collective *Glückseligkeit* in antiquity to have implications for such *Glückseligkeit* in modernity: for example, while *Jerusalem* considers the role of Jewish practice in fostering reflection in the ancient Hebrew commonwealth (see, e.g., 126-128/8:191-193), Mendelssohn also indicates that Jewish practice plays this role in later contexts (see, e.g., 99/8:165-166) . Third, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers with whom Mendelssohn is familiar often discuss the ancient world in order to illuminate modern life, suggesting that *Jerusalem*'s account of the ancient Israelites *may* serve a similar goal: see pages 144-145 and note 68 in Chapter 3. *Jerusalem*'s text and context, then, generate uncertainty about the historical scope of Mendelssohn's claims.

[92] There are, of course, other readers who note that Mendelssohn takes Jewish practice to confer benefits on society as a whole. For example, Gottlieb claims that Mendelssohn takes Judaism to protect society from idolatry, since his "conception of chosenness focuses on the way halakhic observance benefits society as a whole," and more specifically on the way in which "Jewish chosenness involves God assigning Jews the responsibility for being a model community preserving pure monotheism" (Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 54). I agree with this reading, but it is important to note that this is not framed as an interpretation of *Jerusalem*'s references to collective felicity: Gottlieb neither cites the passages discussed above, nor clarifies the meaning of collective *Glückseligkeit* and Jewish practice's role in generating that condition.

[93] See Eisen, "Divine Legislation," 259; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 207-208. The reference to paying "remarkably little attention" appears in Arkush's summary of Eisen's analysis. Arkush seems to assume that *Jerusalem* is advancing an argument *only* about the ancient Israelite state: when discussing collective felicity, he refers to the ways in which Jewish law "included provisions for the regulation of innumerable aspects of the life of the ancient Jewish state, including its administration, armed forces, civil law, and so on" (207). Eisen, by contrast, is less clear about the precise historical focus of Mendelssohn's argument.

Two additional points are worth noting. First, these commentators do not discuss what collective *Glückseligkeit* entails for Mendelssohn. That is, they offer an account neither of how Jewish practice promotes such a condition, nor of precisely what such a condition involves; the analysis of the *Glückseligkeit* of a *Staat* or *Nation* in this chapter is thus my own. Second, while Eisen and Arkush present collective *Glückseligkeit* as playing a minor role in *Jerusalem*'s arguments, my analysis—more specifically, my demonstration that this notion recurs on several occasions—highlights the importance of this idea to Mendelssohn's reasoning.

[94] See page 37 above.

[95] If we read *Jerusalem* against the backdrop of Mendelssohn's other writings, we discover that—strictly speaking—he takes *many*, but *not all*, of the norms governing Jewish practice to be "divine" in the sense I am about to outline. That is, he takes *many*, but not *all*, norms governing Jewish practice to be divine in the sense of being norms which are endorsed by God, which we take to be endorsed by God because of their biblical basis, and which we take to possess a biblical basis for one of two reasons—either because these norms are outlined explicitly in the Pentateuch, or because these norms are presented by the rabbis from antiquity as derivable from that text. Indeed, Mendelssohn acknowledges that some of the laws which govern Jewish practice should be understood as the enactments of human authorities. See Mendelssohn, *Ritualgesetze,* 7:115-116. The account I am about to provide, then, outlines Mendelssohn's views on the authority of *many* norms governing Jewish practice. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, when discussing norms taken to be divinely endorsed in the sense outlined here, I will refer simply to "norms" and "laws" (or "the norms" and "the laws"), rather than to "many of the norms" or "many of the laws."

[96] To be sure, Mendelssohn does not claim that this divinely endorsed status is *sufficient* to render these norms binding. On the contrary, while I know of no text in which Mendelssohn specifies the full range of factors that endow these laws with authority, he hints that the consent of the Jews might also play an important role (see Ibid., 7:116-121). Nevertheless, based on the texts explored in the body of my chapter, it seems clear that, for Mendelssohn, norms seen as divine commands depend on this status for their authority—that being endorsed by God is a necessary, although perhaps not sufficient, basis for the authority of much of Jewish law.

The account of Jewish law in the text I have just cited—in Mendelssohn's *Ritual Laws*—bears a striking resemblance to arguments in the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides's monumental legal code. I hope to explore these similarities in a future study; see the brief allusion to this issue in Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 106.

[97] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 133-134/8:198-199.

[98] On a possible link between Mendelssohn's emphasis on "clear" statements and early modern political theory, see Morgan, "Overcoming the Remoteness of the Past," 170-172.

[99] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 134/8:199.

[100] As I indicate in note 95 above, Mendelssohn argues that *many*, but not *all* norms are divine in the sense I outline here.

[101] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 90/8:157. I have slightly altered Arkush's translation.

[102] Ibid., 99/8:165-166. Mendelssohn uses some of the same language here that he uses when describing the Israelites' "divine legislation" (cp. this passage to the text cited in my previous note), indicating that he is presenting this "book" as source of that legislation. This insistence on a link between norms and the Bible is consistent with the connection I posited in my introduction between Jewish law and rabbinic literature. After all, as we will soon see,

Mendelssohn holds that a key project of rabbinic literature is to present *halakha*'s norms and clarify their biblical grounding.

[103] On the composition of Mendelssohn's translation and commentary, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 368-420; see also notes 125 below and 20 in Chapter 3.

[104] This claim appears in the *Biur*'s introduction, "Light for the Path": see Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:243. This follows my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 196-197.

[105] Mendelssohn, *Vorrede*, 8:16-17. With one slight alteration, I follow Bowman's translation in "From the Preface to *Vindiciae Judaeorum*," 44. Mendelssohn notes that Dohm "rightly" offers this summary of Judaism's attitude regarding "divine commandments."

[106] Mendelssohn, *Ritualgesetze*, 7:115. On the concept of the "written law" (and the related notion of an "oral law"), see, e.g., Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 286-314.

[107] Mendelssohn, *Ritualgesetze*, 7:115-117. This passage also acknowledges that some laws outlined in rabbinic literature should be understood as the enactments of human authorities: see note 95 above. See also note 110 below.

[108] More precisely, this is *one* of the biblical groundings which the Babylonian Talmud provides for this rule: see, e.g., the extended discussion of this issue in b. Hullin 113a-115b.

[109] See, e.g., the discussion of this issue in b. Berakhot 26b.

[110] I wish to avoid confusion. I leave aside the question of whether rabbis *understand themselves* to be deriving laws from the Pentateuch in any simple sense—whether the rabbis of antiquity understand themselves to be formulating laws on the basis on an engagement with Scripture (as opposed to, for example, connecting preexisting norms to the Bible for a variety of reasons). Indeed, the history of Jewish thought exhibits diverse views on the precise relationship between rabbinic accounts of Jewish law and rabbinic readings of the Bible. See, e.g., Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 45-75, 131-139; see also David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). I am advancing a claim here not about how the rabbis understand themselves, but rather about how *Mendelssohn* presents their work. That is, I am suggesting that *Mendelssohn* presents the rabbis as deriving norms from, or tracing laws back to, the words of the Pentateuch, and that he takes such moves to play a key role in establishing the authority of the norms in question.

[111] While the phrase "historical study of Scripture" appears in the work of Baruch Spinoza, I use this phrase to refer, more broadly, to a constellation of developments which begin from an emphasis on the historically conditioned nature of the Bible—developments which, as we will see, gain adherents not only among critics of revealed religion, but also among thinkers who see themselves as defenders of Christianity. See the sources cited in the following note.

[112] See, e.g., Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 77-107; see also Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 78-87. On the history of modern biblical scholarship more generally, see, e.g., Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des alten Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982). For a brief introduction to some key seventeenth- and eighteenth-century developments, see John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 15-27, 147-157. For a discussion of attitudes towards the Bible and biblical scholarship in the German Enlightenment, see Henning Reventlow, Walter Sparn, and John D. Woodbridge, ed., *Historische Kritik und biblischer Kanon in der deutschen Aufklärung*, Wolfenbütteler

Forschungen 41 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988). On history in the German Enlightenment, see, e.g., Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

[113] On Mendelssohn's engagement with this approach, see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 115-124, 140-143, 147-222. For the presence of key works in Mendelssohn's personal library, see the texts by figures such as Lowth, Kennicott, Michaelis, and Johann Gottfreid Eichhorn in Hermann Meyer, ed. *Verzeichniss der auserlesenen Büchersammlung des seeligen Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1926), 13-14, 23, 27, 44-45. For Mendelssohn's discussion of these scholars in his correspondence, see, e.g., Mendelssohn to a biblical researcher, 16 February 1773, in *JubA*, 12.2:33-34; Mendelssohn to a biblical researcher, 8 February 1774, in *JubA*, 12.2:41-43. For an example of Mendelssohn's discussion of these figures in his literary reviews, see, e.g., his review of Lowth's writings (*JubA*, 4:20-62). For Mendelssohn's engagement with this approach in the *Biur*, see the following pages and Chapter 4 of this dissertation. For Mendelssohn's (sometimes contentious) relationship with Michaelis, see, e.g., Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 241-244, 278-280, 459-460, 465-467, 530-531, et al.

[114] This dedication appears on an unnumbered page at the beginning of Elijah Levita, *Uebersetzung des Buchs Massoreth Hamassoreth*, trans. Christian Gottlob Meyer, ed. Semler (Halle: C.H. Hemmerde 1772). This is a German translation, edited by Semler, of a Hebrew work by Elijah Bahur (also known as Elijah Levita), a German-Jewish writer active during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; this work raises questions about aspects of the biblical text preserved by the Jewish tradition. See Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 99, 117-118.

[115] See, e.g., Johann David Michaelis to Mendelssohn, 27 January 1770, in *JubA*, 12.1:213. See also Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 118-119.

[116] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:242-243. I have slightly altered my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 196-197. For Mendelssohn, if some scholars find it "plausible" to alter the biblical text, this plausibility reflects a particular hermeneutic focus: "They do not accept the words of the Torah in order to observe and perform all that is written there, but rather as a book of chronicles, to know the events of ancient times and to understand the ways of divine providence and governance in every generation. For these purposes, it does no harm if they sometimes alter details by adding or subtracting letters or words."

[117] On the Masoretic edition (and the history of the Hebrew Bible's text more generally), see, e.g., Martin Jan Mulder, "The Transmission of the Biblical Text," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Mulder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 87-135; E.J. Revell, "Masoretes," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:593-596; "Masoretic Text," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:597-599; Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 34-45.

[118] Strictly speaking, the Masoretic edition includes the word *lamed-aleph* in the body of the Bible but preserves the alternate rendering—*lamed-vav*—in marginal notes. On this verse, see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 36-40.

The example offered above focuses on the Bible's consonantal text. An illustration of the Masoretic edition's treatment of the Bible's vowels emerges if we turn to Deuteronomy: the Masoretes determine that vowels should be added to the consonants of Deuteronomy 31:7 to form the words *ata tavo et ha'am* (meaning "you shall go [with] the people"), rather than *ata tavi et ha'am* (meaning "you shall bring the people"), and thus that this verse advances a claim about accompanying the Israelites, rather than a claim about leading that group. On challenges to this

vocalization, see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 98. An illustration of the Masoretic edition's treatment of the Bible's accents, in turn, emerges if we turn to the Decalogue: the Masoretes call for the Decalogue's first two commandments to be recited as one verse, indicating—at least in the eyes of some readers—that these statements constitute a unit separate from the remaining commandments. On this case, see Levenson, "Moses Mendelssohn's Understanding," 21-23.

[119] I offer this example because Michaelis raises questions about the Masoretic rendering of verses concerned with marriage laws. See Johann David Michaelis, *Mosaisches Recht*, 6 vols. (Frankfurt: J.G. Garbe, 1775-1800), §114-115 (2:291-301).

[120] On this scholarship, see the sources cited in note 112 above, especially Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 78-101, 147-175; Breuer discusses the passage quoted above in 159.

[121] This term refers to the Masoretic edition.

[122] Benjamin Kennicott, *The State of the Printed Hebrew Text of the Old Testament Considered: A Dissertation in Two Parts*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1753-1759), 2:269. Mendelssohn owns a copy of this text: see Meyer, *Verzeichniss*, 23.

[123] Michaelis, *Deutsche Uebersetzung des alten Testaments, mit Anmerkungen für Ungelehrte*, 13 vols. (Göttingen and Gotha: Johann Christian Dieterich, 1769-1785), 1:xiii; see also Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 97. While this volume of the translation does not appear in our catalog of Mendelssohn's library, he owns the remaining volumes, and thus seems to be familiar with this work; moreover, he knows Michaelis's *Mosaic Laws*, which raises questions about the Masoretic edition. See Meyer, *Verzeichniss*, 14, 44; see also note 115 above.

[124] Michaelis, *Deutsche Uebersetzung*, 1:xxix; see also Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 97, as well as the discussion in the previous note.

[125] Mendelssohn does not explicitly state that it is the position he outlines in *Jerusalem* which is in danger, although I would note that he composes the *Biur*'s introduction during the very months—the second half of 1782—in which he writes *Jerusalem*: Mendelssohn completes the *Biur*'s introduction on November 7, 1782 (Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:267), and works on *Jerusalem* during the fall of 1782 (Altmann, "Introduction," 11-13). My point, instead, is that during the same period in which he writes *Jerusalem*, he recognizes that a specific type of position—a type of position which is also outlined in that treatise and traces Jewish law's authority to the grounding of norms in the Bible—rests on a contested commitment.

[126] See page 55 above.

[127] Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow to Mendelssohn, 9 May 1782, in *JubA*, 13:46-47; see also Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 142.

[128] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 21, in *JubA*, 16:198-199. I have slightly altered my translation in "On Peshat and Derash," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 206

[129] I do not mean to suggest, of course, that Mendelssohn is unconcerned with, or opposed to, developing a reading of the Bible's plain sense. On the contrary, he is correctly remembered as a thinker who places a strong emphasis on offering such a reading, and he describes medieval Jewish exegetes who pursue this project as "our eyes in the elucidation of Scripture" (Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:244; this follows my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 198). Instead, I am suggesting that alongside Mendelssohn's deep concern with the Bible's plain sense is an emphasis on the importance of accepting rabbinic exegesis. On Mendelssohn's hermeneutics, see, e.g., Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 33-89; Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 177-222.

[130] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Hakdamah L'Megilat Kohelet*, in *JubA*, 14:148-149. On the term *peshat* in pre-modern Jewish sources, see, e.g., Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, 3-88.

[131] For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see pages 174-177 of Chapter 4.

[132] See, e.g., the discussion of Exodus 21 in b. Bava Kamma 83b-84a.

[133] Mendelssohn, *Alim L'Trufah*, in *JubA*, 14:327. Mendelssohn composes this prospectus with his assistant Dubno; therefore, following other scholars, I believe that we can treat this text as reflecting Mendelssohn's views (see also Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 234n26). I would note, as well, that this passage employs biblical quotations which Mendelssohn uses in his contributions to the *Biur*, further suggesting his role in composing these lines: cp. to Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:242; *Biur* on Exodus 15, in *JubA*, 16:134. In any event, it is clear that Mendelssohn is aware of attacks on rabbinic exegesis: see, e.g., note 127.

[134] The reference to the "sages" is a standard way of invoking the rabbis.

[135] On this passage, see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 184. On this scholarship, see the sources cited in note 112 above, especially Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 83-107, 177-222. I should add that while some of these scholars accept the possibility of non-straightforward readings, these individuals insist that such readings must in some sense be derived from a more straightforward interpretation, and that rabbinic modes of exegesis fail to meet this interpretive standard. See Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 90, 102, et al.

[136] Robert Lowth, *Isaiah: A New Translation with a Preliminary Dissertation* (London: J. Nichols, 1779), lii-liv. After insisting that our primary task when approaching the biblical text is to explicate the "plain literal and grammatical sense of [the Bible's] author," Lowth goes on to declare that the rabbis are deficient as "interpreters" of the Bible—implying that the rabbis fail to attend to the Bible's plain meaning in its original context. Mendelssohn owns a copy of this work: see Meyer, *Verzeichniss*, 13. See also Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 90.

[137] Michaelis, *Mosaisches Recht*, §18 (1:58). Mendelssohn receives this volume of *Mosaic Law* directly from Michaelis: see the letter cited in note 115 above. See also Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 102-103.

[138] Mendelssohn does not explicitly state that it is the position he outlines in *Jerusalem* which is in danger; indeed, he writes the *Biur*'s prospectus before composing *Jerusalem*. My point, instead, is that by the time he outlines a position on Jewish law's authority in *Jerusalem* (a position which trace Jewish law's authority to the grounding of norms in the biblical text), he recognizes that this type of position rests on a contested commitment.

[139] This is an important point. Indeed, Arkush even suggests that assaults on Masoretic and rabbinic reliability constituted "some of the less profound challenges with which the Enlightenment confronted Judaism": see Arkush, "Review of *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-Century Study of Scripture*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 89, no. 3-4 (1999): 393. Key additional developments include (1) the critique of revealed religion associated with thinkers such as Spinoza, which suggests that the Hebrew Bible is not a reliable record of an enduringly binding divine revelation; (2) the historical relativizing of biblical law associated with figures such as Michaelis, which suggests that even laws endorsed by God in the Pentateuch possessed authority *only* in the ancient Hebrew state; and (3) the attack on unitary Mosaic authorship associated with scholars such as Eichhorn, which suggests that the some of the material included in the Pentateuch is borrowed by Moses from pre-existing sources, and which therefore seems to suggest that a connection to the Pentateuch need not indicate a connection to God's words—that some portions of the Pentateuch represent human creations which Moses

inherited, rather than authority-conferring utterances which God revealed. However, as far as I or other scholars have been able to determine, Mendelssohn offers few explicit remarks on challenges (1) and (2), making it difficult to assess his attitude towards such threats—to determine whether his silence reflects an inability to address such concerns, a belief that these challenges are more apparent than real, or some other factor entirely. Moreover, as the sources cited below clarify, while it is clear that Mendelssohn has read Spinoza's *Ethics*, scholars remain divided regarding the question of whether Mendelssohn actually read the text in which Spinoza most explicitly attacks revealed religion: the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Therefore, I will leave aside these issues until Chapter 5, focusing instead on developments that we *know* Mendelssohn takes to threaten the binding nature of Jewish practice: attacks on the version of the Bible used by Jews, and on rabbinic interpretive claims. On the status of Spinozistic attacks in Mendelssohn's thought, see Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 133-222; Friedrich Niewöhner, "'Es hat nicht jeder das Zeug zu einem Spinoza': Mendelssohn als Philosoph des Judentums," in *Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit*, 291-313; Ursula Goldenbaum, "Mendelssohns schwierige Beziehung zu Spinoza," in *Spinoza im Deutschland des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Norbert Waszek, Eva Schürmann, and Frank Weinreich (Stuttgart Bad-Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2002), 265-317; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 137n19. On Michaelis's attack, see Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 86-87. On the possibility that Mendelssohnian arguments I reconstruct in this dissertation might constitute responses to challenges (1) and (2), see pages 240-242 and notes 43-44 in Chapter 5. For a response to Arkush's description of assaults on the Masoretes and rabbis as "some of the less profound challenges with which the Enlightenment confronted Judaism," see note 45 of Chapter 5.

While Mendelssohn at times seems concerned with the issue of unitary Mosaic authorship, this concern does not seem to revolve around threats to Jewish practice, for the sections of the Bible that are seen as non-Mosaic and discussed by Mendelssohn are not sections primarily concerned with practice. On Mendelssohn and Mosaic authorship, see Levenson "Moses Mendelssohn's Understanding"; Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 163-165.

[140] I leave aside the question of whether the problems Mendelssohn takes himself to face are problems he could have avoided—whether there are strands in pre-modern Jewish thought that would allow him to defend the authority of Jewish law without positing Masoretic and rabbinic reliability. However we answer this question, it remains the case that *Mendelssohn* presents this reliability as crucial to his position, but as under attack from the study of history.

[141] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:213; this follows my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 191. See also pages 169-174 in Chapter 4.

[142] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:245; this follows my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 200. See also pages 174-181 in Chapter 4.

[143] See Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 78-87.

[144] See Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 174-175. He offers a more positive assessment of Mendelssohn's treatment of rabbinic exegesis: see, e.g., 184-201.

[145] See Arkush, "Review of Breuer," 394-395.

[146] For Arkush's reasoning, see Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 167-288. For Arkush, the key threats are those associated with Spinoza and Cranz. See pages 238-239 in Chapter 5.

[147] Such doubts, I wish to emphasize, need not lead to a critique of Mendelssohn, who on Arkush's account has strong reasons to offer "rhetorical" arguments. See page 233 in Chapter 5.

[148] See pages 8-9 in my introduction.

Chapter 2
Conceptual "Disfiguring": Jewish Practice and Philosophical History

The previous chapter left us with a growing suspicion that *Jerusalem* might prove more influential than intelligible—that while Mendelssohn's treatise has been accepted as a founding work of modern Jewish thought, this text describes Jewish practice in terms likely to remain frustratingly opaque. Initially, to be sure, the basic contours of *Jerusalem*'s position seemed relatively straightforward: for Mendelssohn, the actions required by Jewish law generate reflection on "eternal truths" accessible through reason, such as God's existence, divine providence, and the soul's immortality. Upon further scrutiny, however, this account of Jewish practice turned out to pose serious interpretive challenges, for three of *Jerusalem*'s central claims seemed to resist explication. More specifically, it was not at all clear what Mendelssohn has in mind when he claims that Jewish practice enables adherents to avoid "disfiguring" their religious beliefs, that Jewish practice serves to promote "the felicity of the nation," and that modern Jews have not been freed "from the strict obedience we owe to the law." Indeed, this confusion raised questions about the basic character and significance of Mendelssohn's writings on Judaism, providing grounds for suspecting that he defends this tradition with arguments which are "more rhetorical than real," and that he discusses Judaism in terms which are too elusive to be relevant for contemporary thinkers—that he seeks merely to deflect, with effective rhetoric, attacks on the Jewish tradition, and that his claims are too vague to contribute to contemporary debates. Our encounter with *Jerusalem* thus raised fundamental questions about Mendelssohn's thought. Can we glean from his writings, read in their historical context, a more precise account of what he has in mind when he presents his theory of Jewish practice? Can we reconstruct the details of his approach to Judaism's "living script," or should we harbor doubts about the sincerity and relevance of his philosophy of Judaism?

Chapter 2 will begin to answer these questions, seeking to reconstruct *Jerusalem*'s account of Jewish practice and conceptual "disfiguring." Mendelssohn's claim, I will argue, is that Jewish practice can address an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history—the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems. More specifically, I will show, his claim about "disfiguring" constitutes a response to what he calls "the changeability of philosophical systems [*die Unbeständigkeit der philosophischen Lehrgebäude*]"—a response to the idea that history has been characterized by, and may continue to involve, the rise and fall of conceptual frameworks such as Aristotelian and Cartesian philosophy.[1] Recognizing that communities often express religious convictions in fixed verbal formulas such as creedal statements, Mendelssohn worries that a requirement to affirm such formulas amid shifting philosophical frameworks will lead us to distort our beliefs. He worries that formulas composed under the influence of one conceptual model might be incompatible with beliefs generated by later philosophical systems, and that we might therefore reject commitments we should accept for the sake of affirming communally sanctioned words—that a requirement to affirm preexisting creedal formulas might impede our ability to revise our views, and thus that we might distort our beliefs by rejecting emerging commitments which we have grounds to endorse. Mendelssohn's claim, in turn, is that Jewish practice can address this danger, for by leading adherents to privilege actions over specific sets of words and thereby discouraging fixed verbal formulas, Jewish practice secures conceptual flexibility in light of the dynamic nature of philosophical history. Jewish practice, Mendelssohn insists, permits adherents to revise their understandings of key principles in light of shifting philosophical systems—to employ the most compelling account of reality available in a given context to lend determinate content to categories such as providence and immortality.

I will devote the following pages to defending this reading. Before doing so, however, I wish to clarify several terms that will be crucial to my argument. Mendelssohn often distinguishes between (1) "principles [G*rundsätze*]" and "truths [*Wahrheiten*]" that are accessible to all individuals but have been understood in different ways; (2) the determinate "concepts [*Begriffe*]" that individuals form of these *Grundsätze* and *Wahrheiten*; and (3) the "words [*Worte*]" and "signs [*Zeichen*]"—or arrangements of "words" and "signs"—with which we express *Begriffe* of principles. For example, while arguing that there are "fundamental principles on which all religions agree," such as "God, providence, and a future life,"[2] Mendelssohn denies that these principles have always been understood or expressed in the same way. On the contrary, he insists that "paganism" possesses a "concept" of "the Deity" different from the view present in Jewish sources,[3] that we "wander through" a "cycle of concepts" as we alter our "mode of conceiving" providence,[4] and that individuals may use different "words" while employing the same concept.[5] In order to capture these distinctions, then, I will refer to *Grundsätze* and *Wahrheiten* as *principles*, *truths*, and *categories*; to *Begriffe* as *concepts*, *conceptions*, and *understandings*; and to *Worte* and *Zeichen* as *words*, *sentences*, and *verbal formulas*. When discussing "God," for example, I refer to a *category* when I have in mind any notion of a higher power, to a *concept* when I mean to describe a determinate view of the deity's properties, and to a *verbal formula* when I wish to denote sentences expressing such a view.[6]

A second clarification involves the phrase "philosophical systems." In Mendelssohn's 1763 *Essay on Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences*, this term refers to "the philosophy of Aristotle" and "the metaphysics of Descartes or Leibniz,"[7] positions that Mendelssohn describes as offering "concepts" which yield "knowledge about nature" (understood to include "theology" and "ethics"), and as being "considered certain" until the emergence of views possessing greater

"rigorousness and distinctness."[8] The reference here seems to be to a collection of concepts that is taken to provide a compelling account of reality—that individuals living in a specific historical context take to accurately describe entities such as God and nature, but that may eventually come to be viewed as possessing serious flaws. I will use the phrase "philosophical system," then, to indicate a conceptual framework—a collection of *Begriffe*—that is taken to provide a compelling account of reality. For example, I will describe Mendelssohn as a defender of the rationalist "system" associated with Leibniz and Wolff, since *Jerusalem*'s author seeks to refine the content, while nevertheless recognizing and addressing the limits, of Leibnizian-Wolffian demonstrations for determinate conceptions of various religious principles: the existence of God, understood as an omnipotent, omniscient, and infinitely good being whose existence does not depend upon other entities; divine providence, understood as the creation of "the best of all possible worlds," the establishment of natural laws and performance of miracles, and the dispensation of reward and punishment; and the immortality of the soul, understood as a non-composite entity possessing perceptions and appetites.[9]

We can now turn to *Jerusalem*'s claim about "disfiguring." I will begin by developing a preliminary reading of this argument, drawing both on passages from *Jerusalem*, and on Mendelssohn's other German writings, to suggest that he is concerned with a danger linked to philosophical "changeability." I will then argue that Mendelssohn's historical context and Hebrew writings lend strong support to this interpretation, for developments in early modern Christian theology and natural philosophy, as well as the treatment of medieval Jewish thinkers in works such as the *Biur*, provide further grounds for ascribing to Mendelssohn a concern with the rise and fall of conceptual systems. Taken together, I will conclude, these factors establish that Mendelssohn presents Jewish practice as a means of addressing an epistemological danger

grounded in philosophical history. He argues that Jewish practice protects us from distorting religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems—that Jewish practice protects us from rejecting emerging commitments which we have grounds to endorse, and thus secures conceptual flexibility in light of the dynamic nature of philosophical history.

Concepts and History in *Jerusalem*

As we saw in Chapter 1, *Jerusalem* offers the following account of the benefits arising from adherence to Jewish practice—from the performance of actions which generate reflection on, and in turn foster communal discussion of,[10] truths such as providence and immortality:

> Doctrines and laws, convictions and actions. The former were not bound to words or written characters which always remain the same, for all men and all times, amid all the revolutions of language, morals, manners, and conditions, and which always present the same rigid forms, into which we cannot force [*einzwängen*] our concepts without disfiguring [*zerstümmeln*] them. They were entrusted to living, spiritual instruction, which can keep pace with all changes of time and circumstances…The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation and provide the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction.[11]

When Mendelssohn discusses "binding" beliefs to "words," we saw, he is referring to the rise of fixed verbal formulas such as creedal statements—to a situation in which a community treats specific formulas expressing beliefs as central to religious life, and in which this community therefore requires the affirmation of these sentences while discouraging their revision. When he claims that Jewish practice avoids a situation in which "doctrines" are "bound to words…which always remain the same," then, he is claiming that Jewish practice constitutes a means to avoid the emergence of fixed verbal formulas—of sentences that members of a community are required to affirm without introducing revisions. His point is that insofar as Jewish practice creates a communal life oriented around reflection and conversation grounded in required deeds, this system leads adherents to view the actions which generate contemplation and discussion of

truths, rather than any specific written formulations of those truths, as the central feature of religious life, and that this privileging of actions over specific sets of words renders unlikely the emergence of "rigid" formulas—that this posture will discourage adherents from treating any specific formula as indispensable to Jewish life, and that these individuals will therefore refrain from demanding that any such sentences be affirmed without revision.

Confusion arose, however, once we turned to the details of this account. *Jerusalem* insists that by generating reflection on eternal truths, Jewish practice allows adherents to avoid formulas which "always remain the same…amid all the revolutions" and "all changes of time and circumstances," and which thus "always present the same rigid forms, into which we cannot force our concepts without disfiguring them." The idea here seems to be that Jewish practice enables adherents to avoid "disfiguring" their religious beliefs—that we will in some sense distort religious "concepts"[12] if we are required to affirm the same sentences amid "changes of time," and that practices which discourage the rise of such formulas therefore avoid this type of "disfiguring." But what does this mean? In what sense do "rigid" formulas "disfigure" beliefs amid "changes of time and circumstances"? What problem does Jewish practice avoid by protecting adherents from a requirement to affirm fixed formulas amid historical "revolutions"? No satisfactory answers emerged in Chapter 1, leaving us in a state of interpretive confusion.

We can begin to dispel this confusion by attempting to identify the historical "revolution" Mendelssohn takes to motivate the avoidance of fixed formulas—to be associated with the "disfiguring" Jewish practice is intended to combat. More specifically, we might ask whether any historical processes figure prominently in *Jerusalem*, since a "revolution" invoked elsewhere in this work might also occupy Mendelssohn's attention when he discusses Jewish praxis.[13] An initial clue emerges from a passage immediately preceding the account of "rigid forms":

> [In some places] men are left to brute nature, which inwardly feels its powers and uses them, without being able to express itself in words and speech except in the most defective manner and, as it were, stammeringly. In another place, they are aided by science and art, shining brightly through words, images, and metaphors, by which the perceptions of the inner sense are transformed into a distinct [*deutliche*] knowledge of signs and established as such. As often as it was useful, Providence caused wise men to arise in every nation on earth, and granted them the gift of looking with a clearer eye into themselves as well as all around them to contemplate God's works and communicate their knowledge to others. But not at all times is this necessary or useful…The man who lives simply…still knows but little of the difference between direct and indirect causality; and he hears and sees instead the all-vivifying power of the Deity everywhere—in every sunrise, in every rain that falls, in every flower that blossoms and in every lamb that grazes in the meadow and rejoices in its own existence. This mode of conceiving things has in it something defective, but it leads directly to the recognition of an invisible, omnipotent being, to whom we owe all the good which we enjoy.[14]

Jerusalem presents two "mode[s] of conceiving" providence, contrasting individuals who take God to be present "in every sunrise" with those who take God to only "indirect[ly]" produce such phenomena. Mendelssohn then identifies as the source of this divergence a more basic difference between these individuals, suggesting that the former "live simply" on the basis of "brute nature," while the latter attain "distinct knowledge" by reflecting on "direct and indirect causality"—that the latter attain a *Deutlichkeit* elsewhere described as the result of philosophical reflection[15] and employ a causal model elsewhere treated as deriving from Aristotelian thought.[16] Mendelssohn's point, then, is that some individuals lend determinate content to religious truths by drawing on philosophical models such as Aristotelianism, while other individuals rely on an adequate yet less sophisticated "mode of conceiving" the cosmos. He concludes as follows:

> On balance, men's doings and the morality of their conduct can perhaps expect just as good results from the crude mode of conceiving things as from these refined and purified concepts. Many a people is destined by Providence to wander through this cycle [*Kreislauf*] of concepts, indeed, sometimes it must wander through it more than once.[17]

Mendelssohn presents the move from "a crude mode conceiving" to "purified concepts" as a recurring "cycle of concepts" within the history of "a people." That is, he envisions a recurring process in which we lend determinate content to categories such as providence by employing a

system such as Aristotelianism, but in which the use of this model eventually comes to a close and a "crude mode of conceiving" again becomes possible. He claims that history involves shifts in *Begriffe* of core religious truths based on the rise and fall of models such as Aristotelianism.

We can better grasp Mendelssohn's view of this process by considering his other German writings. The *Essay* begins by discussing what it calls "the changeability of philosophical systems"—the idea that history has involved the rise and fall of diverse conceptual frameworks:

> The criticism is commonly advanced against philosophy that, in its doctrines, no particular conviction is ever to be hoped for since in every century new systems [*Lehrgebäude*] rise up, glimmer and in turn pass away…In the dark ages Aristotle meant far more to philosophers…For a long time his proclamations were considered certain, that is, until Descartes and Leibniz came along and surpassed him in rigorousness and distinctness.[18]

This view implies that *Jerusalem*'s "cycle" involves the rise and fall of *diverse* "purified concepts," for if such concepts arise from philosophical systems, and if these systems themselves change over time, then the "purified" *Begriffe* we possess will vary over the course of history. Indeed, Mendelssohn explicitly affirms this idea in 1785 when discussing Aristotelian thinkers:[19]

> They elevated their Deity fully above the sub-lunar world, and ascribed to Him merely a concern for the preservation of the whole—for the kinds and species of things, along with complete neglect of the fates and encounters of singular beings…It is the highest triumph of human wisdom…to realize with *Shaftesbury* and *Leibniz* that the purposes of God, as well as His involvement, extend to the smallest change and singular occurrence, both among the lifeless and among the living.[20]

The claim here is that while Aristotelianism leads thinkers to restrict providence to the preservation of "species," Leibnizian metaphysics implies that God is concerned with "singular" beings and events. When connecting changes in our conceptions of religious principles to the rise and fall of philosophical systems, then, *Jerusalem* is concerned with changes in determinate *Begriffe* linked to a "cycle" of diverse philosophical systems—to a process involving the rise and fall of one system, the potential return to a "crude mode of conceiving," and the emergence of a

new conceptual framework taken to provide a compelling account of reality. *Jerusalem* is concerned with shifts in religious *Begriffe* linked to "the changeability of philosophical systems."

A further sign of *Jerusalem*'s interest in this process of philosophical "changeability" emerges from the following passage:

> Men can be made to take oaths only about things which affect their external senses…But we are putting their conscience to a cruel torture when we question them about things which are solely a matter of the *internal sense*…My neighbor and I cannot possibly link the very same words to the very same internal sensations, for we cannot compare them, liken them to one another and correct them without resorting again to words. We cannot illustrate the words by things, but must again have recourse to signs and words, and finally to metaphors; because, with the help of this artifice, we reduce as it were, the concepts of the internal sense to external sensory perceptions. But, in this way, how much confusion and indistinctness are bound to remain in the signification of words, and how greatly must the ideas differ which different men, in different ages and centuries, connect with the same external signs and words![21]

Mendelssohn describes a process in which we seek to determine whether we attach to the "same" words the "same" conceptions of supra-sensible entities. Such efforts result in failure, he argues, because we cannot point to physical examples of supra-sensible "things" but must "resor[t] again to words," and because our words are themselves "metaphors" drawn from "sensory perceptions"—because clarifying a supra-sensible idea involves verbal explanation, and because words are drawn from sense experience and thus point only unclearly to supra-sensible matters.

My concern lies with the text's final statement: "how greatly must the ideas differ which different men, in different ages and centuries, connect with the same external signs." On one level, Mendelssohn seems to be presenting a simple *a fortiori* argument, suggesting that if individuals living in the *same* period often attach different ideas to the same words, then *surely* individuals living in *different* periods will ascribe different meanings to "the same…signs." The striking point, however, is that the issues which Mendelssohn raises—the practice of clarifying concepts through verbal explanations, and the incapacity of words to point clearly to concepts—

are *precisely* the issues which he identifies in other works as generating shifts in philosophical models. Consider the account of philosophical discourse he presents in the 1763 *Essay*:

> If I want to make an intrinsic characteristic *A* distinct for [an individual] and he has not made clear his concepts of the other features *B*, *C*, and so forth which are connected to *A*, then some obscurity will always remain in his soul. Because of this, one recognizes the necessity of always returning to the first principles with every step forward that one takes in philosophy. One never makes this journey back to the beginning without enormous benefit, since philosophical concepts cast rays of light that reciprocally lend distinctness to another and must be pursued. This accounts for the fact that the further philosophers themselves advance, the more they find to improve on the first basic definitions, and, hence, they are always refuting one another or at least seem to be refuting one another.

Mendelssohn suggests that the need to frequently explain our concepts creates recurring opportunities to reassess "basic definitions," and that such reevaluation can produce revisions "refuting" the work of our predecessors.[22] Mendelssohn then offers an example of this process:

> At the beginning he will be satisfied with the facile definition: "justice is a steadfast will to let each individual have what is his." If he took a few steps further, then he would notice that, by the words "what is his," property cannot be understood but instead everything to which a person has a right. He then posits: "justice is a steadfast will to let each person have that to which he has a right."…He thus continues: "A right is an entitlement or ethical capacity to make use of certain things as means to one's happiness." Hence, a person who practices justice lets each individual make use of the permitted means to his happiness…A person who enjoys seeing others beside him happy is benevolent; a person who seeks to obtain the best final purpose by the best means is wise. Now the concepts have been cleared up, and one sees quite distinctly that justice, reduced to its elements, is nothing else but a benevolence administered with wisdom.[23]

In this example, using "words" to clarify concepts leads to a shift in philosophical systems, for while the initial "definition" quotes a standard presentation of Plato's conception of justice, the conclusion arising from verbal clarifications coincides with a standard Leibnizian view of this virtue.[24] Mendelssohn, then, takes philosophical discourse to involve verbal explanations that can generate shifts in conceptual models. He claims that such discourse involves providing verbal explanations of key concepts, that this practice creates recurring opportunities to assess and revise our "basic definitions," and that such revisions can prove sufficiently far-reaching to

lead to the replacement of one worldview with another. The verbal explanation of concepts, invoked in *Jerusalem*'s discussion of oaths, fosters "the changeability of philosophical systems."

Moreover, the 1763 essay also alludes to the other issue cited in *Jerusalem*:

> Philosophy has lacked the aid of essential signs. Everything in the language of philosophers remains arbitrary. The words and the connections among them contain nothing that would essentially agree with the nature of thoughts and the connections among them. Hence, definitions are endlessly heaped on top of one another, and a demonstratively executed philosophy acquires, at first glance, the look of vain verbosity. For the soul finds nothing in the designation by means of which it could be guided to the nature of the designated subject without an arbitrary association of concepts. Hence, the soul must constantly fix its attention on the arbitrary combination of signs and what is designated, a combination established at some point in the past. For this reason, the slightest inattentiveness makes it possible for thought to lose sight of the subject matter, leaving behind merely the empty signs; in which case, of course, the most cogent philosopher must appear to be merely playing with words.[25]

Mendelssohn suggests that philosophy relies on "arbitrary" language rather than "essential signs," that philosophical terms can prove unable to clearly "guide" us to the intended "subject matter," and that this fact creates a situation in which "the most cogent philosopher" seems "to be merely playing with words." The claim here is that words such as "God" bear only a conventional relationship to the object which they designate, that we thus run the risk of failing to recall precisely what these words denote, and that we will therefore often be tempted to reject a philosopher's work on the grounds that her words lack any clear meaning. And while Mendelssohn does not explicitly state that such rejections lead to the articulation of new philosophical systems, the context of this passage indicates that he means to advance precisely this claim. After all, just a few pages earlier, he takes "new systems" to emerge when the works of influential philosophers "pass away,"[26] implying that if the nature of philosophical language leads us to reject influential works as "empty," then the nature of philosophical language paves the way for "new systems"; indeed, he describes disciplines that avoid "arbitrary" signs as capable of avoiding conceptual instability.[27] Mendelssohn's point, then, is that philosophers

must utilize words which do not point clearly to concepts, that this fact can lead us to reject the work of even "the most cogent" thinker, and that such rejections create opportunities to replace seemingly "empty" positions with new conceptual frameworks. The incapacity of words to point clearly to concepts—linked in *Jerusalem* to the derivation of words from sensory experience, and in the *Essay* to the arbitrary nature of those terms—fosters philosophical "changeability."

We can now return to *Jerusalem*. Discussing oaths, this text invokes the clarification of concepts through verbal explanations and the incapacity of words to point clearly to concepts, and concludes that "in this way" variations must emerge in the "ideas" linked to words "in different ages." Mendelssohn's earlier works, in turn, identify as the shift produced by such factors the rise and fall of philosophical systems. It seems to me, then, that unless we take Mendelssohn to be repudiating his earlier views, we should conclude that the variations *Jerusalem* links to these factors are the variations his earlier texts link to these factors—that when he invokes the different "ideas" which "different men, in different ages" ascribe to the "same" words, he refers to the different concepts we attach to words such as "providence" in light of changing philosophical systems. Both *Jerusalem*'s "cycle of concepts," and this text's discussion of oaths, invoke changes in religious *Begriffe* linked to shifting philosophical models.

Consider, finally, the period surrounding *Jerusalem*'s composition and publication in 1782 and 1783. There are strong reasons to suspect that Mendelssohn enters the 1780s concerned with the ongoing possibility of philosophical "changeability." As we have seen, his *Essay* states that philosophy is forced to utilize words which do not point clearly to concepts, that this fact can lead us to reject the work of even "the most cogent philosopher," and that such rejections create opportunities for the emergence of new frameworks—that words such as "God" bear only a conventional relationship to the object which they designate, that we thus run the risk

of failing to recall precisely what these words denote, and that we will therefore be tempted to replace philosophical systems on the grounds that their words lack a clear meaning. This view, in turn, entails that *every philosophical system—even one we should endorse—might eventually be rejected*. If philosophers must employ words which do not point clearly to concepts, then even arguments free from error might be viewed as collections of "empty" words, and even a system constructed from such arguments might be dismissed for relying on meaningless terms. We might suspect, then, that Mendelssohn derives from his conception of philosophical language a belief in the ongoing possibility of philosophical instability—a belief that if all philosophers must employ terms which can easily become obscure, then all philosophical systems run the risk of eventually being viewed as "empty," and thus of being rejected and replaced with new systems vulnerable to the same fate. His linguistic theory provides grounds for thinking that he understands history not only as having been characterized by, but also as continuing to involve, the rise and fall of conceptual systems that lend determinate content to religious truths.

Unfortunately, I know of no text in which Mendelssohn explicitly outlines such a view of philosophy's future. However, regardless of whether he fully recognizes the implications of his linguistic theory, historical factors lead him to predict future "changeability" during the years surrounding *Jerusalem*'s composition. His 1785 *Morning Hours* begins as follows:

> My philosophy is no longer the philosophy of the times. Mine has too much of the stench of that school in which I was educated, and which in the first half of the century wished to rule in perhaps too high-handed a way…Since then, this school's reputation has fallen considerably, and has dragged into its decline the reputation of speculative philosophy as such. Germany's best minds recently speak of all speculation with scornful disdain. They insist throughout on facts, restrict themselves merely to evidence of the senses, collect observations, [and] multiply experiences and experiments, perhaps with an all too great disdain for universal principles…It is time to give the wheel a push, to again bring up what, in the circular course [*Zirkellauf*] of things, for too long has been brought under foot. But I am too aware of my weakness …The business should be reserved for better powers, for the profundity of a *Kant,* who hopefully will again build up with the same spirit with which he pulled down.[28]

Two points are crucial. First, referring to attacks on Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy by empiricist thinkers and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*,[29] this text shows that in 1785 Mendelssohn contemplates the possibility of ongoing shifts in conceptual frameworks, for he seems to envision a "circular course" that involves "build[ing] up" a new rationalist system—a system that avoids his school's "high handed" dismissal of alternative ways of thinking.[30] Second, although some factors that motivate this conclusion emerge only after *Jerusalem* takes shape,[31] Mendelssohn is aware of the threats cited above prior to composing this work. Empiricist threats already emerge by the mid-eighteenth century,[32] and *Jerusalem* cites several thinkers associated with such developments.[33] Moreover, Mendelssohn receives a copy of the *Critique of Pure Reason* prior to composing *Jerusalem*,[34] and an essay he writes in 1778 responds to earlier attacks by Kant.[35] This evidence indicates, then, that by the mid-1780s Mendelssohn understands philosophical "changeability" as a process which might continue in the future, and that he is aware of factors which motivate this realization by the time of *Jerusalem*'s composition. This evidence suggests that Mendelssohn may write *Jerusalem* while concerned with the ongoing "changeability of philosophical systems"—with the prospect that history has involved, and may continue to involve, the rise and fall of conceptual frameworks.

Let us review. *Jerusalem* invokes, on at least two occasions, changes in determinate conceptions of religious principles linked to the rise and fall of philosophical systems. Moreover, by the time of this text's composition, Mendelssohn both is aware of factors he will later describe as indicating this process's ongoing nature, and has endorsed a conception of language that entails a similar view. Taken individually, perhaps, each point may prove little. Taken together, however, these points suggest that *Jerusalem* is concerned with shifts in religious *Begriffe* linked to "the changeability of philosophical systems." These points suggest

that Mendelssohn is concerned, when writing *Jerusalem*, with the recurring rise and fall of conceptual frameworks that supply determinate content to core religious categories.

The next step, of course, is to determine whether Mendelssohn has this process in mind when he discusses Jewish practice. As we have seen, *Jerusalem* portrays Jewish practice as a means to avoid dangers linked to fixed verbal formulas, and claims that such formulas end up "disfiguring [*zerstümmeln*]" concepts amid historical "revolutions." We must ask, then, whether the historical shifts cited above are associated with conceptual "disfiguring." We must determine what Mendelssohn means when he refers to the *Zerstümmelung* of our concepts, and whether he might link such results to affirming fixed formulas amid philosophical evolution.

A Preliminary Reading of *Jerusalem*

We can begin with the term *Zerstümmelung*, which we can translate as "disfiguring" or "mutilation." As is well known, *Jerusalem* takes fixed verbal formulas to produce a variety of problems, most notably a situation in which "everyone would…attach to the same words a different meaning."[36] However, such a scenario does not seem to constitute a "mutilation" or "disfiguring" of *Begriffe*, for while the term *Zerstümmelung* seems to suggest distortion, the scenario outlined above merely involves disagreement.[37] What, then, does Mendelssohn have in mind? How might concepts become distorted when we "force" them into fixed verbal formulas?

An answer emerges from Mendelssohn's fears, discussed in Chapter 1, regarding the prospect of a "union of faiths"—regarding efforts to compose a verbal "formula" which all religious "parties…in Europe" might affirm, thus creating a religious community in which all individuals might participate. *Jerusalem* worries that even though such a formula would involve "broad" words to which each individual might attach different beliefs, we might still be required

to "squeeze [*abzwacken*] something out of the concepts…so that the concepts…may be forced [*hineinzwängen*] into" the relevant sentences.[38] The idea here is that in order to ensure that our beliefs cohere with required formulas, we might eliminate elements from—*etwas abzwacken*, meaning "squeeze something out of" or "pinch something off from"—concepts we would otherwise endorse. For example, we will determine which aspects of our views on immortality are compatible with required words, and we will act on this determination by rejecting commitments that clash with those sentences—for instance, rejecting a belief in the universality of salvation if communally required formulas deny that notion. Indeed, *Jerusalem* suggests that this process involves treating beliefs as "merchandise for sale," an image that implies their reduction to goods that might pass from our possession—to commitments we might renounce.[39]

To be sure, Mendelssohn does not explicitly identify the *Abzwackung* of elements from our concepts with the *Zerstümmelung* of those *Begriffe*. Nevertheless, the former action corresponds closely to the idea of "disfiguring" or "mutilating" concepts, since if we were to exclude from our understandings of religious truths commitments we have grounds to accept, those understandings of religious truths would seem to become distorted—to lack key elements that should be included. Moreover, the language in the passages on *Zerstümmelung* and *Abzwackung* bears a striking degree of resemblance, for while one text discusses a situation in which we "force [*einzwängen*] our concepts" into words, the other text discusses a scenario in which our concepts "may be forced [*hineinzwängen*]" into formulas. We can thus conclude that when *Jerusalem* discusses *Zerstümmelung* and verbal formulas, Mendelssohn alludes to instances of conceptual *Abzwackung*—to situations in which we distort our concepts by rejecting commitments we have grounds to endorse. When linking "revolutions" to this scenario, then, *Jerusalem* refers to historical developments during which we acquire beliefs irreconcilable with

preexisting verbal formulas, and during which we are therefore tempted to renounce well-grounded commitments for the sake of fidelity to communally required creedal statements.

The crucial point for our purposes is that philosophical "changeability" constitutes just such a development. If history involves the rise and fall of conceptual systems such as Aristotelian philosophy, and if determinate conceptions of religious principles vary as this process occurs, then fixed verbal formulas composed at one point in time might lead us to reject commitments that we have grounds to endorse. To return to an earlier example, if Aristotelian principles entail a denial of the conception of providence central to Leibnizian theology, then a creedal statement composed under the influence of the former system might deny a belief generated by the latter posture, and a requirement to affirm such a formula might "disfigure" the concepts of a Leibnizian thinker. After all, such an individual might be tempted to "force" her concepts into the relevant sentences by "disfiguring" the understanding of providence she has reasons to affirm, rejecting a belief—in God's concern for "singular beings"—that follows from what she takes to be a compelling account of reality. Changes in religious *Begriffe* due to shifting systems thus fall within the scope of *Jerusalem's* "revolutions," for affirming fixed verbal formulas amid such changes might lead us to reject views we have grounds to hold. We might exclude from our understanding of key truths determinate content we should include—content that is entailed by a system we accept, but that cannot be "forced into" preexisting words.

The implications of my analysis are clear. As we have seen, *Jerusalem* claims that Jewish practice is supposed to combat the emergence of fixed formulas that "disfigure" concepts amid "revolutions." We have discovered, in turn, that a philosophical "revolution" which *Jerusalem* invokes can give rise to "disfiguring" which *Jerusalem* describes. That is, Mendelssohn alludes to changes in religious concepts due to shifting philosophical models, and

could conclude that affirming fixed formulas during such changes might "disfigure" our beliefs—that creedal statements composed at one point in time may be irreconcilable with concepts generated by later philosophical models, and that we may thus reject commitments we have grounds to endorse in order to affirm communally sanctioned words. It seems to me, then, that if a process linked to conceptual distortion is central to *Jerusalem* as a whole, it is this process that *Jerusalem*'s account of Jewish practice cites when invoking a "revolution" linked to "disfiguring." When discussing Jewish practice, Mendelssohn worries that affirming preexisting creedal formulas amid philosophical shifts might lead us to distort our beliefs—to reject commitments we should accept as following from what we take to be a compelling system.

A preliminary reading of *Jerusalem* now emerges. If Mendelssohn presents Jewish practice as a means of avoiding the emergence of fixed verbal formulas, and if he takes such formulas to "disfigure" our beliefs by excluding commitments emerging from philosophical shifts, he may be presenting Jewish practice as a means of addressing an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history—the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems. That is, his point may be that Jewish practice protects us from rejecting *Begriffe* we should incorporate into our beliefs—from allowing preexisting creedal formulas to impede our ability to revise our views, and thus from distorting our beliefs by rejecting emerging commitments we have grounds to affirm. His point may be that by leading adherents to privilege actions over specific sets of words and thereby discouraging fixed verbal formulas, Jewish practice secures conceptual flexibility in light of the dynamic nature of philosophical history, permitting adherents to revise their understandings of key truths in light of shifting philosophical systems—to employ the most compelling account of reality available in a given setting to lend determinate content to categories such as providence

and immortality. Put simply, Mendelssohn's claim about "disfiguring" may constitute a response to his views on the "changeability of philosophical systems."

Early Modern Theology and the Decline of Aristotelianism

Support for this reading of *Jerusalem* emerges from an exploration of Mendelssohn's historical context. As is well known, the seventeenth century witnesses the decline of Aristotelian natural philosophy and the emergence of a new conceptual framework:

> At the beginning of the century, every student learned physics from Aristotle; only one hundred years later, Aristotelianism was definitively on the defensive, if not in eclipse …For Aristotelian physics, the basic explanatory principles were matter and form…Matter is what remained constant in change, while form is what changed when a body changed its properties; accidental form explained changes in accidents (from brown to yellow hair, from hot to cold), while substantial form explained changes in substance, from air to water, or from prince to frog. And so, for the Aristotelian physicist, properties of bodies were explained in terms of these forms, thought of as innate tendencies bodies have to in one way or another…[This view] came under a new kind of attack. Central in this regard was the new mechanical philosophy. According to this, the only explanatory principles in physics were size, shape, and motion…Properties bodies have are to be explained not in terms of form, accidental or substantial, but in terms of the broadly geometrical properties of the tiny particles that make up larger bodies.[40]

While Aristotelianism describes a world of "accidents" and "substances" governed by distinct "forms"—where an entity's "accidental" properties such as appearance and temperature are governed by a force known as an "accidental form," while the entity's underlying nature or "substance" is determined by a separate "substantial form"—the mechanical philosophy presents a world of extended, moving "particles" that account for *all* properties belonging to bodies.

While this revolution generates a variety of debates, one of the most vigorous disputes involves the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the Lutheran doctrine of real presence—the Catholic claim that the substance or underlying nature of what seems to be bread can become the body of Christ, and the Lutheran idea that the spaces occupied by pieces of sacramental bread

can also be occupied by Jesus's body. Some early modern thinkers explain these doctrines by drawing on the mechanical philosophy, claiming that the behavior of "tiny particles" can account for a transformation in underlying nature from bread to body, or that such particles' behavior can clarify the sense in which Jesus's body is present in numerous pieces of bread. Other early modern thinkers, however, reject emerging conceptions of these doctrines as incompatible with authoritative formulations of Christian belief.[41] Leibniz, for example, worries that some Catholic theologians might reject positions that combine mechanical and pre-modern commitments:

> Our Scholastics will be embarrassed…I seem to hear them speaking as follows: "What? You who presume to demonstrate the possibility of transubstantiation, do you expect to satisfy the Church with terms chosen at your own pleasure? After all, you must use the terms "substance," "transubstantiation," "accident," "species," and "identity" in that sense which the Council of Trent is believed to have favored, and there is no doubt that this council favors that which the chorus of Scholastics has observed. Unless you adhere to this, you deserve the sentence of the Church; you show the mind of a heretic."[42]

Leibniz refers to widespread concerns that the "terms" endorsed by the sixteenth-century Council of Trent are incompatible with mechanical conceptions of transubstantiation. One common worry, for example, is that while the Council describes accidental properties such as taste as "remaining" despite a transformation in underlying nature, the new science entails that changes in underlying nature cannot be separated from changes in observed properties—since this science refuses to ascribe explanatory power to accidental and substantial forms which separate changes in accidents from changes in substance, and which thus allow an accidental property such as taste to remain during a change in substance from bread to body.[43] Moreover, Leibniz describes the existence among Lutheran thinkers of similar worries regarding real presence, since the sixteenth-century Augsburg Confession presents Christ's body as "truly present" in diverse pieces of sacramental bread, and since it is not clear whether this phrase is compatible with the new science's view that body's "essence" is "extension"—a view which insists that the essential

feature of a body is its occupation of a specific space, potentially implying that a single body cannot be present in multiple locations at the same time, and thus that Christ's body cannot simultaneously be present in the spaces occupied by diverse pieces of bread.[44]

Two points are crucial. First, it is likely that Mendelssohn would have been familiar with these discussions since they receive widespread attention, playing a critical role in the reception of Descartes's work[45] and appearing in texts with which Mendelssohn is deeply engaged.[46] Second, despite important differences,[47] the issues at stake in these debates resemble the issues discussed earlier in this chapter. Just as *Jerusalem* seems worried that fixed verbal formulas might prevent us from taking seriously the entailments of new philosophical systems, leading us to reject emerging *Begriffe* that merit our endorsement, so too do the debates over transubstantiation and real presence revolve around authoritative formulas and evolving models—around the possibility that a requirement to affirm sixteenth-century terms might limit the utilization of the mechanical philosophy, preventing the explanation of key doctrines on the basis of an emerging framework taken to be correct, and thus requiring the rejection of new conceptions of those doctrines even when such conceptions appear well-grounded. The danger I took to animate *Jerusalem*'s account of Jewish practice, then, is a danger Mendelssohn would have had a reason to address. He would have known of a prominent case in which affirming fixed verbal formulas amid philosophical "changeability" is linked to the rejection of emerging commitments taken to merit acceptance, and he thus would have had a reason to ask whether Judaism can avoid such distortion with respect to core religious truths.

We can now more confidently affirm my reading of *Jerusalem*. Earlier, I took this text to be arguing that formulas composed at one point in time may be incompatible with concepts generated by new philosophical models, that we may end up rejecting commitments we have

grounds to accept in order to affirm the formulas in question, and that Jewish practice's role in avoiding such formulas minimizes this danger and permits conceptual revision. We have now seen that the issues I took to animate *Jerusale*m's account are issues Mendelssohn would have had a reason to address, since he would have been familiar with tensions between fixed formulas and conceptual flexibility, and thus would have had a reason to ask whether Judaism can avoid the former and secure the latter—whether Judaism can protect adherents from "disfiguring" beliefs by rejecting emerging commitments taken to merit endorsement. My preliminary reading of *Jerusalem*, then, coheres with Mendelssohn's historical setting. *Jerusalem*, we have additional grounds to suspect, argues that Jewish practice can address an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history, protecting us from distorting religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems. *Jerusalem*, this evidence suggests, takes Jewish practice to secure conceptual flexibility in light of the dynamic nature of philosophical history, permitting adherents to revise religious *Begriffe* in light of shifting conceptual frameworks.

Medieval Jewish Thought in Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings

Further support for this reading emerges from Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings. Like German texts such as the *Essay*, these Hebrew works are deeply concerned with the issue of philosophical "changeability." To cite just one example, this theme already occupies a prominent place in the 1761 *Elucidation of Logical Terms*, Mendelssohn's Hebrew commentary on the work of the twelfth-century Jewish thinker Maimonides.[48] Outlining the account of cosmic origins endorsed by "Plato and his supporters," Mendelssohn's text notes that while "many members of our people—among them great and good individuals—followed this approach," this cosmogony is not "constructed…on the foundations of true investigation, as later

thinkers elaborated"—that while some Jewish thinkers draw on Platonic philosophy to lend determinate content to the category of creation, this system has lost credibility due to "later" philosophical developments, forcing Jews to turn elsewhere when considering the nature of creation.[49] Similarly, discussing Maimonides's partial acceptance of Aristotelian astronomy, Mendelssohn reflects on the intellectual distance between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries:

> The master [Maimonides] himself, may his memory be for a blessing, already acknowledged that [such] studies had not been perfected in Aristotle's time, and that he knew nothing of the astronomical investigations [undertaken] by means of observing the paths of the stars. If the master, may his memory be for a blessing, had himself seen the experiments and observations performed from his time until now (experiments regarding what is beneath the lunar sphere, observations regarding alteration in the position of the stars, and numerous investigations that added to what was known in his time), there is no doubt that he would have rejected Aristotle's thin and empty reasoning.[50]

Mendelssohn again refers to the rise and fall of conceptual frameworks, suggesting that the Aristotelian model utilized by thinkers such as Maimonides has become untenable in light of new "experiments and observations." The issue of conceptual "changeability" present in Mendelssohn's German writings, then, also receives attention in his Hebrew works.

The key point for us is that these Hebrew texts not only acknowledge the dynamic nature of philosophical history, but also explore specific issues similar to those I link to *Jerusalem*—namely, the importance of revising our commitments in light of shifting conceptual frameworks, and the possibility that words composed at one point in time might fail to express concepts generated by later philosophical models. Consider the *Biur*'s treatment of Maimonides:

> It is known that the master [Maimonides], may his memory be for a blessing, followed the system of Aristotle [*b'shitat Aristo*] [51] in this, noting—in many places in his writings—that falsehood and truth, rather than good and evil, belong to that which is necessary. The good and evil are matters conventionally accepted among all human beings, but we possess absolutely no access to them by means of the intellect…We make no concessions to the master, may his memory be for a blessing, with respect to what he said about conventionally accepted opinions. In truth, it seems that the good and the evil are also included among the *intelligibilia*…since the good and the evil are determined from the point of view of the intellect…There are correct proofs to this effect.[52]

The background here is Maimonides's insistence that "the intellect" determines whether propositions are true or false, but not whether actions are good or evil.[53] The *Biur*, in turn, suggests that while Maimonides derives this position from "the system of Aristotle," Mendelssohn rejects this medieval "system" and possesses "proofs" regarding the intellect's role in moral assessment.[54] Moreover, in a letter written several years earlier to the rabbinic authority Jacob Emden, Mendelssohn reflects on the results of this dispute regarding Aristotle's "system":

> I consider [Maimonides's] words harder than flint…Maimonides's reasoning seems to follow only from what he declared in many places in his books, namely that "good" and "evil" are only conventionally accepted opinions that have absolutely no root and basis in the *intelligibilia*…In my view, Maimonides's approach to the knowledge of good and evil—specifically, its not being among the *intelligibilia*—is very strange. I possess clear and correct demonstrations that good and evil, justice and injustice, and beauty and ugliness are truly among the *intelligibilia*.[55]

Mendelssohn insists that while some "reasoning" affirmed by Maimonides may "follow" from Aristotelian views on good and evil, such "reasoning" seems "very strange" once we possess "correct proofs regarding the nature" of ethics—that while it might be plausible for Maimonides to endorse various positions given his Aristotelian outlook, such views should no longer be affirmed given access to a more compelling account of reality.[56] Mendelssohn thus claims to break with his predecessor with respect to the tenability of "the system of Aristotle," and insists that "reasoning" grounded in this model should be rejected in favor of "correct" views.

My concern here lies not with determining whether these texts are correct to ground Maimonides's position in Aristotelian thought,[57] but rather with exploring what this move tells us about *Mendelssohn's* views. If Mendelssohn acknowledges that some of Maimonides's "reasoning" may "follow" from the medieval thinker's Aristotelian orientation, but nevertheless insists that we should revise such "reasoning" given our possession of "correct proofs," then Mendelssohn calls for a project similar to the one I take *Jerusalem* to link to Jewish practice—

the revision of determinate concepts in light of shifting philosophical models. Mendelssohn's Hebrew works emphasize the conceptual flexibility that I take *Jerusalem* to be discussing.

Indeed, echoes of *Jerusalem* also emerge from the *Biur*'s treatment of Nahmanides, a thirteenth-century Jewish thinker whose commentary on the Bible is frequently quoted by Mendelssohn.[58] Consider the following passage appearing in the *Biur*'s gloss on Exodus 6:3:

> [God] triumphs over the arrangements of nature and compels them—for the good of His elect—to perform for [the elect] great miracles through which the customary manner of the world is not negated. Rather, He compels and diverts the laws of nature and the arrangements of creation…Yet if a man is left to his own nature or to the arrangements of nature, this good or evil will not always go forth to him in this world because of his deeds.

This view of providence echoes what Mendelssohn describes as the results of a Leibnizian-Wolffian model: just as the God of the *Biur* establishes "laws of nature" and "diverts" them to perform "great miracles," so too does the Leibnizian-Wolffian God ordain "laws of nature" and perform "miracles" through their "suspension."[59] The *Biur* then turns to immortality:

> The soul's continued existence into the world of souls—as well as its cleaving to God—is a matter necessary to and following [*v'nemshakh*] from[60] its nature, for it is a single unit [*helek*][61] belonging to the Deity above, and will return to the God who bestowed it.[62]

The *Biur* again invokes a Leibnizian-Wolffian account of a religious truth, for the description of immortality as "following from" the soul's "nature" echoes a central Mendelssohnian idea—the idea that we can rationally demonstrate immortality on the basis of the soul's non-composite nature.[63] Indeed, lest we miss this point, the *Biur* links the soul's "nature" to immortality with the Hebrew term *nemshakh*, which in medieval texts often indicates the conclusion of a syllogism,[64] and thus instructs us to view immortality as rationally derivable. The *Biur*, then, presents a determinate view of key truths that coheres with a Leibnizian-Wolffian framework.

While Mendelssohn claims that his commentary draws on exegetical work by Nahmanides,[65] a comparison of the *Biur* with this source reveals a set of striking discrepancies:

Mendelssohn	*Nahmanides*[66]
[God] triumphs over the arrangements of nature and compels them—for the good of His elect—	[God] triumphs over the arrangements of the heavens,
to perform for [the elect] great miracles through which the customary manner of the world is not negated.	to perform for [the elect] great miracles through which the customary manner of the world is not negated.
Rather, He compels and diverts the laws of nature and the arrangements of creation	
…Yet if a man is left to his own nature or to the arrangements of nature, this good or evil will not always go forth to him in this world because of his deeds…	…Yet if a man is left to his own nature or to his constellation,[67] his deeds will neither add anything to him nor take anything away from him…
The soul's continued existence into the world of souls	The soul's continued existence
—as well as its cleaving to God—	—as well as its cleaving to God—
is a matter necessary to and following [*v'nemshakh*] from	is a matter necessary to
its nature, for it	its nature, for it
is a single unit belonging to the Deity above and	
will return to the God who bestowed it.	will return to the God who bestowed it.

While it lies beyond the scope of this chapter to explore all the changes introduced by Mendelssohn,[68] we can see that key elements of his Leibnizian-Wolffian views emerge from alterations of Nahmanides's text. The removal of the word "constellation," as well as the introduction of "laws of nature," replaces a Nahmanidean God who permits the operation of astrological forces—who allows "a man" to be "left…to his constellation"—with a Leibnizian God who rules through orderly natural "laws." Similarly, by inserting the word *nemshakh* that frames immortality as rationally derivable, Mendelssohn expands a text which characterizes immortality as *natural* into a text which presents this doctrine as *demonstrable*—which retains the notion that immortality constitutes a natural property of the soul, but which explicitly adds the idea, central to Mendelssohn's natural theology, that we can *demonstrate* this point.[69] Mendelssohn, then, alters the words of his medieval source in order to present Leibnizian-

Wolffian conceptions of providence and immortality—in order to lend determinate content to core religious principles on the basis of a philosophical system he takes to be compelling.

We have seen that when discussing Maimonidean claims, Mendelssohn expresses an interest in revising these views in light of changing philosophical systems. Moreover, when utilizing Nahmanidean exegesis, Mendelssohn recognizes that words composed at one point in time might not express *Begriffe* arising from a later philosophical model; after all, if he presents his Leibnizian-Wolffian conceptions of religious principles by altering the words of a medieval text, he must believe that those words are somehow inadequate to the task of expressing the views he endorses. The treatment of medieval Jewish sources in Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings, then, reflects concerns similar to the ones that I have argued are central to *Jerusalem*. When engaging the work of predecessors such as Maimonides and Nahmanides, Mendelssohn not only emphasizes the importance of the project that I have read *Jerusalem* as seeking to foster, but also exhibits an awareness of the possibility that I have read *Jerusalem* as seeking to address—the project of revising our commitments in light of shifting philosophical systems, and the possibility that sentences composed at one point in time might fail to express *Begriffe* generated by new philosophical models.

Let us review. Earlier in this chapter, I took *Jerusalem* to be treating Jewish practice as an attempt to ensure that we can take seriously the entailments of new philosophical systems—to be arguing that verbal formulas composed at one point in time may be irreconcilable with concepts generated by later philosophical models, that we might reject commitments which we have grounds to endorse in order to affirm such creedal statements, and that Jewish practice's role in avoiding such formulas minimizes this danger and permits conceptual revision. I then suggested that Mendelssohn's historical context provides him with an example of the tensions

between fixed formulas and conceptual flexibility, and that he thus would have had a reason to ask whether Judaism can avoid the former and secure the latter—whether Judaism can protect us from "disfiguring" our beliefs by rejecting well-grounded commitments for the sake of affirming communal formulas. We have now seen, finally, that issues similar to the ones that I take *Jerusalem* to address play an important role in *Mendelssohn's own Hebrew writings*, since these Hebrew texts both call for the type of revision that I take *Jerusalem* to link to Jewish practice, and acknowledge the type of limitation that I take *Jerusalem* to ascribe to verbal formulas; put differently, when I take *Jerusalem* to be concerned with conceptual flexibility, preexisting sentences, and philosophical "changeability," I am taking Mendelssohn to be concerned with issues *we know* occupy his attention. Mendelssohn's historical setting and Hebrew writings, then, strongly suggest that we should affirm the reading of *Jerusalem* outlined earlier in this chapter. Mendelssohn, we should conclude, is arguing that Jewish practice can address an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history—the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems. His point is that Jewish practice protects us from allowing preexisting creedal formulas to impede our ability to revise our views, and thus from distorting our religious beliefs by rejecting emerging commitments we should affirm—commitments that we have grounds to accept as following from what we take to be a compelling philosophical model. For *Jerusalem*, insofar as Jewish practice leads adherents to privilege actions over specific sets of words and thereby discourages fixed verbal formulas, Jewish practice secures conceptual flexibility in light of the dynamic nature of philosophical history, permitting adherents to revise their understandings of key truths in light of shifting philosophical systems—to employ the most compelling account of reality available in a given setting to lend determinate content to categories such as providence and immortality.

I wish to avoid confusion. My claim is not that the *only* purpose *Jerusalem* ascribes to Jewish practice is the preservation of philosophical flexibility, but rather that this purpose is *one* of the functions Mendelssohn takes Jewish law to serve.[70] Similarly, when I argue that Mendelssohn presents Jewish practice as permitting conceptual revision in light of philosophical history, my point is that he takes Jewish practice to *enable* the use of shifting conceptual frameworks, but not that he takes Jewish practice to *render obligatory* the use of these models. After all, as we have seen, while he seeks to ensure that individuals who find a system to be compelling can turn to it for "refined and purified concepts," and that individuals are not required to distort their beliefs by remaining loyal to a framework they have come to reject, he is willing to allow individuals who are unaware of such models to "live simply" without engaging thinkers such as Aristotle.[71] Put differently, while Jewish practice enables individuals concerned with the coherence of philosophical systems to draw upon the most compelling framework available, Jewish practice also permits individuals unaware of developments in philosophy to avoid engaging such models. Finally, while some other readers have argued that Mendelssohn links Jewish practice to the reinterpretation of religious principles, I know of no scholar who explicates this link by highlighting the type of reinterpretation I discuss—by taking Mendelssohn to be concerned with the conceptual flexibility necessitated by philosophical "changeability."[72]

Of course, several objections might now arise. Some readers might argue that insofar as *Jerusalem* elsewhere describes Jews as "preserv[ing]…pure concepts of religion,"[73] and insofar as a 1785 Mendelssohnian text seems to separate Judaism from the "metaphysical argumentation" of philosophical "books,"[74] it is implausible to frame *Jerusalem* as advancing the position outlined above—a position that emphasizes the revision rather than preservation of key *Begriffe*, and that promotes rather than avoids engagement with philosophical systems. Other

readers, in turn, might doubt whether Mendelssohn would encourage the type of flexibility envisioned here—whether he would wish for Jews lacking the modern framework he endorses to make use of alternate conceptual schemes, given the errors which he associates with models such as Aristotelian philosophy.[75] Finally, some readers might suggest that we should not ascribe to Mendelssohn a position that emerges from *Jerusalem* only implicitly—that we should not take him to be advancing the view outlined here if he merely invokes "revolutions" and "disfiguring."

These objections are not persuasive. When discussing the Jewish "preservation" of "pure concepts," Mendelssohn claims to be concerned with the ways in which Jews "preserve…pure concepts of religion, far removed from idolatry," and thus seems to be using the term "preservation" to denote protection against idolatry, rather than the absence of revision.[76] Similarly, when separating Judaism from "metaphysical argumentation," Mendelssohn claims only that he does not "presuppose" the "incontestable" role of such "argumentation" in Judaism—that engagement with figures such as Leibniz is not *incumbent* upon all members of the Jewish community, even if such engagement bears an important relation to Jewish life.[77] Turning to the second concern, I see little evidence that Mendelssohn would want Jews living in a different era to shun the most compelling system to which they have access. On the contrary, he seems to praise Aristotelian thinkers for avoiding less adequate medieval systems,[78] and I know of no text in which he explicitly condemns the medieval Jewish use of Aristotle.[79] Finally, the oblique nature of Mendelssohn's presentation should not undermine my reading's plausibility. Insofar as he writes *Jerusalem* not only in the midst of ongoing attacks on Leibnizian-Wolffian thought, but also a mere century after the decline of Aristotelian natural philosophy, we can assume that he expects many readers to be concerned with conceptual "changeability," and to recognize this process as a "revolution" linked to religious *Begriffe*;

indeed, as we have seen, he notes in the *Essay* that philosophical instability is "commonly" discussed among his contemporaries.[80] Key objections against my view are thus unpersuasive.[81]

Beyond "Disfiguring"

We began this chapter by expressing uncertainty regarding the prospects for explicating *Jerusalem*'s account of Jewish practice, and by contemplating the possibility that Mendelssohn might not seek to present a detailed account of Jewish law. My analysis should begin to dispel these worries, for this analysis shows that we *can* reconstruct one of *Jerusalem*'s central claims about Jewish practice—the claim that the actions required by Jewish law avoid conceptual "disfiguring" amid historical "revolutions." Mendelssohn, we have discovered, seeks to articulate—and enables us to reconstruct—an argument about the "changeability" of conceptual systems, suggesting that Jewish practice addresses an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history, and providing us with ample indication of the reasoning behind this claim. My reading provides an initial indication, then, that we *can* glean from *Jerusalem* a detailed theory of Jewish practice. We can tentatively affirm the possibility of treating Mendelssohn's account of the "living script" as not only influential, but also intelligible.

The next chapter will provide further grounds for this affirmation of intelligibility. More specifically, I will turn to the second interpretive challenge confronting readers of *Jerusalem*, attempting to reconstruct Mendelssohn's views on the sense in which Jewish practice promotes collective well-being. *Jerusalem*, I will argue, is claiming that Jewish practice can address an ethico-political danger grounded in social history—the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony. Mendelssohn's account of Jewish practice, we will discover, is deeply concerned with a second peril grounded in historical change.

[1] This phrase appears in Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 253/2:269. I have altered Dahlstrom's translation.

[2] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 63/8:131.

[3] Ibid., 120/8:186; I have slightly altered Arkush's translation. Mendelssohn does not take all such conceptions to be correct. For example, *Jerusalem* emphasizes the inadequacy of "pagan" conceptions of God's properties: see, e.g., 104-125/8:171-191. See also pages 85 and 89-90 below for passages that endorse some understandings of providence over others.

[4] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 95/8:162. I have altered Arkush's translation.

[5] Ibid., 66-67/8:134-135.

[6] The texts cited in this paragraph help clarify a crucial point discussed earlier in this dissertation (see note 15 in Chapter 1). On the one hand, Mendelssohn holds that "eternal truths" such as God's providence do not change over time: according to *Jerusalem*, "one calls eternal truths those propositions which are not subject to time and remain the same in all eternity" (Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 90/8:157). On the other hand, as the lines cited in the body of my chapter indicate, Mendelssohn holds that determinate understandings or conceptions of "eternal truths" have varied considerably: in his words, "paganism" possesses a "concept" of "the Deity" different from the view present in Jewish sources, and we "wander through" a "cycle of concepts" as we alter our "mode of conceiving" providence. Mendelssohn's view, then, seems to be that although there is only one *correct* understanding of a principle such as divine providence, many thinkers have not affirmed this conception of the truth in question, with alternate views gaining acceptance—and then suffering rejection—over the course of time. In effect, then, what is "eternal" about an "eternal truth" is the validity of the principle's *proper* understanding, rather than the content of the principle's interpretation throughout history.

[7] Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 253-254/2:269-270.

[8] See Ibid., 254/2:269-270, 279-306/2:297-330. For Mendelssohn, the development of more accurate scientific and metaphysical models does not *necessarily* generate progress with respect to morality. See, e.g., *Jerusalem*, 94-97/8:161-164; Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question,* 56. Nevertheless, he sees modern philosophy as superior to its predecessors in key ways. See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Phädon*, 153/3.1:150-151; Strauss, "Einleitung," 3.2:lx-lxiv.

I leave aside as beyond the scope of this dissertation Mendelssohn's views on the unity of "philosophical systems"—for example, on the precise extent to which we can alter predecessors' *Begriffe* while still counting as adhering to the same "system."

[9] For background on Leibniz and Wolff, see, e.g., Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 196-305; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 1-35. For Mendelssohn's defense and development of the work of these thinkers, see Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Proofs for the Existence of God," 135-151; Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 44-108; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 37-131.

None of what I say should be taken as an endorsement of the view that Mendelssohn is a "popular philosopher"—a thinker who merely disseminated the ideas of Leibniz and Wolff. The works by Altmann, Beiser, and Arkush cited above emphasize Mendelssohn's refinement of earlier material, and Altmann's *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften* shows that Mendelssohn draws on work by figures such as British Empiricists. Moreover, Mendelssohn breaks with Leibniz and Wolff on various issues: see, e.g., Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 89-91. Finally, Mendelssohn is aware of, and responds to, diverse challenges to Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysics: see, e.g., pages 95-96 and notes 29 and 31-35 below, as well as note 11 in my

introduction; see also pages 245-250 in Chapter 5. My point is simply that Mendelssohn takes himself to be defending and refining the work of thinkers such as Leibniz and Wolff.

[10] On this claim, see pages 41-42 in Chapter 1.

[11] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102-103/8:168-169. I have altered Arkush's translation.

[12] On "concepts" as the object of "disfiguring," see note 62 in Chapter 1.

[13] Unfortunately, one historical process explored by *Jerusalem*—the emergence of idolatry—is not a likely candidate, for as discussed in pages 40-42 (and note 53) of Chapter 1, Mendelssohn separates the issue of idolatry from his arguments regarding "rigid" formulas.

[14] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 94-95/8:161-162. I slightly alter Arkush's translation.

[15] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 273/2:291; see also Dahlstrom, "Introduction," in *Philosophical Writings*, xvi. On the history of this term, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften,* 94-95; on this term in *Jerusalem*, see "Commentary," 193.

[16] Ibid., 210-211. For example, in one early work, Mendelssohn both notes the presence of this causal model in Maimonides's work, and reproduces a Maimonidean passage that ascribes this model to "the philosophers"—a reference, as Mendelssohn knows, to Aristotelian thinkers. Indeed, in this same passage, Mendelssohn goes on to discuss Maimonides's philosophical debts to the "ancients," Aristotle, and the "school of Aristotle." See Mendelssohn, *Biur Milot Hahigayon*, in *JubA*, 14:80-84.

[17] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 95/8:162. I have slightly altered Arkush's translation.

[18] Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 253-254/2:269-270. I slightly alter Dahlstrom's text.

[19] While this text does not cite Aristotle by name, readers have recognized that Mendelssohn has in mind medieval Aristotelian thinkers such as Maimonides: see, e.g., Strauss, "Anmerkungen," in *JubA*, 3.2:305; "Einleitung," 3.2:lxi.

[20] Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, 3.2:127-128.

[21] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 65-66/8:133-134. I have slightly altered Arkush's translation.

[22] Of course, this text admits, some of these refutations may be more apparent than real.

[23] Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 273-274/2:291-292.

[24] Mendelssohn's initial definition of justice draws on the language of the Roman jurist Ulpian, while the second definition of this virtue makes use of various texts by Leibniz and Wolff. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, 290.

[25] Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 272-273/2:290-291.

[26] Ibid., 253/2:269.

[27] Ibid., 254-255/2:270-271, 271-273/2:288-291.

[28] Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, 3.2:4-5. The italics appear in the original.

[29] For background on these (and other relevant) challenges, see Strauss, "Einleitung," 3.2:xii-xcv; Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 582-653; Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 44-94.

[30] While some readers take the *Morning Hours* to turn away from the speculative metaphysics to which Mendelssohn devotes his early writings (see, e.g., Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question*, 310-320), this reading is difficult to maintain in light of the textual evidence. The crucial point here is that the *Morning Hours* continues to devote considerable effort to projects such as *a priori* demonstrations of God's existence: see Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, 3.2:68-103, 138-157. For readings of this text similar to mine, see Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 79-93; Gottlieb, "'The Ambiguity of Reason': Mendelssohn's Writings on Spinoza" (Ph.D., Indiana University, 2003), 95-98; see also Gottlieb's recent description of the *Morning Hours* as "a defense of rational proofs for God's existence in the face of idealist,

skeptical, materialist, and pantheistic challenges" (Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 75). For a scholar who reads the *Morning Hours* as a text that aspires to defend speculative rationalism, but that ends up failing to do so consistently, see Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 98-102.

[31] The most important example, of course, is the challenge presented by F.H. Jacobi, whose claims about Spinoza and rationalism inaugurate the well-known Pantheism Controversy. See, e.g., Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 44-108; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 59-111.

[32] See Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 94; Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768-1800: A Contribution to the History of Critical Philosophy*, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Ideas 11 (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 36-43, 103-118.

[33] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 95/8:162. One such figure is David Hume, whose *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Mendelssohn reads and discusses just a year and a half before *Jerusalem* takes shape: see Mendelssohn to Peter Camper, 6 January 1781, in *JubA*, 13:1-2. For Mendelssohn's links to Hume more generally, see Kuehn, "David Hume and Moses Mendelssohn," *Hume Studies* 21, no. 2 (1995): 197-220.

[34] He receives a copy directly from Kant in 1781: see Immanuel Kant to Marcus Herz, 1 May 1781, in Kant, *Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Arnulf Zweig, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 179-180. While Mendelssohn is described as "putting the book aside" (Kant to Herz, 11 May 1781, in *Correspondence*, 181), he writes—soon after composing *Jerusalem*—that he has made repeated attempts to engage the *Critique* (Mendelssohn to Kant, 10 April 1783, in *Correspondence*, 190). Indeed, despite claiming to devote little attention to the *Critique* (Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, 3.2:3), he is deeply engaged with Kant's work (see note 11 in my introduction).

[35] See Mendelssohn to Johann Daniel Schumann, Johann Bernhard Basedow, and Herz, May (?) 1778, in *JubA*, 12.2:117-119. On this text as an attempt to engage the pre-critical Kant, see Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Proofs," 147-148.

[36] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 137/8:202.

[37] Mendelssohn also takes such formulas to produce dishonesty, since we may claim to affirm formulas we do not actually endorse (Ibid., 68/8:135). Again, though, it is not clear why such a scenario would count as a case of conceptual *Zerstümmelung*, since concepts would be expressed without conviction rather than substantively altered—rather than actually "mutilated."

[38] Ibid., 137/8:202. I have slightly altered Arkush's translation.

[39] Ibid., 136/8:201.

[40] Daniel Garber, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-4. For the complex relationship between early modern thought and Aristotelian philosophy, see, e.g., Donald Rutherford, "Innovation and Orthodoxy in Early Modern Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Rutherford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 11-38; Nicholas Jolley, "Metaphysics," in *Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, 95-135.

[41] On these debates, see Richard A. Watson, "Transubstantiation among the Cartesians," in *Problems of Cartesianism*, ed. Thomas M. Lennon, John M. Nicholas, and John W. Davis (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982), 127-148; Steven M. Nadler, "Arnauld, Descartes, and Transubstantiation: Reconciling Cartesian Metaphysics and Real Presence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 (1988): 229-246; Goldenbaum, "Leibniz as a Lutheran," in *Leibniz, Mysticism, and Religion*, ed. Allison P. Coudert, Richard H. Popkin, and Gordon M.

Weiner (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1998), 169-192; "Transubstantiation, Physics and Philosophy at the Time of the *Catholic Demonstrations*," in *The Young Leibniz and His Philosophy (1646-76)*, ed. Stuart Brown (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1999), 79-102.

[42] Leibniz, "On Transubstantiation," in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. and ed. Leroy E. Loemker, 2nd ed., Synthese Historical Library 2 (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1976), 117; for the Latin, see *De Transsubstantiatione*, in *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1921-), 6.1:510-511. On mechanical and Aristotelian aspects of "On Transubstantiation," see the Goldenbaum texts in the previous note; Christia Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 84-88; Garber, *Leibniz*, 40-43.

[43] While "On Transubstantiation" does not explicitly cite this worry, Leibniz is aware of this concern: see his *De Demonstratione Possibilitatis Mysteriorum Eucharistiae*, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, 6.1:515-517. Another worry is whether the mechanical philosophy can explain the presence of Christ's body in the small space occupied by sacramental bread. See also note 41 of this chapter; for the key text in the Council of Trent, see *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. Henry Joseph Schroeder (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 79.

[44] While these concerns do not seem to have been as widespread as the worries related to transubstantiation, Leibniz raises this issue in one of his best known works: the *Theodicy*. See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Preliminary Dissertation on the Conformity of Faith with Reason," in *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E. M. Huggard, ed. Austin Farrer (Chicago: Open Court, 1952), §18-20 (84-87); for the French, see *Essais de Theodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*, in *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C.I. Gerhardt, 7 vols. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1960-1961), 6:60-62; further references to the opening "Dissertation" will follow the format of Leibniz, *Theodicy*, PD paragraph number (English/French). See also note 41 above. For the key text in the Augsburg Confession, see "The Confession of Augsburg," in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Scowcroft Bettenson and Chris Maunder, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 234.

[45] See, e.g., the sources cited in note 41 of this chapter.

[46] One example, cited above, is the *Theodicy*. On Mendelssohn's long-standing engagement with this text, see, e.g., Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 29, 53-54, 770n10, et al.

[47] For example, these debates do not involve what Mendelssohn would call a "truth of reason," since real presence and transubstantiation are typically taken to be known through divine revelation, rather than human reflection. See Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation: Reason and Revelation in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Gerald Parks (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 59-63.

[48] On Mendelssohn and Maimonides more generally, see, e.g., Kaplan, "Maimonides and Mendelssohn," 423-456; Harvey, "Mendelssohn and Maimon," 185-192; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 13-58.

[49] Mendelssohn, *Biur Milot Hahigayon*, 14:80. While stating that Plato's account of cosmic origins does not cohere with the "foundations of the Torah," Mendelssohn devotes most of his attention to what he sees as the philosophical incoherence of Platonic cosmogony.

[50] Ibid., 14:83. On Maimonides's complex relationship with Aristotelian science, see Gad Freudenthal, "Maimonides' Philosophy of Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 134-166.

[51] On the use of the term *shita* to mean "system" or "school of thought," see Klatzkin, *Thesaurus philosophicus*, 4:87.

[52] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Genesis 2:9, in 15.2:22-23. It is unclear precisely what role Mendelssohn plays in the composition of this passage—whether he writes these sentences on his own, produces them with his collaborator Solomon Dubno, or substantially edits lines drafted by Dubno. That said, it seems reasonable to follow other scholars and treat this passage as Mendelssohn's work, since he may well have written the sentences in question, and at the very least plays a key role in their editing and incorporation in the *Biur*. For readers who adopt this approach, see Sandler, *Habiur Latorah*, 98-99; Harvey, "Mendelssohn and Maimon," 185n1.

[53] Maimonides presents this view in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (1.2). See Shlomo Pines, "Truth and Falsehood Versus Good and Evil: A Study in Jewish and General Philosophy in Connection with the Guide of the Perplexed, I,2," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 95-157. For a different account of Maimonides's position, see Howard T. Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal*, SUNY Series in Jewish Philosophy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 71-75.

[54] See Mendelssohn "On Evidence," 295-306/2:315-330; Harvey, "Mendelssohn and Maimon," 185-192.

[55] Mendelssohn to Jacob Emden, 26 October 1773, in *JubA*, 19:178-179. I have slightly altered my translation in "Letter to Rabbi Jacob Emden, 26 October 1773," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 32-34.

[56] The Maimonidean "reasoning" involves gentile access to the afterlife. See, e.g., the account of the Mendelssohn-Emden exchange, and the broader debate in which they intervene, in Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times*, Scripta Judaica 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 174-177.

[57] On Maimonides and Aristotle with respect to good and evil, see Pines, "Truth and Falsehood," 95-157; Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 63-124.

[58] On Mendelssohn and Nahmanides, see Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, xxii-xxiii, 72-77, et al.; Harvey, "Mendelssohn and Maimon," 185-189; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 55-56.

[59] See Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, in *JubA*, 7:77; I follow Bowman's English translation in "On the Possibility of Miracles," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 252. The Leibnizian-Wolffian grounding becomes more clear if we consider *Jerusalem* and its Leibnizian sources: cp. the account of miracles in Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 90-91/8:157-158 with the account of miracles in Leibniz, *Theodicy*, PD §2-3 (74-75/6:50-51). On Mendelssohn, Leibniz, and miracles (in particular on the different ways in Leibniz discusses this issue), see Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn on Miracles," 152-163. For the claim about "this world," see note 68 below.

[60] While the prefix attached to "nature" typically means "to," the "from" is implicit in *nemshakh* ("following"). As we will see, the *Biur* alters a medieval text, apparently inserting *nemshakh* into a source that uses "to" without updating the original prepositional structure.

[61] While *helek* can mean "part," it can also refer in medieval Hebrew philosophy to a single unit within a whole, and more specifically to a unit which cannot be divided—that is, to the type of non-composite entity which Mendelssohn takes the soul to be. On the meaning of this term in philosophical sources, see Klatzkin, *Thesaurus philosophicus*, 1:306-307.

[62] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 6:3, in *JubA*, 16:47.

[63] See Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 53-64.

[64] See Klatzkin, *Thesaurus philosophicus*, 3:42-43.

[65] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 6:3, in 16:47.

[66] Nahmanides on Exodus 6:3, in *Perushei Hatorah*, ed. Hayim Chavel, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1965-1966), 1:303-304.

[67] I translate the Hebrew (*mazlo*) as "his constellation" to reflect Nahmanides's belief in astrology. See Novak, *The Theology of Nahmanides Systematically Presented*, Brown Judaic Studies 271 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 61-87.

[68] Consider the claim that "good or evil will not always go forth…in this world because of" an individual's "deed," which replaces Nahmanides's statement that "deeds will neither add anything…nor take anything away"—neither confer rewards nor entail punishments—in the absence of direct divine intervention. This medieval view clashes with Mendelssohn's outlook, which concedes the reality of suffering and injustice but insists that nature reflects divine governance (see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Phädon*, 140-142/3.1:120-122). Mendelssohn thus alters what he might see as a problematic medieval claim, insisting that rewards will sometimes—but "not always"—emerge in the absence of miraculous intervention. On Nahmanides's conception of providence and miracles, see David Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Twersky, Texts and Studies 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 113-128.

[69] The distinction I describe—between the *metaphysical* claim that the soul is immortal and the *epistemological* claim that we can demonstrate this doctrine—is important to Mendelssohn, since he elsewhere places an emphasis on the possibility of *knowing through reason* that the soul endures—for example, on the role of such knowledge in individual consolation and communal life. See Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 57-60; see also the discussion of Mendelssohn's emphasis on "demonstrations" in Strauss, "Einleitung," 3.2:lxii-lxiv.

Three additional points are important. First, while the Nahmanidean passage I quote does not refer explicitly to immortality, the concern with this issue seems clear: Nahmanides refers in the previous clause to "the world of souls," and uses a word—*kiyum*, or "continued existence"—that can denote immortality (Klatzkin, *Thesaurus philosophicus*, 3:280). Second, when I discuss Nahmanides and "immortality," I am concerned only with the existence of the soul after death, and not with Nahmanides's views on resurrection and the eschaton. Finally, I leave aside as beyond my chapter's scope a determination of the extent to which Mendelssohn and Nahmanides disagree—the extent to which Mendelssohn's arguments for immortality diverge from the reasoning endorsed by Nahmanides, and the extent to which Nahmanides takes knowledge of immortality to be rationally demonstrable (see, e.g., Nahmanides's commentary on Leviticus 18:29 and 26:12 in Nahmanides, *Perushei Hatorah*, 2:114, 2:186). For the purposes of this chapter, it is sufficient to note that Mendelssohn takes the adequate expression of Leibnizian-Wolffian commitments to require a revision of medieval words.

[70] For example, as discussed in Chapter 1, Mendelssohn also takes Jewish practice to play a key role in securing collective well-being. I will devote Chapter 3 to this issue.

[71] See page 89 of this chapter.

[72] See, e.g., Eisen, "Divine Legislation," 239-267; Fenves, *Arresting Language*, 80-97; Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity*, 147-169; Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question*, 78.

It is worth addressing a dispute between Eisen and Michael Morgan—cited briefly in Chapter 1—over the precise relationship between Jewish practice and religious truths. According to Morgan, Mendelssohn is arguing that the actions mandated by Jewish law generate

reflection on "eternal truths *long associated with them*," and that the performance of these "practices" serves to "stimulate…the recollection" of "a specific set of beliefs" (Morgan, "History and Modern Jewish Thought," 476-477). By contrast, according to Eisen, Mendelssohn is arguing the actions mandated by Jewish law do not point to specific propositions, since religious truths cannot be stated "propositionally"; instead, Mendelssohn is suggesting that "the ceremonies did not…take us to truth so much as provide an occasion for its coming with the range of our intuitive grasp," and that the meanings which adherents attach to such "ceremonies" will therefore vary over time (Eisen, "Divine Legislation," 253-263).

My reading exhibits points of contact with, but also diverges from, these approaches. Like Morgan, I believe that Mendelssohn might be presenting an argument about association: as I argued in Chapter 1, Mendelssohn might be suggesting that if Jews trace their laws to a text (the Bible) which repeats truths already known through rational reflection, then Jews are likely to associate these norms with those religious principles, and the performance of actions required by the one is likely to yield reflection on the other (see pages 38-39 in Chapter 1). However, unlike Morgan, I emphasize the ways in which Jews' determinate understandings of these eternal truths will vary over time. Moreover, while this emphasis on shifts in understandings over time brings me into proximity with Eisen, I disagree with his account of the factors that lead such shifts to occur. More specifically, I reject his claim that such shifts arise from the impossibility of expressing religious beliefs in words (see page 45 in Chapter 1), and instead suggest that the key factor is the rise and fall of philosophical systems.

[73] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 118/8:183.

[74] Mendelssohn, *An die Freunde Lessings*, in *JubA*, 3.2:197.

[75] See pages 90 and 105-106, as well as note 8, of this chapter.

[76] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 118/8:183.

[77] Mendelssohn, *An die Freunde*, 3.2:197. Indeed, the *Biur* uses terminology associated with philosophical "books": see, e.g., the discussion of human "faculties" in Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Genesis 2:9, in 15.2:23-24.

[78] Mendelssohn, *Morgenstunden*, 3.2:127-128.

[79] To be sure, he admits that some Aristotelian claims are false (see pages 105-106), that Aristotelianism can clash with aspects of the Jewish tradition (Strauss, "Einleitung," 3.2:lx-lxii) and that Maimonides may sometimes be *too* deferential to Aristotle (Mendelssohn, *Biur Milot Hahigayon*, 14:83-84). Mendelssohn, though, seems to be claiming not that Maimonides *should not* have made *any* use of Aristotle, but rather that this use sometimes causes problems and is on occasion insufficiently critical. See also Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 109-110.

[80] See page 90 of this chapter.

[81] This is not to say that we cannot raise further questions about Mendelssohn's arguments. We might wonder, first, whether he fails to address the role of fixed verbal formulas in Jewish life. While he argues that there have been few attempts to develop creedal formulas for Jews (see Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 100-101/8:167-168), we might wonder about the status of other fixed formulas in Jewish life. Can the fixed verbal formulas of the traditional Jewish liturgy impede conceptual flexibility? Might beliefs generated by emerging philosophical frameworks clash with, and thus be rejected for the sake of preserving, inherited liturgical formulas? Moreover, just as we might wonder whether Mendelssohn fails to address the role of fixed verbal formulas in Jewish life, so too might we wonder whether he can maintain his distinction between actions and fixed verbal formulas. Can't the recitation of a creedal formula

be understood as a type of action? If so, is Mendelssohn's position tenable? Does he rely on an unsustainable distinction between actions and verbal formulas?

While I know of no text in which Mendelssohn addresses these concerns, we can imagine ways in which he might respond. With respect to the first concern, he might distinguish the function of the fixed verbal formulas that he rejects (such as creedal statements) from the function of the verbal formulas traditionally accepted by Judaism (such as liturgical formulas). While Mendelssohn holds that the purpose of a creedal statement is to express a community's beliefs or "opinions" (see pages 43-44 in Chapter 1), he seems to believe that the central concern of prayer lies elsewhere: he approvingly cites a medieval text that casts prayer as an attempt to express needs and gratitude (Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:233). Therefore, he might argue, a community which affirms creedal statements is at a greater risk of "disfiguring" than a community which merely possesses a fixed liturgy. If a creedal formula is primarily seen as expressing a community's beliefs, then there is reason to think that individuals might to turn to this statement to assess emerging commitments, asking whether these new beliefs agree with the community's authoritative statement of doctrine, and potentially rejecting well-grounded commitments that are judged to be incompatible with these sentences; by contrast, if liturgical statements are *not* primarily seen as expressions of belief, then individuals might be less likely to turn to such formulas upon encountering new commitments, and thus less likely to reject well-grounded beliefs for the sake of inherited words. Perhaps, then, Mendelssohn might argue that if Jewish practice discourages creedal formulas but leaves intact a fixed liturgy, Jewish practice is still capable of combatting the occurrence of "disfiguring"—that Jewish practice discourages types of formulas particularly likely to produce *Zerstümmelung*, while leaving intact fixed statements less conducive to such a result.

With respect to the second concern, Mendelssohn might attempt to argue that while creedal statements can play an indispensable role in some religious actions, we can still posit a distinction between these fixed verbal formulas on the one hand, and actions on the other. To be sure, he might concede, the recitation of a creedal formula is a type of action. Nevertheless, he might go on to suggest, all that follows from this concession is that creedal formulas can play a role in constituting action—and *not* that creedal formulas are indistinguishable from action. That is, Mendelssohn might argue, while creedal statements make possible a specific religious performance, such formulas continue to exist and function outside that performance: to cite two examples he offers, creedal formulas can provide a standard for individuals who wish to identify beliefs which must be accepted (per the argument I have reconstructed in this chapter), as well as for communal leaders who wish to identify and punish individuals who hold heretical views (Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:99-106; for Bowman's English translation, see "Counterreflections," 24-30). Mendelssohn might conclude, then, that creedal formulas can be linked to, but should nevertheless be distinguished from, actions. (This is not to say, of course, that the specific examples with which he illustrates this distinction are persuasive: we can accept the distinction between actions and formulas while wondering whether creedal statements have been as conducive to punishment as Mendelssohn imagines.)

Despite this attempt to imagine Mendelssohnian responses, I would repeat the point that Mendelssohn does not *himself* offer these arguments. Moreover, although I will suggest in my conclusion that some aspects of his reasoning might be relevant to contemporary thinkers, I do not wish to give the impression that I see his views as being without flaws.

Chapter 3
"The Felicity of the Nation": Jewish Practice and Social History

Chapter 2 began to dispel the interpretive confusion emerging from our initial encounter with *Jerusalem*, illuminating Mendelssohn's claim that the reflection generated by Jewish practice—reflection on "eternal truths" such as God's existence and providence—serves to protect adherents from "disfiguring" religious beliefs. The success of this analysis, in turn, raises the question of whether we can reconstruct, in comparable detail, Mendelssohn's other claims regarding Jewish practice. More specifically, we might ask, can we make sense of *Jerusalem*'s insistence that Jewish practice serves to promote "the felicity of the nation," and that modern Jews have not been freed "from the strict obedience we owe to the law"? Can we glean from Mendelssohn's writings, read in their historical context, an account of the sense in which Jewish practice is capable of promoting collective well-being, and of the grounds on which the laws governing Jewish practice remain binding despite challenges posed by biblical scholarship?

Chapter 3 will begin to address these issues by turning to Mendelssohn's perplexing claims about collective "felicity." Mendelssohn's view, I will argue, is that Jewish practice can address an ethico-political danger grounded in social history—the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony. As we saw in Chapter 1, Mendelssohn's philosophical anthropology ascribes to the individual the task of pursuing "perfection" or "flourishing," and insists that this project of self-cultivation requires the existence of societies.[1] The key point for us now is Mendelssohn's belief that societies might threaten the very pursuit which they are supposed to enable, for while he maintains that societies can evolve in ways that promote the pursuit of perfection, he also worries that societies might evolve in ways that prove to be corrupting and destabilizing. His claim about Jewish practice, in turn, is that this system can dispose adherents to identify and combat these types of perilous

changes, for by generating recurring reflection on God, Jewish practice can orient adherents' cognition and desire in a way that impedes the development of harmful social conditions. Jewish practice, Mendelssohn holds, can cultivate the emergence of Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving society—citizens who strive to ensure that changes in social life promote perfection and civic accord, rather than corruption and civic strife.

Three preliminary remarks are in order. The first involves the sources I will consider. While Chapter 2 turned briefly to Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings, Chapter 3 is the first section of this dissertation devoted primarily to such texts. As we explore this material, then, it will be helpful to keep in mind the approach outlined in my introduction. First, insofar as Mendelssohn borrows language from pre-modern Jewish literature, it will often be important to identify the sources on which he draws—for example, to identify textual allusions that he might expect some readers to grasp. Second, insofar as Mendelssohn is not merely borrowing, but also attempting to update, inherited Hebrew terminology, it will be important to go beyond his use of pre-modern sources and consider the idiosyncrasies of his Hebrew style—to explicate *his* usage of key Hebrew terms. Finally, insofar as Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings often engage in "philosophic Bible exegesis," it will be important to keep in mind the characteristics of this genre—characteristics such as an elliptical and allusive manner that recalls the terse style of pre-modern Jewish exegesis, as well as a willingness to go beyond the issues explicitly at stake in the Bible and rely on extra-textual philosophical commitments. That is, as we consider Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings on the Bible, we should assume neither that we will always encounter detailed accounts of his reasoning, nor that his arguments will always confine themselves to the Bible's textual features; instead, we should be prepared to reconstruct his reasoning and conclusions on the basis of subtle clues and extra-biblical conceptual commitments.[2]

My second remark involves Mendelssohn's views on the theological and ethical significance of human perfection,[3] and complements the discussion in Chapter 1 of his social philosophy—of his posture towards concepts such as *nation*, *state*, and *citizen*.[4] As we have seen, Mendelssohn ascribes to the human being the "vocation" of pursuing the *telos* of perfection or flourishing, understood as a condition—ultimately unattainable—in which an individual has properly cultivated and rendered harmonious the faculties, or *Kräfte*, of her body and soul. The key point here, in turn, is that Mendelssohn presents self-cultivation as a task that God wishes for us to pursue, since "the wisest and most benevolent being" cannot "have any other intention than the perfection of creatures"—since an omniscient God will recognize the pursuit of perfection as the human being's correct vocation, and since a benevolent God will wish for humans to pursue the end that constitutes their proper *telos*.[5] Moreover, Mendelssohn identifies the pursuit of our own perfection, as well as the perfection of others, as *the* central ethical imperative; indeed, for him, an action is "good" insofar as it promotes the development of *Kräfte* and "evil" insofar as it impedes this development.[6] For example, he suggests that while sacrificing my life for the preservation of the state can count as a good action, taking my life out of despair necessarily counts as evil. After all, while a sacrifice for the state can promote the pursuit of perfection by preserving a polity that provides others with opportunities for self-cultivation, suicide interrupts the cultivation of my faculties without enhancing my neighbors' pursuit of flourishing.[7] Similarly, Mendelssohn claims that while economic pursuits can count as good if treated as opportunities to exercise our faculties, such pursuits can become evil if they interfere with self-cultivation. After all, such pursuits might produce wealth so extensive that it eliminates any motivation to strive for future gain, and thus eliminates the opportunities for cultivation offered by such striving; moreover, such pursuits might be treated as so important that they displace

other activities crucial to self-cultivation, discouraging individuals from attending to the proper development of the body and intellect.[8] For Mendelssohn, then, the pursuit of human perfection constitutes a task endorsed by God and provides a standard for moral assessment.

My third remark concerns Mendelssohn's account of the relationship between cognition, desire, and action. For Mendelssohn, we determine whether actions count as good through rational reflection performed by the "faculty of cognition," and we are moved to perform specific actions by the "faculty of desire"—by a faculty that receives "impulses" from various sources, such as cognition and the senses, and that moves us to desire and perform the action for which the strongest "impulses" exist. More precisely, while our faculty of desire might lead us to act in a way cognition deems "evil" if our senses produce powerful yearnings for such actions, our faculty of desire will lead us to act in a way cognition deems "good" if our "knowledge" is more "effective" than opposing drives—if our cognition produces "impulses" capable of overcoming any opposing inclinations.[9] We will act in accordance with our cognitive judgments, for example, if we grasp particularly weighty "motivating reasons" in favor of actions deemed to be good, and thus strengthen the rational "impulses" contending with contrary inclinations, or if we reflect so frequently on moral "laws" that we transform them into "a second nature," and thus generate instincts that agree with "reason" and counteract opposing drives.[10] For Mendelssohn, then, we will act in a way that cognition deems good if this faculty is able to shape our desires—if a process of rational reflection determines that an action promotes the pursuit of perfection, and if the impulses arising from this reflection are stronger than any opposing drives.[11]

We can now turn to the issues at the heart of this chapter. I will begin by reconstructing the *Biur*'s little-known interpretation of the biblical tabernacle,[12] arguing that Mendelssohn takes this ancient sanctuary to orient cognition and desire towards the pursuit of perfection, and that he

portrays this orientation as capable of impeding the emergence of harmful social conditions. I will then show that he means to advance a claim not only about the tabernacle in antiquity, but also about Jewish practice in modernity—that the *Biur* presents the diverse actions required by Jewish law, and not merely the tabernacle described in the Bible, as capable of impeding the rise of corrupting and destabilizing developments. I will conclude by arguing that we should read *Jerusalem*'s claims about collective felicity as alluding to the idea developed in the *Biur*. When discussing collective well-being in *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn takes Jewish practice to cultivate the emergence of citizens committed to assessing and improving society. For *Jerusalem*, Jewish practice can address the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony.

The *Biur* on the Tabernacle

In Chapter 1, we saw that when Mendelssohn claims that Jewish practice generates reflection on truths such as God's existence, he links this reflection to "the felicity of the nation":

> Religious and moral teachings were to be connected with men's everyday activities…The truths useful for the felicity of the nation as well as of each of its individual members [*zur Glückseligkeit der Nation sowohl als der einzelnen Glieder derselben*] were to be…connected with actions and performances, and these were to serve them in place of signs, without which they cannot be preserved…In everything a youth saw being done, in all public as well as private dealings, on all gates and on all doorposts, in whatever he turned his eyes and ears to, he found occasion for inquiring and reflecting.[13]

As we saw, Mendelssohn is presenting a claim which begins from Jewish practice's concern with "everyday activities" such as dress and diet, suggesting that if Jewish practice requires actions even in seemingly mundane areas of life and thereby generates frequent reflection, adherence to this system serves to promote the *Glückseligkeit* of collective entities. Moreover, we saw that when Mendelssohn uses phrases such as "the felicity of the nation" and "the felicity of the state,"

he refers to a situation which a society's activities produce "material and spiritual goods"[14]—in which diverse activities, from economic endeavors to aesthetic pursuits, not only yield material benefits such as harmony and prosperity, but also offer opportunities for the cultivation of faculties. That is, collective felicity exists in a society that is characterized by peace and economic success, and that enables participation in activities conducive to self-perfection—for example, aesthetic endeavors that cultivate a capacity for assessing beauty along with diverse physical skills, and economic activities that involve assessing the objects we crave and thereby cultivate cognition and desire. By contrast, such felicity is absent from a society that is characterized by strife and poverty, and that possesses a practical life no longer conducive to self-cultivation—for instance, a society in which aesthetic efforts are oriented towards acquiring fame and fortune and thus distract us from refining our artistic judgment, and in which commercial endeavors are pursued with a single-minded commitment to maximizing wealth that leads us to neglect physical and intellectual cultivation.[15] When Mendelssohn claims that Jewish practice promotes collective *Glückseligkeit*, then, he means that Jewish practice contributes to society's "material and spiritual" well-being. By requiring actions even in seemingly mundane areas of life and thereby generating frequent reflection, this system fosters the emergence of a society in which diverse activities—from economic endeavors to aesthetic pursuits—are conducive to conditions such as harmony and offer opportunities for self-cultivation.

Unfortunately, just as Mendelssohn's claim about conceptual "disfiguring" initially resisted efforts at explication, so too did his repeated references to collective "felicity" prove frustratingly opaque. He says little about precisely *how* Jewish practice promotes collective well-being—about the mechanism by which this system yields "material goods" such as peace and renders "trades" and "arts" conducive to perfection. Similarly, he says little about precisely

when Jewish practice yields this result—about whether Jewish practice promoted felicity only for the nation of Israelites gathered in the ancient Hebrew state, or whether Judaism's "living script" can still play this role in a modern society when enacted by a Jewish minority. We are thus left wondering about the link between Jewish practice and "the felicity of the nation." What does Mendelssohn have in mind when he repeatedly posits this connection?

A first step towards answering these questions is to reflect on *Jerusalem*'s failure to more explicitly clarify the link between Jewish practice and collective well-being. It might be the case, of course, that this treatise says little about the nature of this link because there is little to be said—because Mendelssohn has not worked out, for himself, an account of Jewish practice's role in social life. It might also be the case, however, that *Jerusalem* is repeating the conclusion of an argument which has been worked out more fully in some other text—that Mendelssohn *does* hold a view on the relationship between Jewish practice and collective felicity, but has some reason for avoiding a more extended discussion of this point in *Jerusalem*. For example, recall that this treatise is written, in part, for non-Jewish readers against the backdrop of a debate about whether German states should grant Jews civic rights.[16] As is well known, many of the non-Jewish intellectuals involved in this debate express worries regarding Jewish social distinctiveness, suggesting that Jews are simply too different from their non-Jewish neighbors to be integrated into society through the bestowal of rights. Indeed, this worry appears in a variety of texts which Mendelssohn reads during the months surrounding *Jerusalem*'s composition, with Cranz's pamphlet—to cite just one instance[17]—informing Mendelssohn that "the strict observance of your Sabbath" and Jews' distinctive dietary habits "bars your nation from unlimited participation in the public and private benefits of society."[18] Perhaps, then, Mendelssohn's vague allusions to collective felicity reflect a concern regarding the nature of his

audience. Addressing non-Jewish readers who are debating whether Jews should be integrated into German society but who remain suspicious of Jewish social distinctiveness, Mendelssohn might be attempting to productively introduce, without harmfully emphasizing, a position which he has worked out regarding Judaism and social life—to hint that Jews are capable of fostering the well-being of a modern society, but to avoid accentuating, through an extended discussion of this point, the distinctive nature of Jewish civic involvement.

To be sure, Mendelssohn might have other reasons for alluding to, but not fully clarifying, the social relevance of Jewish practice.[19] The point I am trying to make is simply that while Mendelssohn might be linking Jewish practice to national felicity even though he has not developed a detailed argument for this connection, he also might be repeating the conclusion of an argument worked out more fully in another context—that while he might be advancing a suggestion he cannot defend, he also might be relying on reasoning he has already formulated. One way to explore Mendelssohn's position, then, is to examine his work in the years leading up to *Jerusalem*'s composition. If he has already worked out an account of Jewish practice and collective felicity before writing *Jerusalem* in 1782-1783, we would have grounds for suspecting that *Jerusalem* is alluding to this position—that *Jerusalem* is repeating the conclusion, but omitting the reasoning, of an argument he has already developed. These suspicions would grow stronger, in turn, if we were to discover additional signs pointing to a connection between *Jerusalem* and this previously developed position—for example, similarities between the terms and ideas invoked in *Jerusalem* and the language and content of the earlier account. We must ask, then, whether Mendelssohn clarifies the contribution of Jewish practice to collective felicity in the years prior to *Jerusalem*'s composition, and whether there are grounds for concluding that *Jerusalem* is alluding to this previously developed view.

Let us begin with the question of whether Mendelssohn's pre-*Jerusalem* writings link Jewish practice and national felicity. The crucial text here is the conclusion of the *Biur* on Exodus, written between 1779 and 1781 and concerned with the biblical tabernacle[20]—with the portable sanctuary God commands the Israelites to build soon after emerging from Egyptian slavery. Largely unexplored in recent scholarship,[21] this text opens with the following remarks:

> We will add to the words of the great sages mentioned above one [further] perspective regarding the purpose of tabernacle's construction, as well as regarding the works which were commanded in connection with it. It is possible that none of those authors mentioned this perspective on account of its great simplicity, and on account of the fact that it is discovered and known with [only] a small amount of contemplation.[22]

While often willing to acknowledge disagreements with earlier exegetes,[23] Mendelssohn denies the existence of any such dispute regarding the "perspective" presented here, acknowledging that "none" of his predecessors expresses the view outlined by the *Biur*,[24] but insisting that this lack of precedent does *not* indicate disagreement—that earlier Jewish commentators *do* affirm the "perspective" presented by the *Biur*, but feel no need to articulate this perspective given "its great simplicity." While typically willing to admit his divergences from earlier interpreters, then, Mendelssohn goes out of his way to portray the "perspective" he is about to formulate as a widely accepted view. He goes out of his way to allay any suspicions regarding the novelty of his position, and thus seems to be particularly concerned with winning acceptance for his argument—to attach considerable importance to the claim he goes on to present.

After offering this introduction, Mendelssohn turns to more substantive matters, outlining three types of activities pursued in a "community": "works of necessity" such as agriculture and cooking,[25] which address our most basic needs and thus are indispensable to our survival; "works of utility" such as the production of metal goods and road-building, which are not necessary for our survival but foster "the welfare of the community or its individual members"; and "works of

splendor" such as painting and music, which involve aesthetic endeavors that yield "beautiful" objects and inspire "pleasure."[26] Indicating that the construction of the tabernacle involved all three types of work,[27] Mendelssohn reflects on God's reasons for mandating such a project:

> It is plausible to say that just as the Eternal, Blessed be He, commanded His people to sanctify the first fruits of their wombs, land, and animals to His great name…so too did He wish for the children of Israel to elevate the first fruits of their thoughts, of their ideas, and of every aptitude for deeds in matters concerning the welfare of the state and community, and to sanctify them for His worship. The children of Israel were to make from these an object for the worship of the Eternal—in the tabernacle, its instruments, and the garments of its attendants. By this means, all of their affairs would be sanctified for heaven, for they would remember the Eternal in all of their deeds.[28]

The tabernacle is framed as a "first fruits" offering that created recurring occasions for reflection on God. The idea is that if the newly liberated Israelites, by building this structure, devoted their "first" works of necessity, utility, and splendor to constructing "an object for the worship of the Eternal," future performances of such works would lead individuals to "remember the Eternal"—that since the community's "first" endeavors were oriented towards worship, there emerged a lasting association between such endeavors and God, and the performance of one would call to mind the other. The *Biur* claims, then, that the tabernacle's construction transformed "all… deeds" into occasions for reflecting on God—that by linking the deity to diverse pursuits at a key moment in Israelite history, the tabernacle rendered all such pursuits, from economic works such as agriculture to artistic works such as painting, capable of generating contemplation of God.

Mendelssohn then goes on to clarify the results emerging from this constant reflection:[29]

> By means of this, the person will always set it upon his heart to distinguish between the good and the evil, between the beneficial and the harmful, and he will not go whoring after the arrogance of his whoring heart and pile gluttony upon thirst.[30]

Consider the claim that a "person will always set it upon his heart to distinguish between the good and the evil." The *Biur* elsewhere uses this language to describe the rational assessment of an action's goodness—the determination, by our cognition, of whether an action promotes the

pursuit of perfection. For example, the *Biur* on Genesis 2:9 states that "by means of the faculty of cognition" an individual "distinguishes…between good and evil," recognizing as good "that which leads to flourishing" and as evil "that which impedes flourishing."[31] When Mendelssohn claims that "by means" of reflection on God we will "distinguish" between "good and evil," then, he means that frequent contemplation of God will lead us to assess our actions. That is, he is invoking the idea—developed in his German works—that one way to spark ethical evaluation is to consider the nature of the deity, since (as noted above) we will recognize that "the wisest and most benevolent being" cannot "have any other intention than the perfection of creatures," and since we will therefore ask whether our actions accord with this divinely sanctioned pursuit of perfection.[32] Mendelssohn's point is that by generating frequent reflection on a God who wishes for humans to pursue perfection, the tabernacle's construction motivated the Israelites to rationally determine whether their behavior met this standard—whether their actions promoted the pursuit of perfection and counted as good, or impeded this task and counted as evil.

Consider, as well, the image of an individual who will "go whoring after the arrogance of his whoring heart and pile gluttony upon thirst." Borrowed from Deuteronomy 29:18,[33] this language is taken by the *Biur* to refer to an individual who desires evil actions—who "augments natural desires with wanton ones," is inclined to engage in "sin," and is characterized by "wickedness of the inclination."[34] By stating that individuals who frequently contemplate God will "not" find themselves in this condition, then, the *Biur* is claiming that individuals who engage in such reflection will avoid desiring evil—that these individuals will yearn only to perform acts judged to promote the pursuit of perfection. Indeed, this conclusion follows naturally from Mendelssohn's theory of action, which—as noted above—insists that our cognition is more likely to shape our desire if we grasp weighty "reasons" in favor of good

actions. Consider the example of a particularly weighty reason offered by Mendelssohn's German writings:

> One should learn to consider every human action in connection with the ever-present lawgiver of nature and in relation to eternity. One should get used to having these considerations before one's eyes in every act that one performs. If one does this, a wholesome enthusiasm for virtue will be awakened in us, and each motivating reason for such virtue will attain an ethical majesty by which its influence and its effectiveness on the will is strengthened.[35]

Mendelssohn suggests that the desire of "the lawgiver of nature" for specific actions counts as a "motivating reason" of great "importance," and that "having" such "considerations before one's eyes in every act" will have a strong "influence…on the will"—that if we recognize that God wishes for us to act in a specific manner, we will possess a weighty "reason" for performing the action in question, and our reflection will produce powerful "impulses" capable of shaping our desires. Such a position entails precisely the conclusion outlined by the *Biur*, for if the tabernacle's construction led the Israelites to reflect on a God who wishes for humans to pursue perfection, then this project led the Israelites to grasp a weighty reason for performing actions judged to meet this standard—a reason possessing sufficient "ethical majesty" to generate desires for actions deemed to be good. The rational contemplation generated by the tabernacle's construction thus shaped the content of Israelite desires.

The *Biur*'s view now emerges. By linking God to diverse "works" at a key historical moment, the tabernacle's construction created a lasting association between the divine and such acts, transforming "all" endeavors—from economic works such as the production of goods to aesthetic works such as the creation of music—into occasions for contemplating the deity. This frequent reflection then cultivated an orientation towards human flourishing, moving individuals to ask whether their behavior fostered the pursuit of perfection, and leading them to desire activities judged to promote that end. The tabernacle thus led the Israelites to identify and desire

activities conducive to human flourishing. Moved "to remember the Eternal in all…deeds," the Israelites would be disposed to assess their works and to desire to perform acts deemed good.

The *Biur* then explores the implications of this view, stating that the Israelites "would not be permitted to seek the excess [*hamotar*]" because of the reflection on God generated by the tabernacle.[36] To grasp this claim, we must clarify the *Biur*'s use of *motar* or "excess":[37]

> Initially, it is proper for a nation to foster an increase only in works of necessity; however, when the nation grows and flourishes in its deeds, it should also pursue works of utility and even turn to works of splendor and pleasure, in accordance with [its] condition. While the excess [*hamotar*] is dangerous and harmful in all of these stages, the excess [*hamotar*] and bursting forth beyond the limit in works of splendor and pleasure rapidly destroy and ruin the political felicity [*osher ham'dini*], and many are the fallen whom it has caused to perish. For this gives rise to a love of pleasures, weakening the body with a forceful desire to acquire, as well as the coveting of wealth and luxurious, pleasurable objects. Moreover, this gives birth to a man's jealousy of his fellow and division among the hearts of those who are close, stirring up war among those who inhabit the land, as well as strife and contention between a man and his neighbor…Order will thereby be disrupted and the people will be transformed, disorderly and corrupt.[38]

While Mendelssohn maintains that societies can evolve in ways that promote the pursuit of perfection, he also worries that societies might evolve in ways that prove to be corrupting and destabilizing: social change is "proper" when it involves the emergence of various "works" that foster self-cultivation,[39] but "harmful" when it involves an evolution in "works" that renders individuals "corrupt" and "disorderly"—a change in economic and aesthetic activities that impedes self-cultivation and political harmony. Framed in the language introduced earlier in this dissertation, the point here is that some types of social change can undermine the existence of collective felicity, since social life can become less conducive to the "material and spiritual goods" that constitute this condition—since economic and aesthetic shifts can produce a social life that fosters corruption and strife rather than perfection and accord. Indeed, Mendelssohn's Hebrew indicates that he understands his argument in precisely these terms, for he claims to be worried about changes that "ruin the political *osher*," and he elsewhere takes the Hebrew *osher*

to correspond to the German *Glückseligkeit*—to the term he uses to refer to "the felicity [*Glückseligkeit*]" of a nation or state.[40]

This point clarifies Mendelssohn's use of the term "excess" or *motar*, which he takes to refer to a social development in which we "burst forth beyond the limit in" one type of work—in which one type of work becomes too widespread. Mendelssohn is identifying a *motar* as a mechanism behind the disruption of collective felicity, arguing that the excessive proliferation of one type of work can leave individuals "corrupt" and "disorderly"—that a social life in which one type of work has become too widespread no longer promotes self-cultivation and civic harmony. An excess in works of splendor, for example, might divert attention from the pursuit of perfection and undermine social accord, replacing a commitment to cultivating our faculties with "a forceful desire to acquire," and replacing a situation of political "order" with "war," "strife," and "division." The idea here is that when a society devotes a disproportionate amount of resources to aesthetic works that produce "luxurious… objects," this society implicitly encourages its members to view the acquisition of such objects—rather than self-cultivation—as the task most worthy of pursuit, and these individuals might neglect other activities crucial to self-cultivation and become embroiled in conflict. For example, an individual might be so committed to acquiring luxuries that she neglects physical exercise and intellectual pursuits, failing to cultivate her bodily faculties as well as her capacity for rational reflection. Similarly, an individual might be so committed to acquiring luxuries that she pursues the same items her "neighbors" crave, even when doing so leads to "strife." When discussing a *motar*, then, the *Biur* is worried about economic and aesthetic shifts that threaten collective felicity. The *Biur* is worried about an ethico-political danger grounded in social history—the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony. The *Biur* is worried

that as a society changes by introducing diverse types of economic and aesthetic pursuits, some categories might become too widespread and individuals might become "corrupt" and "disorderly," failing to properly cultivate their faculties and becoming embroiled in conflict.

We can now understand the claim that the Israelites "would not be permitted to seek the excess" because of the reflection inspired by the tabernacle. If an "excess" refers to a social condition imperiling self-cultivation and civic harmony, then the *Biur* means that the reflection generated by the tabernacle served a crucial social function, preventing the rise of society-wide immoderation that would threaten individual development and civic "order." If the Israelites would assess the goodness of their endeavors and desire to act to promote human flourishing, then the Israelites would be attentive to signs of, and yearn to promote perfection by eliminating, obstacles to the cultivation of *Kräfte*, and these individuals would thus be likely to identify, and wish to combat, the obstacle to cultivation cited above—namely, a corrupting and destabilizing *motar*. The Israelites "would not be permitted to seek the excess," then, because they would rationally identify and wish to avoid this corrupting and destabilizing development. Moved to reflect on a God who desires actions which promote perfection, the Israelites would be disposed to evaluate their society's life and to act on the results of such reflection, assessing the prevalence of various works, determining whether any category had become too widespread, and desiring to correct any harmful state of affairs.[41] For example, the Israelites might recognize in the emergence of economic inequality—of widespread poverty among some individuals and extravagant luxury among others—a neglect of basic needs in favor of aesthetic pursuits, and seek to correct this corrupting and destabilizing excess in works of splendor. Similarly, the Israelites might discern in a condition of exclusively *economic* prosperity—in a situation where the arts struggle despite agricultural and commercial prosperity—an excess in works of necessity

and utility, and seek to encourage aesthetic pursuits that aid the cultivation of *Kräfte*. For the *Biur*, then, the reflection generated by the tabernacle's construction shaped cognition and desire, orienting these faculties towards the pursuit of perfection and impeding the rise of harmful conditions. Committed to assessing and improving society, the Israelites would reflectively evaluate social developments and introduce corrections to secure collective felicity, striving to ensure that social change promoted perfection and accord, rather than corruption and strife.[42]

Indeed, lest we miss this point, Mendelssohn illustrates his claim with an example drawn from the Bible, discussing the condition of Hebrew society during the reign of King Solomon:

> When the kingdom was firmly in the hand of this wise king, Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sands upon the shore of the sea, and each man sat safely under his vine and fig tree from Dan to Beer Sheva, and the silver and gold were as abundant as stones in Jerusalem, and the cedars as abundant as the sycamores in the Shefala. At that time, the Eternal, Blessed be He, commanded [the people] to build a house for His name, and the king built a house for his kingship, both of them marvelous and splendid with every type of magnificence and splendor…Would that matters had not gone beyond that proportion, for it was then related to and arranged with the flourishing and felicity of the nation [*hatzlahat hauma v'oshra*]…The rule is that in matters such as these, which properly change in accordance with time and events, one should neither impose a determinate limit upon nor set a boundary for man, saying "until here shall you go." For what would set a boundary in a matter which is perpetual and unceasing? And who would give a definite measure to a matter which has no definite measure? Rather, the more correct approach is to be on guard against the trap.[43]

Discussing Hebrew works of "splendor," Mendelssohn suggests that the "proportion" of such works among society's endeavors was "arranged with the…felicity of the nation," and that the "correct approach" with respect to "matters such as these" is "to be on guard against the trap." On this account, Solomon's reign was initially characterized by a social life conducive to the "felicity of the nation,"[44] and the "correct approach" to achieving this result was to be "on guard against the trap" in such "matters"—to attend to, and act against, the danger associated with social change. The *Biur*, in turn, has just devoted several paragraphs to identifying this danger as a corrupting and destabilizing *motar*. For Mendelssohn, then, "the felicity of the nation"

emerged from attentiveness to, and action against, the potential emergence of excess. Collective felicity emerged from the commitment to assessing and improving society encouraged by the tabernacle's construction: transforming all "works" into activities that direct attention to a God who wishes for humans to pursue perfection, the building of this sanctuary disposed the Israelites to ask whether social developments impeded or promoted this pursuit, and thus to identify and combat the rise of corrupting and destabilizing excess. The tabernacle's construction fostered collective felicity by addressing an ethico-political danger grounded in social history—the danger that society might evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony.

The *Biur* on Jewish Practice

Of course, if Mendelssohn had concluded the *Biur* on Exodus by focusing exclusively on the tabernacle, we might doubt that his commentary is relevant to this chapter's central questions: whether Mendelssohn clarifies the contribution of Jewish practice to collective felicity in the years prior to *Jerusalem*'s composition, and whether there are grounds for concluding that *Jerusalem* is alluding to this previously developed view. After all, even if Mendelssohn treats the tabernacle as socially relevant, he might not ascribe comparable significance to Jewish practice. While we have seen that the *Biur* explores the "felicity of the nation," then, we have not determined whether Mendelssohn's commentary links this condition to the "living script."

Clues emerge from the lines with which Mendelssohn closes this section of the *Biur*:

> Blessed is He and Blessed is His great name, who has distinguished us from the peoples and given to us a true Torah, good decrees, and upright laws, in order that love and reverence for Him [*ahavato v'yirato*][45] might be upon our countenance at all times.[46] Amen Selah.[47]

While it might be tempting to dismiss these lines as a stylized formula that bears little connection to the argument outlined above, this posture is difficult to maintain in light of the available

evidence. These lines seem to be a distinctively Mendelssohnian composition, for while many of the phrases used here appear in pre-modern Jewish sources, neither I nor other commentators have discovered any precedents for these lines as a whole—for *this* combination of phrases.[48] Moreover, Mendelssohn seems to view these lines as particularly appropriate to the discussion at the end of the *Biur* on Exodus, for he does not repeat these sentences—or even present similar statements—in the concluding sections of the *Biur* on the Pentateuch's other books.[49] Finally, these lines constitute precisely the type of composition that Mendelssohn often uses to present his own views, for—as noted by other readers—he shares with many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish intellectuals the practice of presenting original claims through combinations of inherited phrases.[50] It seems to me, then, that if the lines quoted above are an original composition that Mendelssohn takes to be appropriate to the discussion at the end of the *Biur* on Exodus, and if these lines *also* constitute precisely the type of composition that he often uses to present his own claims, we should seek to identify the point he is trying to make by developing a new combination of pre-modern phrases and inserting it at this textual juncture. We should ask what is he trying to accomplish by including these words at this moment in his commentary.

The first point to note here is that Mendelssohn is signaling a broadening of his focus, for the terms that he employs in these lines—"Torah [*Torah*]," "decrees [*hukim*]," and "laws [*mishpatim*]"—are used consistently in the *Biur* to refer to the norms governing Jewish practice as a whole. For example, noting that rabbinic authorities have "set up a fence around the Torah [*latorah*], the commandment, the decree [*lahok*], and the law [*v'lamishpat*]," the *Biur*'s introduction indicates that these terms denote a comprehensive system of norms which set out the actions required of Jews—norms which outline the "inheritance" Jews are required to "observe and perform," and which provide a "paved path" different from any other "way of

life."[51] Similarly, discussing "the Torah [*Torah*], commandments, decrees [*v'hukim*], and laws [*umishpatim*]" that "the Eternal, may He be exalted, gave to us alone," the *Biur* on Exodus 20:2 indicates that these terms refer to the laws which govern the actions of Jews—to the laws which determine the "forms of worship" Jews are required to adopt, and to "the Torah's other commandments, such as the commandment to keep the Sabbath."[52] Mendelssohn's final lines, then, employ terms that the *Biur* treats as referring to the entire body of Jewish law. These lines signal a shift in focus from the biblical tabernacle to Jewish practice as a whole.

Moreover, Mendelssohn's final lines not only indicate a concern with Jewish practice, but also discuss the significance of this system. When the *Biur* claims that Jewish practice promotes "love [*ahavah*]" and "reverence [*yirah*]" for God, Mendelssohn is using words that he treats as terms of art for the results of reflection upon God, with the *Biur* on Deuteronomy 6 defining *ahavah* and *yirah* as the emotions that arise from contemplating the deity—that are involved in a "recognition of His perfection," and that arise when we form an "idea of the greatness, honor, and perfection" of God.[53] This use of *ahavah* and *yirah* is not confined to the *Biur* on Deuteronomy, for diverse Mendelssohnian texts use these terms for the results of reflection. For example, a work from the 1750s links *ahavah* to religious contemplation, stating that "love [*ahavah*] for the Eternal is the joy grounded in knowledge of His perfection."[54] Similarly, the *Biur* on Exodus 1:21 indicates that *yirah* for God arises from our reflection on the deity, for the commentary insists that the Hebrew *yirah* corresponds to the German *Ehrfurcht*, an emotion that Mendelssohn explicitly presents as arising from our "conception" of an entity—indicating that *yirah* for an entity emerges from forming a "conception" of that being, and thus that *yirah* for God emerges from reflecting upon the deity.[55] When Mendelssohn claims that God issued the Torah, *hukim* and *mishpatim* to inspire "love and reverence for Him…at all times," then, he

means that the divinely endorsed norms which govern Jewish practice generate recurring reflection on the deity. He claims that just as a link between "works" and "the Eternal" allowed those acts to direct attention to the divine, so too does a link between actions and God's "laws" yield frequent contemplation of the deity—that insofar as Jewish practice is grounded in divine legislation, the performance of these actions can bring to mind their divine legislator.

The third point to note about Mendelssohn's final lines is that they discuss the function of Jewish practice in modernity. After consistently using the third-person when discussing the individuals motivated to reflect upon God,[56] Mendelssohn suddenly shifts in these final lines to the first-person plural, claiming God disclosed a variety of practices to place "love and reverence …upon *our* countenance." This shift hardly seems accidental, for insofar as these lines draw on a biblical verse that uses the second-person plural,[57] Mendelssohn is not compelled by fidelity to a source to abandon the third-person—to envision "love and reverence" being "upon *our* countenance," rather than "love and reverence" being "upon *their* countenance." Rather, this move seems to reflect a shift in focus from antiquity to modernity, since the *Biur* consistently moves between third- and first-person language to signal a shift in the era being discussed. For example, the *Biur*'s introduction moves from the third- to first-person language when shifting focus from antiquity to modernity, stating of the Jews of the sixth century BCE that they "were exiled to Babylonia" and "forgot their language," but referring to "our fellow children of Israel" who currently live in Poland and whose poor linguistic habits "we see."[58] Similarly, the *Biur* on Exodus 15 moves between third- and first-person language when contrasting ancient and modern aesthetics, stating of antiquity's "great men, sages, and prophets" that "they arranged…psalms praising the Eternal," but acknowledging the gap between ancient practices and "the musical art we possess today."[59] Unless we assume that Mendelssohn is abandoning a convention he adopts

throughout the *Biur*,[60] then, we should conclude that his shift from the third- to first-person indicates a shift in the era being discussed—from antiquity to modernity. When he claims that the norms grounding Jewish practice place "love and reverence…upon *our* countenance," he means that Jewish practice, in the present, can create occasions for religious reflection. He means that just as the tabernacle once transformed "all" deeds into occasions for contemplating God, so too can Jewish practice still create recurring opportunities for such reflection—that the acts required by divine legislation can still direct attention to their divine legislator.

The implications should be clear. Mendelssohn indicates that Jewish practice still generates the reflection on God once sparked by the tabernacle's construction. The *Biur* has just devoted several paragraphs to establishing, in turn, that this frequent reflection yields ethical and political consequences, orienting cognition and desire towards the pursuit of human flourishing, and promoting the "felicity of the nation" by combating the rise of corruption and disorder. It seems to me, then, that if Mendelssohn begins by presenting the contemplation generated by the tabernacle as ethically and politically relevant, and if he then equates this reflection linked to the tabernacle with the reflection now emerging from Jewish practice, his purpose is to suggest that the ethical and political consequences arising from the tabernacle can still arise from Jewish practice. Insofar as Jewish practice generates recurring opportunities for contemplating God, this system can motivate adherents to assess the link between their actions and the divinely willed pursuit of perfection, and lead those individuals to yearn for activities judged to promote this pursuit; moreover, if practitioners are disposed to assess their behavior and to desire actions seen as good, these individuals are likely to identify the development of, and promote perfection by eliminating, excess conducive to corruption and disorder. Led by their practices to frequently reflect on a God who desires actions which promote perfection, Jews might be still be disposed

to evaluate social life and act on the results of such reflection, assessing the distribution of works in a modern society, judging whether any category has become too widespread, and correcting any harmful state of affairs. To revisit an earlier example, Jews might still identify and combat an emerging excess in works of splendor, seeing in widespread poverty coupled with extravagant luxury a neglect of basic needs in favor of aesthetic works, and seeking to eliminate such a *motar* and the resulting corruption and strife. Mendelssohn suggests, then, that his claim about the *tabernacle* and collective felicity is also a claim about *Jewish practice* and collective felicity. Just as the tabernacle promoted this condition by addressing an ethico-political danger grounded in social history, so too can Jewish practice promote this condition by addressing modern incarnations of that threat. Jewish practice can cultivate the emergence of Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving society—citizens who strive to ensure that changes in social life promote perfection and civic accord, rather than corruption and civic strife.

Further support for this reading emerges from ancient and medieval Jewish texts. On my interpretation, the *Biur*'s language signals a concern with Jewish practice, religious reflection, and ethical cultivation—a claim that Jewish practice might foster reflection on the divine and orient adherents towards the pursuit of perfection. While I developed this reading by focusing on Mendelssohn's writings, an examination of pre-modern Jewish texts points to the same conclusion, revealing ample precedent in those sources for his use of key phrases, and thus suggesting that he would have expected educated readers to grasp his concern with the issues I emphasize. For example, by referring to God's "Torah," "decrees," and "laws," the *Biur* employs language that not only Mendelssohn's other writings, but also a variety of pre-modern sources, use to denote the norms governing Jewish practice as a whole—sources ranging from the traditional liturgy to medieval philosophical texts.[61] Moreover, by referring to "love and

reverence" for God, the *Biur* employs language that not only Mendelssohn's Hebrew works, but also medieval thinkers such as Maimonides, present as terms for the results of reflection upon the divine.[62] Finally, by claiming that "reverence for Him might be upon our countenance," the *Biur* is drawing on a biblical text concerned with what we might call ethical cultivation—Exodus 20:17, which describes an attempt to place "reverence for Him upon your countenance" as an attempt to ensure "that you do not sin."[63] An examination of pre-modern Jewish texts thus lends support to my reading, revealing that Mendelssohn uses language he would have expected some readers to recognize as allusions to the themes I have emphasized.

Support also emerges from an examination of eighteenth-century works by non-Jewish authors, for the type of argument I ascribe to the *Biur*—an argument which explores antiquity in order to illuminate modernity—is frequently employed by thinkers with whom Mendelssohn is deeply engaged. More specifically, many of his predecessors invoke classical Greece and Rome to advance claims about modern life, contrasting the excellence of ancient society and art with the flaws of modern politics and aesthetics, and singling out dimensions of ancient life worthy of contemporary emulation. For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau—whose thought forms a key focus of Mendelssohn's early writings[64]—discusses the institutions of Sparta and Rome to advance claims about modern Europe, unfavorably contrasting modern civic life with its ancient antecedents, and perhaps identifying aspects of antiquity as worthy of imitation.[65] Similarly, Johann Joachim Winckelmann—who exerts a strong influence on Mendelssohn[66]—presents classical aesthetics, and perhaps classical culture more broadly, as worthy of our emulation, famously declaring that "the only way for us to become great…is through the imitation of the ancients."[67] An examination of non-Jewish sources with which Mendelssohn is engaged thus lends further support to my reading of the *Biur*, establishing the plausibility of ascribing to an

eighteenth-century thinker the type of argument I attribute to the *Biur*—an argument which discusses antiquity in order to illuminate modernity.[68]

We can now more confidently affirm my reading. Mendelssohn takes the reflection on the divine fostered by the tabernacle's construction to promote the "felicity of the nation," orienting cognition and desire towards the pursuit of perfection, and protecting society from the emergence of corruption and disorder. Moreover, he presents this claim about the tabernacle in antiquity as a claim about Jewish practice in modernity, indicating that the consequences generated by the tabernacle can still arise from observing Jewish law. Finally, an examination of texts with which Mendelssohn is familiar supports this reading, revealing his appropriation of pre-modern language suggestive of the themes I take the *Biur* to invoke, and the existence of Enlightenment precedents for the move I take the *Biur* to make. Mendelssohn's argument about the tabernacle and collective felicity, then, is an argument about Jewish practice and collective felicity—an argument which takes Jewish law to foster the emergence of a social life conducive to human flourishing and civic accord, since if the actions required by this system generate recurring opportunities for contemplating God, these actions dispose practitioners to assess their behavior and to desire actions seen as good, and thus to evaluate their society's activities and combat obstacles to human flourishing. For Mendelssohn, Jewish practice can cultivate the emergence of Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving society—citizens who strive to ensure that changes in social life promote perfection and civic accord, rather than corruption and civic strife. Jewish practice can promote collective felicity by addressing the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony.

Let me be clear. My claim is not that the *Biur* provides a detailed account of how a Jewish minority should behave in a modern society—that the *Biur* is urging Jews to follow any

specific course of action, whether it be to engage in reflection among themselves and present their findings to society as a whole, to seek out opportunities to participate in governmental activities concerned with society's works, or merely to see themselves as exhibiting a posture that non-Jews might observe and emulate. My claim, rather, is that the *Biur* explains how Jewish practice, in modernity, can cultivate an orientation that might manifest itself in various ways. The *Biur* is concerned less with recommending a course of action to modern Jews who seek to improve society, and more with clarifying how this commitment might emerge in the first place.

We can now directly address the problem that motivates this chapter: the challenge of interpreting *Jerusalem*'s claim that Jewish practice promotes "the felicity of the nation." We began by asking whether Mendelssohn clarifies Judaism's contribution to collective felicity in the years prior to *Jerusalem*'s composition, and whether there are grounds for concluding that *Jerusalem* is alluding to this previously developed view. We have now resolved the first question, establishing that the conclusion of the *Biur* on Exodus—written several years before *Jerusalem*—provides an account of Jewish practice's relevance to collective *Glückseligkeit*. The final step, then, is to ask whether Mendelssohn is alluding to this position in *Jerusalem*.

The *Biur* and *Jerusalem*

We should answer this question in the affirmative. The first point to note is the striking degree of confluence between the *Biur*'s argument and *Jerusalem*'s remarks. Both works link Jewish practice to the "felicity of the nation," with the former text referring to felicity with the Hebrew term *osher*, and with the latter text employing the German *Glückseligkeit* identified as *osher*'s proper translation.[69] Moreover, both works claim that Jewish practice fosters collective well-being by generating reflection on God, with the former text emphasizing the importance of

"remembering the Eternal" and of "love and reverence for Him," and with the latter text emphasizing the importance of "inquiring and reflecting" on "religious…teachings." Finally, both works emphasize the frequent nature of the socially relevant contemplation generated by Jewish practice, with the former text noting that reflection on God should occur "at all times," and with the latter text insisting that "in everything a youth saw…he found occasion for inquiring and reflecting." We have thus discovered an initial sign of a link between the *Biur* and *Jerusalem*, for this German treatise uses language strongly suggestive of, and raises precisely the issues discussed in, the conclusion of Mendelssohn's commentary on Exodus.

Further evidence for this connection emerges from a text discussed in Chapter 1—from the 1784 *To Enlighten*. Consider Mendelssohn's treatment of "national felicity" in this essay:

> Where enlightenment and culture proceed in step, they are together the best means of defense against corruption…Hence, the education of a nation, which, given the earlier definition of the words, is composed of culture and enlightenment, will be far less subject to corruption…A nation which has come through *education* to the highest pinnacle of national felicity [*höchsten Gipfel der Nationalglückseligkeit*]…can climb no higher.[70]

As we saw in Chapter 1, Mendelssohn uses the term *culture* to refer to "practical" dimensions of society such as "trades" and "arts," and *enlightenment* to refer to "rational knowledge" and "reflect[ion] upon things of human life, in terms of their… influence upon the vocation of a human being"—for example, to inquiries into the nature of God, and to the determination of whether society's activities foster the pursuit of perfection. *To Enlighten*, then, links the achievement of "national felicity" to diverse forms of rational reflection. If we achieve *Nationalglückseligkeit* "through education," and if "education" involves both "culture" and "enlightenment," *Nationalglückseligkeit* emerges when society's "practical" activities are accompanied by diverse types of reflection. Collective felicity emerges, at least in part, from reflection on the deity and an assessment of society's works.

The implications should be clear. Several years before the composition of *Jerusalem*, the *Biur* argues that Jewish practice promotes collective felicity by generating reflection on God and social assessment. Shortly after the composition of *Jerusalem*, in turn, Mendelssohn repeats key elements of the *Biur*'s argument, for although *To Enlighten* does not discuss Jewish practice, this text repeats the *Biur*'s claim regarding religious reflection and social assessment—the claim that the contemplation of God and an assessment of works foster national *Glückseligkeit*.[71] We have thus discovered a second indication that *Jerusalem* might allude to the idea developed in the *Biur*. If Mendelssohn connects Jewish practice and collective felicity between 1779 and 1781, and if he still affirms and employs elements of this argument in the 1784 *To Enlighten* essay, then he might also endorse and utilize elements of this position during the intervening years—during the period of *Jerusale*m's composition. If we know that an essay written in 1784 repeats an argument developed between 1779 and 1781, then we have grounds for suspecting that a treatise composed during the intervening years might also be alluding to this position.

A final piece of evidence involves the *Biur*'s relationship to *Jerusalem* as a whole. As is well known, *Jerusalem* echoes a variety of conclusions Mendelssohn defends in earlier works, ranging from the *Essay*'s claims regarding philosophical language[72] to the Lavater letter's account of gentile religiosity.[73] The crucial point for us is that *Jerusalem* frequently relies, with minimal argumentation, on conclusions the *Biur* presents in greater detail. For example, when *Jerusalem* repeatedly translates the Tetragrammaton as "the Eternal [*der Ewige*]," Mendelssohn is implementing—without comment—a terminological decision for which the *Biur* provides an elaborate argument.[74] Similarly, when *Jerusalem* discusses episodes in biblical history, Mendelssohn often alludes to interpretive claims presented in more detail by the *Biur*, with *Jerusalem*'s claim that Israelites in Egypt became "insensitive to the truth" echoing a claim

developed more fully in the *Biur* on Exodus 3,[75] and with *Jerusalem*'s account of the Golden Calf echoing a more extensive discussion in the *Biur* on Exodus 32.[76] Finally, at least one scholar has suggested that when *Jerusalem* refers to "real idolatry [*wirklicher Götzendienst*],"[77] Mendelssohn is hinting at a distinction, outlined in the *Biur*, between two types of worship—between worshiping beings other than God while acknowledging the deity's supreme authority, and worshiping beings other than God while rejecting the deity's ultimate power, with the former being permissible for gentiles (but not Jews) and thus counting as *unreal* idolatry, and with the latter being impermissible for gentiles (and Jews) and thus counting as *real* idolatry.[78] We have thus discovered a third indication that *Jerusalem*'s account of national felicity may allude to an idea worked out in the *Biur*, for if the German text frequently relies on claims developed more fully in the Hebrew work, we have grounds for suspecting that *Jerusalem* draws on the *Biur*'s account of collective felicity. We have grounds for suspecting that just as *Jerusalem*'s approach to translation, the Bible, and idolatry relies on reasoning developed in the *Biur*, so too does *Jerusalem*'s approach to collective well-being rely on an argument in that commentary.

Let us review. Earlier in this dissertation, I showed that when *Jerusalem* discusses Jewish practice and collective felicity, this treatise is suggesting that if Jewish practice requires actions even in seemingly mundane areas of life and thereby generates frequent reflection, this system fosters the emergence of a society whose activities promote conditions such as harmony and offer opportunities for self-cultivation. This chapter, in turn, raised the possibility that Mendelssohn *might* be repeating the conclusion of an argument he has developed more fully in some other context, and showed that a text written several years prior to *Jerusalem*—the conclusion of the *Biur* on Exodus—presents just such an argument. Moreover, this chapter has identified a variety of reasons for thinking that *Jerusalem* is alluding to the *Biur*'s position, for

Jerusalem echoes crucial dimensions of the *Biur*'s account when discussing collective felicity, is written during a period when Mendelssohn affirms aspects of the *Biur*'s view, and frequently repeats the *Biur*'s conclusions without reproducing the *Biur*'s argumentation. Taken individually, perhaps, each point proves little. Taken together, however, these factors lead to the conclusion that *Jerusalem* is relying on an argument presented more fully in the *Biur*—that when *Jerusalem* presents Jewish practice as fostering "the felicity of the nation," Mendelssohn is referring to the capacity of Jewish practice, enacted by Jews in a modern society, to address perilous developments arising from social change. That is, while we might doubt the *Biur*'s relevance for *Jerusalem* if we were to lack some of the evidence I present, such a reading loses much of its plausibility in light of the totality of factors cited here. After all, such a reading would have to insist that *Jerusalem*'s author repeatedly echoes, without meaning to do so, the *very* position which he has just developed, which he still endorses, and which appears in a work he continues to utilize—a position which he formulates shortly before writing *Jerusalem*, which he affirms and repeats during the period in question, and which appears in a text that shapes his German treatise. It seems to me, then, that the most compelling reading of *Jerusalem*—the reading that reflects the full range of evidence—is an interpretation that takes this treatise to be alluding to the idea developed in the *Biur*. For Mendelssohn, insofar as Jewish practice leads individuals to frequently contemplate a God who wishes for humans to pursue perfection, Jewish practice disposes these individuals to assess their behavior and desire actions deemed good, and thus to evaluate society's activities and combat obstacles to human flourishing—to evaluate society's works and act on the results of such reflection, asking whether economic and aesthetic shifts impede or promote the pursuit of perfection, and introducing corrections to eliminate harmful conditions such as economic inequality and civil "war." Jewish practice can cultivate

the emergence of Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving society—citizens who will strive to ensure that changes in social life promote perfection and social accord, rather than corruption and civic strife. Jewish practice can foster "the felicity of nation" by addressing an ethico-political danger grounded in social history—the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony.

I wish to avoid any confusion. My claim is neither that Mendelssohn expects most readers of *Jerusalem* to recognize his reliance on the *Biur*, nor that he expects most readers of *Jerusalem* to understand how Jewish practice promotes national felicity; indeed, as we have seen, insofar as *Jerusalem* is directed at an audience that includes many non-Jewish readers, Mendelssohn has reasons to hint at, but avoid discussing in detail, the social relevance of Jewish practice.[79] My claim, rather, is that Mendelssohn intends for *Jerusalem*'s readers to see Judaism as possessing social relevance, and that he sees himself as entitled to advance this claim because of an argument he formulates in his Hebrew commentary. My claim is that we should read *Jerusalem* as alluding to an idea developed in the *Biur*—that Mendelssohn repeats a conclusion which he has worked out to his own satisfaction, but omits the reasoning which would require an elaborate discussion. If Mendelssohn writes *Jerusalem* having already developed an account of the link between Jewish practice and collective felicity, and if he affirms elements of this account and draws on the *Biur* during the years surrounding *Jerusalem*'s composition, then the most compelling conclusion is that the *Biur*'s position stands behind *Jerusalem*'s remarks.

Of course, at least three types of concerns might now emerge. Some readers might worry about using the conclusion of the *Biur* on Exodus to reconstruct *Jerusalem*'s views on Jewish practice. Insofar as the *Biur* is concerned primarily with the tabernacle and devotes only one sentence to Jewish practice as a whole, is it plausible to treat this text as the key to *Jerusalem*'s

account of Jewish law? Is it plausible to derive Mendelssohn's views on Jewish practice from a passage that accords only a few words to this topic? Other readers, in turn, might worry less about whether we are entitled to treat the *Biur* as the key to *Jerusalem*'s position, and more about whether my reading of the former undermines my approach to the latter. If I have shown that Mendelssohn is willing, when writing the *Biur*, to explicate a specifically Jewish approach to civic involvement, is it plausible to suggest that he might be worried, when writing *Jerusalem*, about emphasizing Jewish social distinctiveness? Finally, some readers might worry about whether my interpretation coheres with other Mendelssohnian statements. For example, readers might note, the 1761 *Logical Terms* seems to deny Judaism's political relevance, insisting that "the Torah which Moses commanded…offers neither assistance nor benefit for the guidance of the state as long as Israel is a sheep scattered among the nations."[80] In light of this statement, can we take the *Biur* and *Jerusalem* to ascribe political significance to Jewish practice? If Mendelssohn seems to deny Judaism's political relevance, can we take him to affirm Judaism's contribution to civic order?

These objections are not compelling. Although the conclusion of the *Biur* on Exodus mentions Jewish practice in only one sentence, there are strong reasons for drawing on this passage to reconstruct Mendelssohn's views. On one level, we have grounds for suspecting that *any* claim advanced here might play an important role in his thought, for—as noted above —he goes out his way to persuade readers to accept this text's conclusions, and thus seems to ascribe considerable importance to this passage's claims.[81] Moreover, even though this text mentions Jewish practice in only one sentence, presenting a claim about this topic seems to be one of this passage's central goals. As we have seen, Mendelssohn employs language that leaves readers with the impression that they have been introduced to a theory of Jewish practice, for he selects

terms that he would have expected some readers to recognize as referring to Jewish practice as a whole—terms that pre-modern Jewish sources frequently use to denote Jewish law, and that the *Biur* itself identifies as referring to precisely that system. Similarly, Mendelssohn structures this passage in a way that presents Jewish practice as a central focus, for he omits any mention of the tabernacle from his final paragraph,[82] devotes his final full sentence to God's "laws,"[83] and thus creates the impression that the account of the tabernacle is a prelude to a broader claim—that he offers an interpretation of the tabernacle to illuminate Jewish practice as a whole. It seems to me, then, that the textual evidence not merely permits, but actually recommends, emphasizing this section of the *Biur*. If a central goal of this passage is to advance a claim about Jewish practice, and if Mendelssohn ascribes considerable importance to this section of the *Biur*, then we *should* emphasize this text when exploring *Jerusalem*'s account of the "living script."

The additional objections are also unpersuasive. When I suggested that Mendelssohn might be worried about emphasizing Jewish social distinctiveness in *Jerusalem*, I was raising this possibility in light of the nature of *Jerusalem*'s audience—in light of the fact that *Jerusalem* is directed, to a significant extent, at non-Jewish readers who might react with suspicion to an argument about the distinctive nature of Jewish civic involvement. My reading of the *Biur* does not undermine this suggestion, for—as noted in my introduction—this commentary is directed primarily at a Jewish audience,[84] and thus might constitute a space in which Mendelssohn can elaborate on claims merely hinted at in writings for non-Jewish readers. Moreover, when Mendelssohn suggests that "the Torah…offers neither assistance nor benefit for the guidance of the state," he explains he is using the final phrase—"the guidance of the state"—to refer to tasks associated with the German term "*Polizei* [policing]," such as the state's establishment of "justice" and protection of "safety."[85] Mendelssohn's point, then, is not that Judaism lacks *all*

political relevance, but rather that Judaism lacks a s*pecific* type of political relevance. He means that "as long as Israel is…among the nations," the state's involvement in "policing" should not be dictated by the "Torah which Moses commanded"—that when Jews lack their own polity, they should not recommend the use of God's revealed laws as guidelines for state policy. Mendelssohn advances a view that is compatible with the position I ascribe to the *Biur* and *Jerusalem*, for I see no contradiction between denying that Jewish law should determine the details of state policy, and affirming that this law can foster harmony when enacted by citizens.

Interpretive Progress and Lingering Uncertainty

I began this dissertation by expressing uncertainty regarding the prospects for explicating *Jerusalem*'s account of Jewish practice. Chapters 2 and 3 have made significant progress towards dispelling this worry, for they have shown that we can reconstruct crucial dimensions of this account. Mendelssohn, we have learned, is advancing claims about perils linked to philosophical and social history. He holds that Jewish practice can address the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems, and the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony.

My next chapter will turn to the third challenge confronting readers of *Jerusalem*: the challenge of explicating Mendelssohn's account of the grounds on which Jewish practice remains binding. Mendelssohn, I will argue, seeks to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing a textual danger grounded in the study of history—the danger that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the scriptural basis of Jewish law. He seeks not only to present Jewish practice as a safeguard against perils grounded in historical change, but also to defend Jewish practice against challenges grounded in historical knowledge.

[1] See pages 48-49 of Chapter 1.

[2] See pages 13-14 in this dissertation's introduction.

[3] Mendelssohn's ethics has not been a central object of scholarly focus. He has not typically been described as an important theorist of *Jewish ethics*:, e.g., the relatively brief treatment of his ethical thought in Fritz Bamberger, "Mendelssohn's Concept of Judaism," trans. Eva Jospe, in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, 343-360; Guttmann, "Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*," 361-386; Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew*, 11-56; Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn's Concept of Judaism," 234-248. Two exceptions are Marvin Fox, "Law and Ethics in Modern Jewish Philosophy: The Case of Moses Mendelssohn," *American Academy for Jewish Research* 43 (1976): 1-13; Gilon, *Kohelet Mussar*. Similarly, readers concerned with the history of German philosophy have not typically classified Mendelssohn as an important *moral philosopher*, focusing instead on his work in fields such as metaphysics and aesthetics; indeed, one influential commentator goes so far as to claim that "Mendelssohn wrote little on moral philosophy, and what he said has little or no originality" (Beck, *Early German Philosophy*, 329). Altmann devotes more space to ethics, but nevertheless focuses primarily on Mendelssohn's metaphysics: see, e.g., *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften*, as well as the essays in *Die trostvolle Aufklärung*.

Fortunately, scholars have recently devoted increasing attention to Mendelssohn's ethics. See, e.g., Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 45-68, 99-111, 199-207, et al.; Albrecht, "Überlegungen zu einer Entwicklungsgeschichte der Ethik Mendelssohns," in *Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit*, 43-60; Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 15-18, et al.; Harvey, "Mendelssohn and Maimon," 185-192; Erlewine, *Monotheism and Tolerance*, 43-81; Gottlieb, "Aesthetics and the Infinite," 326-353; Pollok, *Facetten des Menschen*. Issues relating Mendelssohn's ethics also emerge in Beiser, *Diotima's Children*,196-243.

[4] See note 84 and page 53 in Chapter 1.

[5] Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 297-300/2:318-321.

[6] Ibid., 296-299/2:317-320; see also *Biur* on Genesis 2:9, in 15.2:23. A comprehensive treatment of Mendelssohn's conception of the "good" would have to consider additional issues, such as his account of how phenomena other than actions count as good; his views on the distinction between "useful" and intrinsic goods (see, e.g., *Ueber die Grundsätze*, 6.1:130-133); and his belief that just as "good" actions promote the cultivation of faculties, so too do good actions emerge from cultivated *Kräfte* (see, e.g., *Biur* on Genesis 2:9, in 15.2:23). However, these issues lie beyond the scope of this chapter, which seeks not to provide a comprehensive account of Mendelssohn's ethics, but rather to illuminate his claims about national felicity.

[7] For Mendelssohn's views on sacrificing one's life for the state, see Mendelssohn, *Phädon*, 128-138/3.1:105-118. For his views on the evil of suicide, see "On Sentiments," in *Philosophical Writings*, 55-70, 93-95; for the German, see *Über die Empfindungen*, in *JubA*, 1:287-303, 328-330. I have outlined only one of Mendelssohn's arguments against suicide.

[8] While I know of no text in which Mendelssohn explicitly applies the terms "good" and "evil" to economic pursuits, the views outlined in the body of this chapter emerge clearly from his writings: see the texts cited in note 86 in Chapter 1, as well as Mendelssohn, "To Enlighten," 313-314/6.1:115-116. For texts that worry about economic pursuits impeding cultivation by rendering future striving superfluous, see the passages cited in note 86 in Chapter 1 from the Hennings letter and *Ueber die beste Staatsverfassung*. For a text that worries about economic pursuits—more precisely, the drive to acquire wealth—acquiring so high a degree of importance

in our mind that they displace other activities, render us less perfect, and thus count as "vile" rather than "virtuous," see Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 296/2:316-317.

[9] While some dimensions of Mendelssohn's ethics evolve over time, he affirms the position outlined here—with some changes in terminology and detail—throughout his career. For example, the position outlined in the body of my chapter already appears in Mendelssohn's early *Rhapsody*, is affirmed with only a few changes several years later in the *Essay*, and reappears—largely unchanged—in the *Biur* on Genesis 2:9. Indeed, other than the *Essay*'s focus on "approval" (see the next paragraph), the key differences between these texts seem to involve vocabulary, with *Rhapsody* and the *Essay* speaking about "reason" or the "intellect," and with the *Biur* referring to the "faculty of cognition"; the explicit use of the term "impulses" also drops out after *Rhapsody*, although the *Essay* and *Biur* continue to affirm the idea to which this term refers (namely, the idea that cognition generates forces which contend with other drives and which, if sufficiently strong, shape our desires). See Mendelssohn, "Rhapsody, or additions to the Letters on sentiments," in *Philosophical Writings*, 154-168; for the German, see *Rhapsodie, oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen*, in *JubA*, 1:408-424; further references will follow the format of Mendelssohn, "Rhapsody," English/German. Cp. this position to "On Evidence," 301-306/2:322-330; *Biur* on Genesis 2:9, in 15.2:23.

The key substantive change in Mendelssohn's position is his introduction of a faculty of approval in the mid-1770s, a move that builds on the *Essay*'s suggestion that "approval" is involved in the transition from knowledge to desire. See, e.g., "On the Ability," 309-310/3.1:276-277; cp. to *Morgenstunden*, 3.2:61-65. Nevertheless, this development in Mendelssohn's view does not undermine my presentation of his position, for—as the texts I have just cited indicate—he continues to treat the transition from cognition to desire as the crucial factor in shaping action, and he continues to understand this transition as one which involves the process described here—namely, the relation between cognitive forces and competing inclinations. Moreover, he presents his theory of action in the *Biur* without reference to the faculty of approval (even though he has developed the idea of such a faculty by the time he composes this text), indicating that he takes the basic contours of his position to be explicable without reference to this capacity.

[10] Mendelssohn, "Rhapsody," 165-166/1:420-422. I have slightly altered Dahlstrom's translation. For Mendelssohn's account of other ways in we which might strive to ensure that cognitive judgments shape desire, see 166-168/1:422-424; "On Evidence," 305-306/2:326-329.

[11] I leave aside, as beyond the scope of this chapter, Mendelssohn's views on other ways in which we might come to act in a way that cognition deems good.

[12] Mendelssohn uses the German *Wohnung* ("dwelling") to denote this structure, described in the Bible as a *mishkan*: see Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 25:9, in *JubA*, 16:243; Exodus 26:1, in *JubA*, 16:255; Exodus 38:21, in *JubA*, 16:384, et al. I will use the more common "tabernacle" to avoid confusion—to ensure an easy identification of the relevant structure

[13] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 118-119/8:184-185. I have slightly altered Arkush's translation. On the sections of this passage that I have omitted, see pages 46-47 in Chapter 1.

[14] *Jerusalem* also refers to "public…felicity." See page 47 in Chapter 1.

[15] See pages 49-52 in Chapter 1.

[16] On the audience and context, see note 62 in my introduction and page 34 in Chapter 1.

[17] Another example is an essay to which Mendelssohn publishes a response: Michaelis, "Arguments Against Dohm (1782)," trans. L. Sachs, in *The Jew in the Modern World*, 42-44.

[18] See Cranz, "The Search," 63-65/8:83-85.

[19] For example, Mendelssohn might worry that fully explicating his argument would require an extensive digression that would distract attention from his other claims. Indeed, as we will see, the position I end up taking him to have in mind is a position that becomes clear only after we scrutinize his views on the good, self-cultivation, and the development of societies.

[20] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in *JubA*, 16:405-407. On 1779-1781 as the time during which the *Biur* on Exodus is written, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 405-408.

[21] Beyond a passing reference by Erlin (Erlin, "Reluctant Modernism," 100), this text has received little attention:

(a) Sandler devotes two paragraphs to this passage, outlining elements of Mendelssohn's views (and hinting at a link to virtue theory), but saying little about the issues I emphasize—about the idea that the tabernacle and Jewish practice possess ethical and political relevance, and about the historical dimensions of this argument. Moreover, Sandler does not connect this text to *Jerusalem*'s comments on national felicity. See Sandler, *Habiur Latorah*, 110-111.

(b) Hilfrich discusses this text in order to reconstruct Mendelssohn's conception of "culture." However, she neither focuses on the issues of ethical and political cultivation discussed in my chapter, nor reconstructs the details of Mendelssohn's reasoning; moreover, like Sandler, she does not connect this section of the *Biur* to *Jerusalem*'s comments on national felicity. See Hilfrich, "'Cultur ist ein Fremdling in der Sprache': zu Moses Mendelssohns Kulturbegriff," in *Arche Noah: Die Idee der "Kultur" im deutsch-jüdischen Diskurs*, ed. Bernhard Greiner and Christoph Schmidt (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2002), 38-48.

(c) Devoting one and a half paragraphs (and some additional sentences) to this text, Sorkin anticipates a key dimension of my analysis, writing that Mendelssohn takes Jewish law to serve as a "bulwark against the evils that can potentially emerge from the society that is necessary to man's true vocation." However, Sorkin leaves aside central elements of Mendelssohn's argument, discussing neither the process of ethical orientation fostered by Jewish practice, nor the role of the biblical tabernacle in Mendelssohn's reasoning; moreover, while correctly noting Mendelssohn's worry about the emergence of harmful luxury, Sorkin does not identify the chief concern that motivates Mendelssohn in this text (a concern with "excess," understood not simply as luxury, but rather as an imbalance or lack of harmony among society's practical endeavors). Moreover, beyond omitting these important dimensions of Mendelssohn's argument, Sorkin devotes little attention to reconstructing the details of Mendelssohn's reasoning—for example, to determining *how* Jewish practice serves as a "bulwark" against various social "evils." Finally, Sorkin neither makes it clear whether Jewish law plays this role in modernity, nor develops the connection of this text to *Jerusalem*'s comments on collective felicity. That is, while he mentions in passing that *Jerusalem*'s "idea" that "Jews were a priestly people by virtue of the Law…echoed" the "peroration to the Book of Exodus," he is quoting lines in *Jerusalem* other than those which invoke collective felicity, and he neither explicitly suggests that Mendelssohn intends for *Jerusalem* to allude to the *Biur*, nor discusses what I take to be the central point behind Mendelssohn's argument—the claim that Jewish practice promotes the well-being of society as a whole. Instead, Sorkin takes Mendelssohn to present "the Law" as "designed to insulate the Jews from the vices of society"; in effect, rather than suggesting that Mendelssohn takes Jewish practice to cultivate Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving society, Sorkin suggests that Mendelssohn takes Jewish practice to cultivate Jewish individuals who are protected from society. See Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 61-62, 79-80, 132.

(d) Heinemann correctly takes Mendelssohn to be presenting an orientation towards the divine as a way of combating the dangers arising from society; indeed, Heinemann hints, albeit only in passing, at a theme which will figure prominently in my interpretation (the relevance of the tabernacle for both reason and other capacities). Yet like the other scholars discussed above, Heinemann leaves aside crucial dimensions and details of Mendelssohn's argument. For example, Heinemann does not discuss Mendelssohn's concern with the cultivation of social assessment, devotes little attention to Mendelssohn's treatment of politics, fails to reconstruct the details of key lines of reasoning, and does not link this text to *Jerusalem*'s comments on national felicity. See Heinemann, *Ta'amei Hamitzvot*, 2:31-34.

[22] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in 16:405-406.

[23] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Hakdamah L'Megilat Kohelet*, in *JubA*, 14:153; *Biur* on Exodus 3:15, in *JubA*, 16:28; Exodus 20:2, in *JubA*, 16:187, et al. Indeed, he explicitly acknowledges this willingness to break with predecessors, writing that "I [either] determined my translation according to one of the earlier exegetes or turned aside from all of their opinions" (*Or Linitivah*, 14:243; this follows my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 198).

[24] Mendelssohn seems to be correct when he states that there is no explicit precedent for his argument. At least, neither I nor other readers of this passage have identified any precedent.

[25] Writing that "works of necessity" provide "nourishment, clothing, and dwelling" (Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in 16:406), the *Biur* seems to have in mind the specific activities I mention—e.g., the agriculture and cooking which provide nourishment.

[26] Ibid., 16:406.

[27] Mendelssohn writes that the tabernacle was constructed from "deeds in matters concerning the welfare [*tikun*] of the state and community [*hakibutz*]." A few lines earlier, in turn, he uses some of the same Hebrew terms and roots to describe his three types of works, describing these works as endeavors "without which the community [*hakibutz*] as a whole will not be preserved and its condition will not be properly improved [*y'tukan*]." Moreover, Mendelssohn uses a biblical designation for labors associated with the tabernacle—*m'lekhet harash v'hoshev*, first appearing in Exodus 35:35—as a designation for the "works" linked to a "properly" functioning "community." Mendelssohn's point, then, is that all three types of works were involved in building the tabernacle. See Ibid., 16:406.

[28] Ibid., 16:406-407.

[29] The "this" refers to the practice of ensuring that "all your deeds will be for the sake of heaven"—language Mendelssohn uses to refer to tabernacle-inspired reflection (Ibid., 16:407).

[30] Ibid. Since Mendelssohn is drawing on the language of Deuteronomy 29:18, I follow his rendering of the Hebrew. See notes 33-34 of this chapter.

[31] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Genesis 2:9, in 15.2:23; this follows my translation in "On Adam's Sin," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 208.

[32] Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 297-300/2:318-321.

[33] More precisely, Mendelssohn borrows and supplements the language of this verse, translated in the *Biur* as "if I go after the arrogance of my heart and pile gluttony upon thirst" (Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Deuteronomy 29:18, in *JubA*, 18:496).

[34] Ibid. The manner in which the *Biur* alters the biblical language also suggests a concern for corrupt desires, for Hebrew root *ZNH*—introduced into the *Biur* on Exodus, but absent from Deuteronomy 29:18—is often translated by Mendelssohn with variations of the German *huren* or "to whore" (see *Biur* on Genesis 34:31, in *JubA*, 15.2:393; Genesis 38:15, in *JubA*, 15.2:445;

Deuteronomy 23:19, in *JubA*, 18:453). Moreover, the *Biur* defines this term as the directing of "love to that which is not proper" (see *Biur* on Deuteronomy 31:16, in *JubA*, 18:507; on this section of the *Biur* as composed by Mendelssohn, see Sandler, *Habiur Latorah*, 153).

[35] Mendelssohn, "Rhapsody," 165/1:421. I slightly alter Dahlstrom's translation.

[36] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in 16:407.

[37] I translate *motar* as "excess" rather than as "luxury" because—as we will see—Mendelssohn's concern lies with any social condition in which we "burst forth beyond the limit in" one type of "work"—with any social condition in which one type of cultural activity becomes too widespread, rather than with only those social conditions in which we produce items we often term "luxurious." See also the translation of this term in Hilfrich, "'Cultur,'" 45.

[38] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in 16:406.

[39] As we have seen, the "works" Mendelssohn sees as being introduced—economic and aesthetic pursuits such as agriculture, the production of metal goods, and painting—are activities that he sees as potential opportunities for self-perfection. See, e.g., page 49-52 in Chapter 1.

[40] When translating Genesis 30:13, Mendelssohn renders *oshri* as *meiner Glückseligkeit*, or "my felicity" (Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Genesis 30:13, in *JubA*, 15.2:320).

[41] As noted below, the *Biur* takes this balance to evolve: see page 134 of this chapter.

[42] It might seem as if the *Biur* also presents another argument. After claiming that the Israelites "would not be permitted to seek the excess," the *Biur* notes that they would be forbidden from "going after vanity," since "work which was not involved in the tabernacle is not considered to be 'work,'" and since "it was not proper for an Israelite man who worships the Eternal to engage in [such activity] and disturb his thinking with its vanities." Viewed as a separate argument, the idea would be that by directing the Israelites to the activities involved in the tabernacle's construction, God portrayed *all other* endeavors as "not proper," and thus sought to ensure that the Israelites would perform *only* activities commanded by God—activities which presumably will not involve a corrupting excess, since God wishes for us to pursue perfection.

We should not read Mendelssohn in this manner. The *Biur* states that God was *not* attempting to restrict the Israelites to explicitly commanded activities, for Mendelssohn poses the following rhetorical question regarding the tabernacle and the prevention of excess: "why wasn't the command regarding this issued from the Blessed One in an explicit manner, permitting what was permitted to them and forbidding what was forbidden to them?" Moreover, if God meant to protect the children of Israel from "excess," it would not be sufficient to simply identify a range of permissible activities; after all, if avoiding "excess" involves preserving a balance between types of activities, then simply identifying types of activity as permissible would be inadequate, for such an identification would tell us little about the proper balance among these works.

[43] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in 16:407.

[44] The *Biur* acknowledges that this condition of flourishing ultimately came to an end, for "love of pleasure and status grew in the king and in the people: they broke through to the excess, and what happened to them happened, as is known from the books of our prophets" (Ibid.).

[45] The *Biur* connects *yirah* for God with *Ehrfurcht* or "reverence." See *Biur* on Exodus 1:21, in *JubA*, 16:9; Exodus 20:17, in *JubA*, 16:196; Deuteronomy 6:13, in *JubA*, 18:347.

[46] "At all times [*zu allen Zeiten*]" is Mendelssohn's most frequent rendering of this Hebrew (*kol hayamim*): see *Biur* on Deuteronomy 6:24, in *JubA*, 18:350; Deuteronomy 11:1, in *JubA*, 18:375; Deuteronomy 12:1, in *JubA*, 18:384; Deuteronomy 14:23, in *JubA*, 18:402; Deuteronomy 18:5, in *JubA*, 18:421; Deuteronomy 28:29-33, in *JubA*, 18:482-483.

[47] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in 16:407.

[48] Indeed, I would note that Hilfrich and Sorkin also treat these lines as a Mendelssohnian composition (Sandler and Heinemann do not address this issue).

[49] Let us begin with the conclusions composed by Mendelssohn: the conclusion of the *Biur*'s introduction, and the conclusion of the *Biur* on Deuteronomy (see Sandler, *Habiur Latorah*, 153). The final lines of the *Biur*'s introduction employ some traditional phrases, but neither include the references to God's laws, nor follow the liturgical structure, present in the concluding lines on Exodus. Instead, Mendelssohn closes with a phrase that echoes the closing of *Jerusalem* (composed during the same period): "love truth and peace" (Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:267). The *Biur* on Deuteronomy does not include a formal conclusion, instead offering a reading of a specific phrase (*Biur* on Deuteronomy 33:29, in *JubA*, 18:536).

Turning to the concluding sections composed by Mendelssohn's assistants, we can note that the commentary on Genesis also lacks a formal conclusion: see *Biur* on Genesis 50:26, in *JubA*, 15.2:600. The commentaries on Leviticus and Numbers, in turn, conclude with statements that differ considerably from the concluding lines of the *Biur* on Exodus. More precisely, while the concluding lines of the *Biur* on Exodus focus on the value of God's laws, the concluding lines of the *Biur* on Leviticus and Numbers express a hope to understand God's words—a hope that "the Eternal might illuminate our eyes with the light of His Torah," and that "we might look upon His redemption" (conclusion of *Biur* on Leviticus, in *JubA*, 17:441), as well as a hope that "God will grant us the merit to grasp the mysteries of His Torah," and that "we shall not stop thinking about it all the days of our lives" (conclusion of *Biur* on Numbers, in *JubA*, 18:290).

[50] See Breuer and Sorkin, "Moses Mendelssohn's First Hebrew Publication," 4. Breuer and Sorkin focus on a specific type of combination—namely, combinations of biblical phrases.

[51] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:243; I have slightly altered my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 197.

[52] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 20:2, in 16:187-188; I have very slightly altered my translation in "On Commanding Belief in God, Jewish Election, and Idolatry," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 225-226.

[53] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Deuteronomy 6:5, in *JubA*, 18:346; Deuteronomy 6:13, in 18:347-348. More precisely, the *Biur* on verse 5 describes the requirement to "love the Eternal your God" as a requirement to "rejoice in the recognition of His perfection"—to rejoice on the basis of having contemplated God's goodness. The *Biur* on verse 13 then suggests that "reverence" emerges once we have formed this "idea of the greatness, honor, and perfection" of God—once we have engaged in the contemplation which has already generated love. On Mendelssohn as the author of these passages, see Sandler, *Habiur Latorah*, 153.

[54] Mendelssohn, *Kohelet Musar*, in *JubA*, 14:14.

[55] On the translation of *yirah* as *Ehrfurcht*, see Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 1:21, in 16:9; see also the additional sources cited in note 145 above. On *Ehrfurcht* as arising from our conception of an entity, see Mendelssohn, "On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences," in *Philosophical Writings*, 170n; for the German, see *Ueber die Hauptgrundsätze der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*, in *JubA*, 1:428n. Further references will follow the format of Mendelssohn, "On the Main Principles," English/German.

[56] See Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in 16:406-407.

[57] The *Biur* draws on Exodus 20:17, in which God places "reverence for Him upon your countenance" (Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 20:17, in 16:196). See also page 144 below.

[58] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:232; this follows my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 193.

[59] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 15, in *JubA*, 16:126; this follows my translation in "On Biblical Poetry," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 213.

[60] Other examples include Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:212-213, 226-227, 243; *Biur* on Exodus 20:2, in 16:186-188. The last example is particularly striking, for it uses the third-person plural when referring primarily to the ancient Israelites, and the first-person plural when referring a group that includes not only the ancient Israelites but also their modern descendants.

[61] For example, the traditional liturgy seems to use "Torah [*Torah*], commandments, decrees [*hukim*], and laws [*umishpatim*]" to refer to the laws revealed to Jews by God. See *The Daily Prayer Book*, trans. Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 2002), 191. More strikingly, Maimonides uses *Torah* to refer to the body of Jewish law as a whole, and then identifies *hukim* and *mishpatim* as the two types of norms this system includes—with *hukim* referring to laws whose purpose "is not clear to the multitude," and with *mishpatim* referring to laws whose purpose "is clear to the multitude." See Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3.26 (2.506-507); references are to part and chapter (parentheses indicates volume and page in Pines's edition). For the medieval Hebrew version of the *Guide* that Mendelssohn uses, see *Moreh Hanevukhim*, trans. Samuel Ibn Tibbon (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2000), 465.

[62] Maimonides's best known presentation of this view appears in his legal code, which suggests that *ahavah* and *yirah* arise from reflection on God—from reflection generated by the study of physics and metaphysics. See Maimonides, "Basic Principles of the Torah," 2:1-2, in *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Twersky (New York: Berhman House, 1972), 45; for the Hebrew, see *Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* 2:1-2, in *Sefer Hamada* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1993), 9.

[63] I follow Mendelssohn's rendering: see Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 20:17, in 16:196.

[64] For Mendelssohn's long-standing engagement with Rousseau, see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Sendschreiben,* 2:81-109. Indeed, Heinemann links the conclusion of the Biur on Exodus to other themes from Rousseau's writings (Heinemann, *Ta'amei Hamitzvot*, 2:32).

[65] See, e.g., Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*; *Discourse on Political Economy*; and *On the Social Contract*, in *The Basic Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987). On whether Rousseau discusses antiquity merely to criticize modernity, or also to offer a model for emulation, see Judith N. Shklar, "Rousseau's Two Models: Sparta and the Age of Gold," *Political Science Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (1966): 25-51; John P. McCormick, "Rousseau's Rome and the Repudiation of Populist Republicanism," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2007): 3-27.

[66] For Mendelssohn's engagement with Winckelmann, see, e.g., Mendelssohn, "On the Main Principles," 182-183/1:442-443.

[67] This line is quoted in Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 164; see also Johann Joachim Winckelmann, "Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks"; *The History of Ancient Art*, in *Essays on the Philosophy and History of Art*, ed. and trans. Bowman, 3 vols. (Bristol: Thoemmes, 2001). On Winckelmann's aesthetics, see Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 156-195.

[68] Some early modern thinkers whose work Mendelssohn knows turn to an aspect of antiquity related to the tabernacle: the Hebrew state. See, e.g., Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). Turns to antiquity also appear in later thinkers, including

figures Mendelsohn influences: see Philip J. Kain, *Schiller, Hegel, and Marx: State, Society, and the Aesthetic Ideal of Ancient Greece*, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Ideas 4 (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982); see also Erlin, "Reluctant Modernism," 101.

[69] See pages 134-135 of this chapter.

[70] Mendelssohn, "Enlightenment," 316-317/6.1:118-119. I have slightly altered Dahlstrom's translation; for the sake of consistency with respect to spelling, I have also altered Mendelssohn's *Nationalglükseligkeit* to read *Nationalglückseligkeit*.

[71] Hilfrich also links the *Biur* to the *Enlightenment* essay: see Hilfrich, "'Cultur,'" 26-48.

[72] See pages 91-94 in Chapter 2.

[73] On the Lavater affair, see pages 4-5 of my introduction. On *Jerusalem*'s use of arguments developed during this controversy, see Altmann, "Commentary," 209.

[74] For *Jerusalem*'s use of *der Ewige*, see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* 98/8:165, 100/8:166-167, 120/8:185, et al. Mendelssohn's widely discussed argument for translating the Tetragrammaton as *der Ewige* appears in *Biur* on Exodus 3:14-15, in *JubA*, 16:26-28.

[75] Cp. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 118/8:183 to *Biur* on Exodus 3:13, in *JubA*, 16:26. The *Biur* explores various issues left unclear in *Jerusalem*, including the content, limit, and causes of Israelite "insensitivity"—the specific "truths" to which Israelites became "insensitive," the preservation of this knowledge among some individuals, and the factors leading to ignorance. On the medieval background, see Kaplan, "Maimonides and Mendelssohn," 428, 433-434.

[76] Cp. Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 120/8:185-186 to *Biur* on Exodus 32, in *JubA*, 16:327-341. The *Biur* discusses a variety of issues left unexplored in *Jerusalem*, including the antecedents, basis, and details of Mendelssohn's position—the medieval sources on which Mendelssohn draws, the textual grounding of his interpretation, and the details of the process that led to the Israelites to sin in the manner he describes. See also Altmann, "Commentary," 227.

[77] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 8:115/8:181.

[78] See Kaplan, "Maimonides and Mendelssohn," 430-431. Kaplan is referring to Mendelssohn's commentary on Exodus 20:2, which develops the position outlined in the body of this chapter by discussing the Jewish legal concept of *shittuf*—of "associating" God with another being in worship. See Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 20:2, in 16:186-187; on the scope and history of the concept of *shittuf*, see Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 34-36, 162-164.

[79] See pages 128-129 of this chapter.

[80] Mendelssohn, *Biur Milot Hahigayon*, 14:117.

[81] See page 130 of this chapter.

[82] The *Biur* briefly alludes to an element of the tabernacle—its "tent curtain"—but avoids using the word "tabernacle" itself (Mendelssohn, *Biur* on conclusion of Exodus, in 16:407).

[83] I am not treating the concluding "Amen Selah" as a "full sentence."

[84] See pages 12-13 in this dissertation's introduction.

[85] Mendelssohn, *Biur Milot Hahigayon*, 14:115. While Mendelssohn does not explicitly claim that *Polizei* refers to the *state's* establishment of "justice and "safety," this point emerges from his equation of *Polizei* with "the guidance of the state [*hamedina*]": on the use of *medina* to refer to "the state" in Hebrew philosophy, see Klatzkin, *Thesaurus philosophicus*, 2:149-150. Moreover, by the eighteenth century, *Polizei* refers specifically to activities of state institutions: see Franz-Ludwig Knemeyer, "Polizei," *Economy and Society* 9, no. 1 (1980): 172-196.

Chapter 4
"The Strict Obedience We Owe": Jewish Practice and the Study of History

Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation have begun to dispel the confusion generated by our initial encounter with *Jerusalem*, clarifying two of Mendelssohn's perplexing claims regarding the value of Jewish practice. Nevertheless, insofar as these chapters have done little to illuminate his claims regarding the authority of the norms governing this system, it remains unclear how we should assess *Jerusalem*'s insistence that these norms are enduringly binding—that modern Jews have not been freed "from the strict obedience we owe to the law." More precisely, it remains unclear whether Mendelssohn outlines the grounds on which Jewish practice remains binding despite challenges posed by the study of history—despite challenges arising from developments in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biblical scholarship. We are thus left with an interpretive question that emerged in Chapter 1. Does Mendelssohn seek to substantively engage threatening developments in the study of history? Does he strive to provide what he would see as adequate grounds for rejecting attacks emerging from biblical scholarship?

Chapter 4 will explore this issue. More specifically, I will dispute the view, held by some readers, that Mendelssohn fails to engage these threats in a substantive manner. Mendelssohn, I will argue, seeks to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing a textual danger grounded in the study of history—the danger that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the scriptural basis of Jewish law. As we saw in Chapter 1, he worries that influential trends in what we called the historical study of Scripture—attacks on the version of the Hebrew Bible preserved by the Jewish tradition, and on rabbinic accounts of this text's meaning—might deprive the norms governing Jewish practice of the scriptural basis crucial to their authority.[1] The central claim of this chapter, in turn, is that Mendelssohn seeks to address these challenges by mobilizing for the defense of Jewish law an epistemological model

developed to secure Christian doctrine. Implicitly relying on an epistemology deployed by thinkers such as Leibniz to defend the Christian mysteries, Mendelssohn holds that an affirmation of Jewish practice's scriptural basis depends on a prior assessment of Jewish life, and that this assessment permits us to dismiss challenges posed by the historical study of Scripture. Mendelssohn, I will argue, strives to provide what he would see as a substantive defense of the binding nature of Jewish practice—to show that biblical scholarship has not deprived the norms governing Jewish practice of the scriptural basis crucial to their authority.

Three preliminary remarks are in order. The first involves this chapter's goals. My aim is not to determine whether twenty-first century readers should be persuaded by Mendelssohn's reasoning.[2] Rather, my goal is to show that whether or not we read him as articulating a *compelling* argument, we should read him as attempting to offer a *substantive* argument—an argument which he would take to provide sufficient grounds for rejecting the claims of biblical scholars, rather than an argument which he would see as conceptually inadequate but capable of diverting attention from these threats. What is at stake here, in other words, is not our assessment of Mendelssohn's success, but rather our understanding of his aims. What is at stake is a choice between two interpretations of his work: an interpretation which suggests that his primary goal is to divert attention from serious challenges, and an interpretation which suggests that his primary goal is to provide adequate grounds for rejecting these challenges.[3]

My second remark involves the scope of my analysis. Chapter 1 identified additional intellectual developments that Mendelssohn *might* have seen as posing a threat to Jewish practice, including the critique of revelation associated with figures such as Spinoza. As I indicated in my notes, however, Mendelssohn offers few explicit remarks about these additional challenges, making it difficult to assess his attitude towards such threats—to determine whether

his silence reflects an inability to address such concerns, a belief that these challenges are more apparent than real, or some other factor entirely.[4] In the following pages, then, I will focus on intellectual developments that we *know* Mendelssohn takes to threaten the binding nature of Jewish practice: attacks on the version of the Bible used by Jews, and on rabbinic exegetical claims. For example, insofar as the role of Spinozist claims in Mendelssohn's thought remains a matter of debate, I will postpone a discussion of these claims until the middle of my next chapter, which will highlight a variety of ways in Mendelssohn might be read as addressing attacks deriving from Spinoza's work.[5]

My final remark involves the character of Mendelssohn's arguments. The philosopher who emerged from Chapters 2 and 3 might seem to exhibit striking points of contact with influential trends in contemporary thought, including developments associated with Alasdair MacIntyre, Jeffrey Stout, Catherine Bell, and Talal Asad.[6] By contrast, the Mendelssohn who will emerge from this chapter might seem to be a very different thinker—a thinker whose rejection of attacks on the Masoretic text distinguishes him from many modern readers, and whose interest in topics such as biblical vocalization has little analogue in contemporary philosophy.[7] Chapter 5 will consider the implications of this contrast, arguing that my analysis sheds light on the extent to which Mendelssohn should be treated as a traditionalist figure.[8] For now, however, I wish to emphasize that the results of Chapters 2-4 follow from a consistent interpretive approach—from a close reading of Mendelssohn's texts in their historical and philosophical context. Just as Chapter 2 read his work against the backdrop of early modern concerns about philosophical "changeability," and just as Chapter 3 read his work against the backdrop of pre-modern and Enlightenment sources, so too will this chapter read his work in light of early modern religious epistemology and biblical scholarship.

We can now turn to the issues at the heart of this chapter. After reviewing my analysis in Chapter 1, I will reconstruct the arguments with which Mendelssohn responds to developments in biblical scholarship. I will then show that this response echoes an epistemology associated with thinkers such as Leibniz, who is deeply interested in exploring potential grounds for affirming the Christian mysteries. I will conclude by arguing that Mendelssohn appropriates this Leibnizian model to develop what he would see as a substantive response to the threats he confronts. Drawing on early modern Christian thought, he seeks to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing a textual danger grounded in the study of history—the danger that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the scriptural basis of Jewish law.

A Review

As we saw in Chapter 1, when *Jerusalem* claims that Jews "have not been freed" "from the strict obedience" they "owe to the law," Mendelssohn is invoking a position which is fleshed out elsewhere in that treatise, as well as in Hebrew and German works written during the years surrounding the text's composition. His view, we saw, is that many norms governing Jewish practice are understood as commands endorsed by God, that it is this sanction by a divine lawgiver which renders these norms enduringly binding, and that it is the Bible's text which allows us to ascribe many of those norms to the deity. That is, he holds that norms which can be traced back to God's words in the Pentateuch can be seen as divinely endorsed and authoritative, and that many norms which govern Jewish practice can be taken to possess this scriptural basis —because they are explicitly outlined in, or rabbinically presented as derivable from, the words of the biblical text.[9] As Mendelssohn writes *Jerusalem*, then, he holds that the authority of norms governing Jewish practice depends on their explicit or rabbinically secured biblical basis.

The problem, we discovered, is that Mendelssohn's position relies on beliefs which he sees as under attack from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century study of history—from the historical study of the Bible, an approach which takes as its primary starting point an affirmation of the Bible's historically conditioned nature.[10] For Mendelssohn, if the authority of the norms governing Jewish practice rests on the scriptural basis of Jewish law, and in particular if these norms' status as binding divine commandments depends on a link to God's words in the Pentateuch, then it is crucial to hold that the version of the Bible which Jews possess accurately preserves those words—that this version is largely free from scribal errors and post-biblical insertions, since the existence of such corruptions would raise the possibility that laws traced back to this edition are not grounded in the Bible's actual text, and thus that such norms lack the scriptural basis which would establish their binding status. Even as he writes *Jerusalem*, however, Mendelssohn worries that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the reliability of the text used by Jews, for when such scholarship insists that the Bible is historically conditioned in the sense that its text has been corrupted over time, one of the targets is the version of Scripture preserved by the Jewish tradition—the Masoretic text, an edition which was finalized by editors known as the Masoretes between the sixth and tenth centuries, which advances claims regarding issues such as the Bible's vocalization and accents, and which is portrayed as deeply flawed by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars.[11] Mendelssohn's position thus rests on a belief—in the reliability of the Masoretic edition—which he worries is in serious danger. He recognizes that insofar as he takes the authority of Jewish practice to rest on the scriptural basis of Jewish law, he must affirm the belief, attacked by biblical scholarship, that Jews possess a reliable version of the Bible—that in tracing their laws to the Masoretic edition, Jews are tracing their laws to a version of Scripture that preserves the Bible's original text.

Moreover, just as Mendelssohn's position rests on a contested belief regarding the reliability of the Masoretic text, so too does his position rest on a disputed claim regarding the reliability of rabbinic exegesis. If the authority of norms governing Jewish practice rests on the scriptural basis of Jewish law, and more specifically on rabbinic claims that norms are derivable from the biblical text, then it is crucial to hold that rabbinic hermeneutics provides an accurate account of the Bible's message—that rabbinic interpretive claims identify meanings which we can plausibly treat as arising from the biblical text, since doubts regarding the rabbis' exegesis might lead us to reject their claims regarding the biblical derivability of Jewish law, and thus to conclude that key norms lack the biblical basis which establishes their status as binding divine precepts. As we saw, however, Mendelssohn worries that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biblical scholarship casts doubt upon the reliability of rabbinic exegesis, for when such scholarship insists that the Bible is historically conditioned in the sense that its meaning emerges from attending to its plain sense in its historical context, one conclusion which is drawn is that the rabbis of antiquity fail to meet this exegetical standard—that insofar as rabbinic interpreters often ascribe to the Bible layers of meaning which differ sharply from the text's plain sense, these interpreters cannot be treated as reliable guides to Scripture's message. Mendelssohn's position thus relies on a second belief—in the reliability of rabbinic exegesis—that he takes to be in jeopardy. He recognizes that insofar as he takes the authority of Jewish practice to rest on the scriptural basis of Jewish law, he must take the rabbinic interpretive claims outlining this basis to be worthy of acceptance, and he must therefore affirm the contested belief that the rabbis count as reliable interpreters—that the rabbis provide an accurate account of Scripture's meaning.

It is for these reasons that Chapter 1 left us in a state of interpretive uncertainty. When *Jerusalem* discusses the "obedience" Jews "owe" to Jewish law, Mendelssohn is linking the

authority of the norms governing Jewish practice to their biblical basis, arguing that if laws outlining Jewish practice can be traced to the Bible, these laws count as divine norms and remain enduringly binding. However, even as he advances this argument, he recognizes that the historical study of the Bible threatens to leave Jewish practice without this scriptural basis, portraying as unreliable both the Masoretic text to which laws are traced and the rabbinic exegesis by which they are derived. Chapter 1 thus left us wondering whether Mendelssohn seeks to substantively engage threatening developments in the study of history. Does he strive to provide what he sees as adequate grounds for rejecting attacks on the Masoretic text and rabbinic exegesis? Does he seek to address, in a serious manner, developments that might deprive the norms governing Jewish practice of the scriptural basis crucial to their authority?

The *Biur*, the Masoretes, and the Rabbis

The first step in addressing these questions is to explore the introduction to the *Biur*—the text, written during the years surrounding *Jerusalem*'s composition,[12] in which Mendelssohn offers his most extensive discussion of developments in the historical study of Scripture.[13] As we saw in Chapter 1, commentators remain divided regarding the nature of this discussion: while Sorkin expresses no doubts regarding the substantive nature of Mendelssohn's reasoning,[14] readers such as Breuer suggest that the *Biur*'s goal is less to provide "serious" reasons for rejecting the claims of biblical scholars, and more to divert "attention" from such claims by misrepresenting or ignoring key issues.[15] I will begin, then, by reconstructing Mendelssohn's reasoning. What claims does he advance about the Masoretic edition and rabbinic exegesis?

Recall, first, the *Biur*'s comments on scholars' willingness to attack the Masoretic text:[16]

> They treat the words of the Torah as a broken wall, before which each individual rises and which each individual treats as he desires…However, if this is plausible for Christian

> scholars and their students, it is not plausible for us, the house of Israel. For us, this Torah is an inheritance…to know what the Eternal our God has commanded us to study, teach, observe, and perform: it is our life and the length of our days. In order that our life not hang by the hairbreadth of reasoning and by the thread of reflection alone, our sages, may their memories be for a blessing, established the Masoretic text for us…so that we would not grope like blind men in the dark.[17]

As we saw, Mendelssohn worries that without the Masoretic text, "our life" would "hang by the hairbreadth of reasoning and by the thread of reflection," since "this Torah is an inheritance…to know what the Eternal our God has commanded"—that Jewish practice, without the Masoretic text, would lack a secure scriptural grounding, since "this" version of the Pentateuch has been taken to yield many of the norms governing Jewish "life." Mendelssohn then offers the following reason for rejecting attacks on the text "established" by the Masoretic "sages":

> Henceforth, we must neither move from their paved path nor weigh a path of life without proper scales and balances, based on the reasoning and conjecture of a grammarian or editor. We do not live from the mouth of such an individual, but rather according to what the Masoretes, whom we deem trustworthy [*hane'emanim etzleinu*], transmitted to us.[18]

For Mendelssohn, the term *ne'eman* refers to an individual whose statements should be accepted as "truth by means of authority [*auctoritate verum*]"[19]—whose statements possess a form of "authority," not fully described,[20] which justifies their acceptance. The contrast between the Masoretes taken to be *ne'emanim*, and a "grammarian or editor" who offers a "conjecture," is thus a contrast between individuals whose statements possess, and individuals whose hypotheses lack, authority that justifies assent. When Mendelssohn claims that "we do not live…from the mouth" of "a grammarian or editor, but rather according to what the Masoretes…transmitted to us," then, his point is that Masoretic declarations possess authority absent from scholarly "conjecture," and that this authority provides grounds for accepting the Masoretic edition's claims regarding the Bible's content. Mendelssohn, in other words, is appealing to authority in order to ground the affirmation of a contested belief—belief in the reliability of the Masoretic

text. He argues that if statements by the Masoretes possess authority which justifies assent, then we have grounds to accept the Masoretic edition's claims regarding issues such as Scripture's consonants and vowels, and we can treat this edition as presenting a reliable version of the Bible.

Beyond invoking authority, Mendelssohn also outlines a way in which it would be possible for his position to be correct—an account of a historical process which, had it occurred, would have resulted in a Masoretic edition that preserves the Bible's authentic text. In some passages, he writes as if he were describing the process by which Scripture *was* preserved—the actual process which resulted in the Masoretes having access to, and recording, the consonants, vocalization, and accents originally associated with the Bible. For example, he insists that the vocalization and accents endorsed by the Masoretic edition were part of the original Bible,[21] and that these features were preserved until the time of the Masoretes in the following manner:

> There is no doubt that Moses our master, peace be upon him, heard all the Torah's words from the mouth of the Almighty with…their vocalization and accents having been established…And he passed them along in a similar manner to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and thus did the chain of tradition continue generation after generation… [Elders] would not give the Holy Scripture to their sons or students, leaving them to read it in written form alone, as if it were a sealed book to them. Rather, [elders] would recite it before [their students] and repeat it with [these students]…until the matters would enter and be present in their hearts, like goads and nails that have been planted.[22]

Mendelssohn seems to be describing a process that resulted in a correspondence between the Masoretic text and the original Bible—a process that "no doubt" occurred, and that resulted in the Masoretes preserving the vocalization and accents originally associated with Scripture.

Elsewhere in the *Biur*'s introduction, however, Mendelssohn suggests that the historical process he describes is not one that *definitely* occurred, but rather one that *could have* occurred—a hypothetical scenario which, had it taken place, would explain the existence of a Masoretic text that preserves the authentic version of the Bible. Consider his account of the written "marks" that the Masoretes employ to indicate the Bible's vocalization and accents:

> Moses our master, peace be upon him, wrote the Holy Torah without any vocalization and accents. He made known, very clearly, the ways of reciting, the variation of syllables, the sounds, and the caesuras, but he did not write down the signs indicating these matters…He had a strong reason for acting in this way, for he did not want anyone to reflect on [the Torah's] commandments without the oral tradition…Nevertheless, even from that time, the signs were written down by type in a few books…It is possible that in that time, individuals would not write down, in the books which they wrote for themselves, all the vowels and accents on each and every letter as we do today, but rather [would write down the vowels and accents] only in a place of need…When [the Jews] were exiled to Babylonia, forgot their language, and left aside the Torah and its recitation, it is plausible that the vocalizations were also forgotten until Ezra arose and…restored the vocalizations and established them firmly…Yet the vocalizations became increasingly neglected and unknown, except to a small number of individuals—people of spiritual greatness…After the composition of the Talmud,[23] the Tiberian Masoretes,[24] or other individuals who knew them, saw that it was good to construct something like a fence and barrier for ways of proper recitation—by setting up marks and signs.[25]

Mendelssohn claims to outline a "possible" or "plausible" scenario that would have resulted in a reliable Masoretic text—a scenario that could have occurred, and that would have resulted in the Masoretes preserving the original "marks" used to indicate the "vocalization and accents." Indeed, he offers a similar claim regarding another feature of the Masoretic text—the *ketiv-keri* system, which presents multiple renderings of various words by including one version (the *ketiv*) in the body of the Bible and an alternate version (the *keri*) in the margins and additional notes:[26]

> Moses our master, peace be upon him, wrote only the *ketiv* in his Torah, but when he transmitted the Torah to Joshua, he would recite it before him according to the *keri*, and made known to him the secret of the variation between them…Behold, it is plausible that even in the earliest days, individuals grew fearful of forgetfulness, lest they forget the variations which they heard from the mouths of their teachers…To save themselves from such an occurrence, wrote down the *keri* on the margins of the books in their possession, setting up marks for the aid of memory alone…These are the notes in the margins of the Masoretic text and the notes in additional Masoretic lists.[27]

Mendelssohn again claims to outline a "plausible" scenario resulting in the reliability of the Masoretic text—a scenario that could have occurred, and that would have resulted in the Masoretes preserving a *ketiv-keri* system which dates back to biblical times and can therefore be seen as an element of the Bible's original version. Beyond appealing to authority to defend the

reliability of the Masoretic text, then, Mendelssohn outlines a way in which it would be possible for his position to be correct. He describes a hypothetical historical process which would have resulted in a Masoretic text that reliably preserves the original Bible.

Finally, beyond appealing to authority and proposing a historical hypothesis, Mendelssohn engages the details of select arguments which might pose difficulties for his position. As we have seen, insofar as he composes the *Biur* primarily for a Jewish audience, he composes this work for readers more likely to be familiar with pre-modern Jewish sources than with European biblical scholarship.[28] If we consider his defense of the Masoretic text, in turn, we discover that he frequently engages the details of potential challenges emerging from the former, but typically writes in vague terms regarding arguments appearing in the latter. Although Mendelssohn frequently alludes to the historical study of the Bible, he rarely identifies specific figures associated with this approach or engages the details of their arguments; rather, in most cases,[29] he invokes "Christian scholars" who treat the Masoretic text "like a broken wall," but he neither cites these scholars by name nor reconstructs the reasoning behind their attacks.[30] By contrast, he explicitly discusses numerous passages in pre-modern Jewish literature which—while not rejecting the Masoretic text—might generate worries regarding this edition by insisting that it differs from the Bible's original version.[31] For example, he scrutinizes rabbinic and medieval texts that portray the Hebrew script employed by the Masoretes as differing from the Bible's original form of writing;[32] engages a medieval suggestion that the breaks between words present in the Masoretic edition were not included in the original text of the Bible;[33] and criticizes a pre-modern Jewish grammarian who describes key features of the Masoretic text as post-biblical innovations.[34] Mendelssohn thus engages the details of *some* potential challenges—of the potentially threatening arguments most likely to be familiar to the *Biur*'s readers.

An initial assessment of the *Biur* is now possible. If my reading is correct, Mendelssohn makes three types of moves in response to attacks on the Masoretic text: (1) he appeals to authority in order to ground the affirmation of a contested belief, identifying Masoretic statements as sufficiently authoritative to permit us to affirm the reliability of the edition they yield; (2) he outlines a way in which would be possible for his contested belief to be true, providing an account of how the Masoretes *could* have preserved the Bible's original text; and (3) he engages details of the potential challenges most likely to be known to his audience, scrutinizing passages in pre-modern Jewish literature that might undermine the Masoretic edition. If Mendelssohn makes these moves, however, it is not immediately clear how he could be offering a substantive response to scholarly challenges. Insofar as he invokes Masoretic authority, he seems to presuppose the very conclusion he aims to defend—the conclusion that the Masoretes merit adherence. Similarly, insofar as he explains how a reliable Masoretic edition *could* have emerged, he seems not to establish the point he wishes to secure—the belief that a reliable edition *did* emerge. Finally, insofar as he focuses on the details of pre-modern Jewish arguments, he seems not to scrutinize the claims which he describes as most troubling—attacks by "Christian scholars" who "treat" the Masoretic text "like a broken wall." Initially, then, the moves appearing in the *Biur*'s introduction hardly seem to constitute a substantive argument.

We will soon discover that the *Biur*'s claims take on a different appearance when read against the backdrop of early modern epistemology. Before turning to this issue, though, it is important to recognize that similar moves appear in Mendelssohn's response to scholarly attacks on rabbinic exegesis—attacks which argue that if the rabbis ascribe to the Bible meanings which differ sharply from the text's plain sense, then the rabbis should not be treated as reliable guides to Scripture's import. The key passage in the *Biur*'s introduction reads as follows:

> We had a rule of distinguishing the contradictory from the different. For propositions that differ can both be correct and true: therefore, in every place where the path of *peshat* merely deviates and differs from the path of *derash*, but is not opposed to it, Scripture does not depart from its *peshat*, and the *derashah* can be expounded. For then the *peshat* of Scripture is the primary and principal intention, and the *derashah* is a secondary intention, which the speaker also intends…See what I wrote on this in the introduction to the elucidation of Ecclesiastes…But if what seems to us to be the path of the *peshat* of Scripture contradicts and is opposed to the path of *derush*, received [*hemekubal*] and transmitted to us from the sages, may their memories be for a blessing, such that both paths cannot be correct (since contradiction is impossible), then we have an obligation to follow the path of *derash*…because we have only the tradition of our sages [*kabalat hakhameinu*], may their memories be for a blessing, and in their light we see light.[35]

What is Mendelssohn attempting to claim in this passage? What type of "rule" does the *Biur* advance regarding the relationship between Scripture and "the tradition of our sages"?

The first point to grasp is that Mendelssohn is affirming the reliability of rabbinic exegesis. As is well known, he uses *peshat* when referring to interpretations that focus on the plain sense of Scripture, and *derash*, *derush*, and *derashah* when referring to rabbinic interpretations of the Bible—more specifically, rabbinic interpretations that highlight a meaning different from what seems to be the text's plain sense.[36] This passage suggests that two types of relationships might exist between such readings: while in some cases "the path of *peshat* merely deviates and differs from the path of *derash*, but is not opposed to it," in other cases "what seems to us to be the path of the *peshat*…contradicts and is opposed to the path of *derush*." The idea here is that when the rabbinic and straightforward readings of the Bible do not yield identical interpretations, endorsing both accounts would in some cases involve affirming *contradictory* propositions, but in other cases would merely involve affirming *distinct* propositions. Consider two cases discussed by Mendelssohn: Exodus 21:24-25, which declares that punishments in cases of injuries should follow the pattern "eye for eye" and "tooth for tooth"; and Genesis 44:18, in which Judah flatters his brother Joseph with the words "you are equal to Pharaoh."[37] In the former case, endorsing both the straightforward and rabbinic readings seems to involve

affirming contradictory propositions, for insofar as a straightforward reading suggests that the Bible demands the physical punishment of offenders, while the rabbinic reading insists that the Bible permits *only* the imposition of monetary fines, endorsing the accuracy of both interpretations seems to involve affirming contradictory propositions—namely, the propositions *Exodus 21 demands physical punishment* and *Exodus 21 rejects physical punishment*.[38] By contrast, in the case of Genesis 44, insofar as a plain reading takes Judah to be flattering Joseph by praising him for being "as important in my eyes as a king," while the rabbinic reading takes Judah to be subtly threatening Joseph with the prospect of the divine punishments which often befall kings, we can endorse both readings without affirming contradictory propositions.[39] After all, there is no contradiction between the propositions *Judah means to flatter Joseph in Genesis 44* and *Judah means to subtly threaten Joseph in Genesis 44*, since there is nothing about one which entails the falsity of the other—which entails that the Bible could not be presenting Judah as having both aims in mind. The *Biur* thus distinguishes between cases in which rabbinic and straightforward readings are merely "different," and cases in which such interpretations are "contradictory"—cases in which endorsing one reading permits the acceptance of the other approach, and cases in which endorsing one reading entails the falsity of the other account.

Mendelssohn's claim now emerges. On the one hand, he suggests, when straightforward and rabbinic readings are merely different, we should affirm the accuracy of both interpretations: in his words, "in every place where the path of *peshat* merely deviates and differs from the path of *derash*…Scripture does not depart from its *peshat*, and the *derashah* can be expounded." On the other hand, he continues, when these approaches yield contradictory readings, we should affirm the rabbinic account and reject what we initially took to be the straightforward interpretation:[40] in his words, "if what seems to us to be the path of the *peshat* of Scripture

contradicts and is opposed to the path of *derush*…then we have an obligation to follow the path of *derash*." The first point to note, then, is that Mendelssohn's "rule" is an affirmation of the reliability of rabbinic exegesis—a claim that we should treat rabbinic interpretations as accurately reflecting the Bible's meaning. When comparing straightforward and rabbinic readings of the Bible, we should sometimes affirm the former but consistently endorse the latter.

The second point to note is that the *Biur*'s "rule" is a response to a danger emerging from biblical scholarship—to attacks on rabbinic exegesis which threaten the scriptural basis of Jewish practice. While the passage quoted above does not explicitly cite the historical study of the Bible, Mendelssohn has already made it clear that the *Biur*'s defense of rabbinic exegesis constitutes a response to this approach: for example, as we saw in Chapter 1, when he announces the *Biur*'s publication, he claims that this work is an attempt to aid "youths among the children of Israel" who have been forced to "satisfy themselves" with "gentile scholars" who "turn their back…on the elucidations of the trustworthy sages."[41] Moreover, when citing his "rule" later in the *Biur*, Mendelssohn states that his goal had been to address precisely the issue emerging from biblical scholarship—the issue of whether the rabbis secure the biblical derivability of key laws:

> We have not forgotten the rule that we adumbrated in this book's introduction, regarding the distinction between the contradictory and the different. Although it is possible for the *peshat* of Scripture to differ from rabbinic tradition in its manner of elucidation, it is impossible for the *peshat* to contradict rabbinic tradition with respect to laws and precepts. For although it is not impossible for propositions that differ to both be true, in a case of propositions that are contradictory, if one is true, the other must necessarily be false. Therefore, in every place where what appears to be Scripture's *peshat* contradicts rabbinic tradition with respect to laws and precepts, the one who elucidates must either completely abandon the approach of *peshat* to follow the path of the true tradition, or broker a compromise between them, if possible.[42]

Mendelssohn suggests that his "rule" leads to the affirmation of rabbinic claims regarding the derivability of "laws and precepts," since by establishing that we should accept rabbinic claims regarding the Bible's meaning, this "rule" establishes that we should "follow the path of the true

tradition" with respect to "laws and precepts"—that we should accept rabbinic claims regarding norms emerging from the biblical text. Mendelssohn's "rule" is thus a response to scholarly attacks on rabbinic hermeneutics, for this rule appears within a broader argument framed as a response to such attacks, and is described as addressing the threat emerging from such claims.

The third point to note is that Mendelssohn's argument seems to involve a strategy similar to one he employs when discussing the Masoretic text—a strategy which involves appealing to statements that possess authority in order to ground a contested belief, outlining a way in which it would be possible for this belief to be true, and engaging details of the potential challenges most likely to be familiar to readers. As noted above, the *Biur* insists that "we have an obligation to follow the path of *derash*…because we have only the tradition of our sages [*kabalat hakhameinu*], may their memories be for a blessing." Elsewhere in his writings, Mendelssohn uses the term "tradition [*kabalah*]" to refer to a collection of statements which have been transmitted from a "trustworthy [*ne'eman*]" source, and which therefore allow a belief "to be confirmed as true"—statements which have been transmitted by a source whose claims are authoritative, and which we thus have grounds to treat as worthy of acceptance.[43] Moreover, Mendelssohn elsewhere describes the rabbinic "sages" as figures whom Jews deem "trustworthy [*ne'emanim*]"—as individuals whose statements possess authority that provides a basis for assent.[44] When he urges us to treat rabbinic exegesis as reliable "because we have only the tradition of our sages," then, he means that we should treat rabbinic exegesis as reliable because rabbinic claims possess authority—because this exegesis emerges from statements in rabbinic literature by *ne'emanim* figures who merit assent. Just as Mendelssohn affirms the disputed reliability of the Masoretic text by invoking the authority of Masoretic statements, so too does he affirm the disputed reliability of rabbinic exegesis by invoking the authority of rabbinic claims.

Moreover, just as Mendelssohn presents an account of how a reliable Masoretic text could have emerged, so too does he outline an account of how rabbinic exegesis could yield a reliable reading of Scripture. In the passage cited above, Mendelssohn suggests we will better grasp his "rule" if we "see what [he] wrote on this in the introduction to the elucidation of Ecclesiastes," a text that had been published a decade earlier and presents the following position:

> Every statement reflects an intention that fits with all the concerns of the speaker and listener, and that agrees with the flow and context of the words that are spoken, without excess or deficiency. This is called the primary intention, and the elucidation of this intention is called *peshat*…However, there is a time when even the natural human speaker will be precise and weigh the meaning of every word according to true scales, without any embellishment. In such a case, he will deliberately use one of the words or statements that are alike in meaning, rather than another. He will do so neither by accident and chance, nor for the sake of elegance, but rather in order to thereby allude and refer to a specific matter…What is meant through this precision is like a secondary intention…The elucidation of this secondary intention is called *derush*.[45]

Mendelssohn argues that *peshat* and *derush*—the straightforward and rabbinic readings of a text[46]—attend to distinct layers of meaning potentially present in any statement—the "primary" meaning that an individual intends to communicate and that is not dependent on the nuances of specific words, and a "secondary" meaning that an individual might also seek to express by choosing one word or phrase over another. For example, when the Bible demands both that we "remember [*zakhor*] the Sabbath" and that we "guard [*shamor*] the Sabbath," these statements possess the same "primary" meaning but express different "secondary" meanings: both sentences require the observance of laws regarding the Sabbath, but while the former statement employs "remember" to highlight norms related to religious conversation, the latter statement uses "guard" to highlight norms related to the cessation of labor.[47] Mendelssohn then presents this model as establishing the possibility that the rabbis count as reliable interpreters:

> The sages…left a place for the secondary intention, which scrutinizes every word, every letter, and even every jot on those letters. For nothing in the words of the living God appears accidentally, without intention, just as He did not create anything in His world

> without a specific purpose…In the work of creation, and particularly in living creatures' organs, their Creator has many intentions in each organ. For example, He created the nose for smelling, for breathing, for expelling excess moisture, and for enhancing facial beauty …Therefore, it is not unreasonable that the [Divine] Wisdom should have many different intentions in one utterance. This is what is meant by the saying of the sages, may their memories be for a blessing: "one verse is expounded in many senses"… From this you will understand how it is plausible to elucidate in many ways…everything said by prophecy.[48]

For Mendelssohn, if multiple layers of meaning are potentially present in any statement, and if God is an entity who often has "many intentions" in one act, then "it is not unreasonable that the [Divine] Wisdom should have many different intentions in one utterance," and it is therefore "plausible" to accept rabbinic exegesis when it goes beyond the Bible's straightforward meaning. That is, if competent language-users often intend to express meanings beyond a sentence's plain sense, then it is possible that God intends to express meanings beyond the Bible's plain sense, and it is therefore possible that rabbinic claims which posit such meanings capture messages the Bible is supposed to communicate; indeed, as Mendelssohn notes elsewhere, such a move "neither contradicts the ways of the intellect and logic, nor is strange and astonishing to human understanding."[49] When invoking his commentary on Ecclesiastes, then, Mendelssohn is invoking an account of how rabbinic exegesis *could* be reliable. He is explaining how it would be possible for his contested belief in rabbinic reliability to be true—how rabbinic readings which go beyond the Bible's plain sense *could* provide an accurate account of the text's import.

Finally, like his account of the Masoretic text, Mendelssohn's account of rabbinic exegesis engages details of the potential difficulties most likely to be known to his audience. Despite his concern with the historical study of Scripture, he does not discuss the details of attacks on rabbinic exegesis associated with this approach; rather, he invokes such attacks only in the general terms outlined above, referring to "non-Jewish scholars" who reject the "sages" and "their pure tradition,"[50] rather than to specific authors and the details of their arguments. By

contrast, he goes into greater depth when dealing with sources more likely to be known to his readers, citing passages in pre-modern Jewish literature that express doubts about specific rabbinic interpretations, and in some cases addressing the details of readings advanced in these texts. For example, the *Biur* acknowledges objections, recorded in the Talmud, to the rabbinic account of Exodus 21:24-25, offering various reasons for endorsing this reading;[51] similarly, the *Biur* discusses, and offers grounds for rejecting, medieval Jewish readings of Exodus 14:30 which differ from the rabbinic account of this verse.[52] Like his account of the Masoretic text, then, Mendelssohn's discussion of rabbinic exegesis engages the details of *some* potential challenges—of arguments appearing in the sources most likely to be familiar to his readers.

Let us review. In Chapter 1, we learned that even as Mendelssohn links the enduring authority of Jewish law to this system's biblical grounding, he worries that trends in the study of history might undermine his position, since the historical study of the Bible challenges the beliefs which such a grounding presupposes—beliefs regarding the reliability of the Masoretic text to which laws are traced and the reliability of rabbinic exegesis by which laws are derived. We have now seen that the *Biur* addresses these threats by making three types of moves—by appealing to authority in order to ground the affirmation of contested beliefs, by outlining a way in which it would be possible for such beliefs to be true, and by engaging the details of potential challenges already likely to be known. We must ask, then, whether Mendelssohn intends for these moves to supply adequate grounds for rejecting threats posed by biblical scholarship.

Leibniz and the Mysteries

Initially, it is tempting to answer these questions in the negative, for just as the *Biur*'s arguments regarding the Masoretic text seem to suffer from a variety of flaws, so too do

problems appear to plague the *Biur*'s account of rabbinic exegesis. Insofar as Mendelssohn invokes the authority of rabbinic interpreters, he again seems to presuppose the very conclusion he wishes to secure—the conclusion that the rabbis are reliable guides to Scripture's content. Similarly, insofar as he provides an account of how rabbinic exegesis *could* yield an accurate reading of Scripture, he seems not to establish the point he wishes to defend—the idea that rabbinic exegesis *does* yield an accurate interpretation. Finally, insofar as he does not engage the details of attacks associated with the historical study of Scripture, he fails to scrutinize the very arguments which he takes to be cause for concern—arguments by "non-Jewish scholars" who "repudiate the acceptance" of rabbinic tradition. The *Biur*'s three types of moves, then, seem to generate a substantive defense neither of the Masoretic text, nor of rabbinic exegesis.

This assessment of the *Biur*, I will argue, fails to read Mendelssohn in his proper intellectual context. More specifically, this evaluation fails to read him against the backdrop of early modern religious epistemology—early modern discussions regarding the grounds for affirming propositions about God and ascribing authority to religious texts. Read in this context, I will suggest, the *Biur*'s claims take on a very different appearance. These claims, we will see, are best understood not as constituting an obviously flawed strategy that Mendelssohn could not intend as a substantive argument, but rather as reflecting an implicit appropriation of early modern Christian epistemology. These claims are best understood as an attempt to mobilize for the defense of Jewish practice a model developed to secure Christian doctrine—a model deployed by thinkers such as Leibniz to defend doctrines traditionally described as "mysteries."

For many readers, of course, this suggestion will hardly seem more plausible than the *Biur*'s reasoning. We might not expect Leibniz to provide a robust defense of the mysteries, for he is often remembered more as a proponent of natural theology than as a defender of these

principles: the Trinity, a doctrine which claims that the one God is in some sense three persons; the Incarnation, a doctrine which claims that this deity in some sense became a human being; and the Eucharist, a doctrine which claims that Christ's body and blood are in some sense present in bread and wine.[53] Moreover, we might not expect Mendelssohn to appropriate arguments linked to the mysteries, for he frequently criticizes Christianity for endorsing these doctrines.[54] Suggesting a link between the *Biur* and Leibniz's account of mysteries, then, seems to cohere neither with our received image of Leibniz, nor with Mendelssohn's own views.

We will soon see that Mendelssohn's criticism of the mysteries exists alongside an engagement with early modern writings on these doctrines.[55] For now, though, the key point to recognize is that, as recent scholarship has shown,[56] the mysteries frequently occupy Leibniz's attention throughout his long career, from his early writings in the 1660s to the 1710 *Theodicy*.[57] Indeed, while the metaphysics he employs to illuminate the mysteries may vary over time, his account of the epistemological conditions for affirming these doctrines remains remarkably stable, receiving its clearest formulation in the *Theodicy*'s "Preliminary Dissertation":[58]

> All that remains for us then, after having believed in the Mysteries by reason of the proofs of the truth of the religion [*de la vérité de la religion*] (which are called "motives of credibility [*motifs de crédibilité*]") is to be able to *uphold* them against objections. Without that our belief in them would have no firm foundation; for all that which can be refuted in a sound and demonstrative manner cannot but be false. And the proofs of the truth of the religion [*de la vérité de la religion*], which can give only a *moral certainty*, would be balanced and even outweighed by such objections as would give an *absolute certainty*, provided that they were convincing and altogether demonstrative.[59]

The idea here is that we are entitled to affirm the mysteries if we satisfy two conditions—if we possess "proofs of the truth of the religion" with which the mysteries are linked, and if we are "able to *uphold*" these mysteries against potential "objections." What is Leibniz attempting to suggest? What is involved in proving a religion's truth, and in upholding the mysteries against attacks?[60]

Let us begin with Leibniz's claims regarding the truth of a "religion," a term that he uses to refer to a tradition consisting of texts, beliefs, and behaviors.[61] The *Theodicy*'s "Opening Dissertation" advances the following claim regarding the *vérité* of such traditions:

> It is a matter of no difficulty among theologians who are expert in their profession, that the motives of credibility [*motifs de crédibilité*] justify, once and for all, the authority [*l'autorité*] of Holy Scripture before the tribunal of reason…That is the tendency of sundry good books that we have on the truth of the religion [*de la vérité de la religion*], such as those of Augustinus Steuchus, of Du Plessis-Mornay or of Grotius; for it must needs have marks that the false religions have not, else would Zoroaster, Brahma, Somonacodom, and Mahomet be as worthy of belief as Moses and Jesus Christ.[62]

This is a difficult passage to explicate. Leibniz alludes to "the truth of the religion" that the passage cited earlier linked to "motives of credibility," but he now takes these "motives" to "justify…the authority of Holy Scripture." How should we make sense of these statements? What does Leibniz mean when he invokes "authority," "truth," "proofs," and "motives," and how does he understand the links between these concepts? Is he claiming that proofs and motives establish the Bible's authority, and that such authority then establishes the truth of the religion associated with this text? Or is he claiming that proofs and motives establish the truth of a religion, and that this truth then invests the religion's texts with some form of authority?

Consider, first, Leibniz's account of "the authority of Holy Scripture." The passage cited earlier suggests that beliefs associated with religious traditions deserve qualified assent, with such beliefs being entitled not to "an *absolute certainty*," but rather to "only a *moral certainty*"—to the strong degree of conviction often associated with action, rather than to the "absolute" conviction associated with mathematics.[63] Leibniz elaborates on the nature of this assent elsewhere in his writings, describing the propositions advanced by Scripture as content which "is presumed [*praesumitur*] until the contrary is proved,"[64] and insisting that "to *presume* [*presumer*] something is…to accept it *provisionally*, but with foundation, while waiting for a

proof to the contrary"[65]—that propositions advanced by the Bible possess sufficient "foundation" to merit our assent until we possess "proof" that they are false. When invoking "the authority of Holy Scripture," then, the *Theodicy* is concerned with a text whose claims deserve provisional assent. The Bible is authoritative, Leibniz suggests, in the sense that its claims are sufficiently grounded to merit endorsement until we possess a decisive indication that they are false.

What relationship exists between this authority and "the truth of the religion" linked to the Bible? We can answer this question if we turn to the "books" identified by Leibniz as exemplifying his approach, focusing primarily on a text with which we know Mendelssohn to be familiar: *On the Truth of the Christian Religion*, composed in the early seventeenth century by the Dutch thinker Hugo Grotius.[66] Originally one of Grotius's most influential works,[67] this treatise offers the following account of a religion's "truth [*veritas*]":[68]

> The goal of man is felicity after this life [*felicitas post hanc vitam*]. If the soul is of a nature that it does not have in itself the causes of perishing, and if God has given to us many signs by which it should be understood that He wishes for the soul to outlive the body, then man cannot possess any goal more worthy than the felicity of that state…To secure this, the true religion [*vera religio*] must be sought…If anything relating to this matter has been revealed by God, it should be considered as the most true and certain. Since the Christian religion, above all others, promises to bear such [material], this work's second part will examine whether we must have faith in [this religion].[69]

For Grotius, "felicity after this life" refers to the soul's happiness after the body's death.[70] The passage cited above thus argues that the proper "goal" of the human being is this eternal happiness, that a revelation regarding such felicity and how "to secure this" would be "most true and certain," and that we should assess the claim of the "Christian religion" to "bear" such a revelation. We should ask whether Christianity has preserved, perhaps imperfectly,[71] a divine revelation regarding life after death—whether Christianity's texts, doctrines, and practices contain a divinely issued account of eternal felicity, as well as a divinely ordained path to the attainment of this goal. Grotius then states that such an inquiry will identify "the true religion"

and establish "true religion" as a "title fit for" Christianity[72]—that once we judge a tradition to be a vehicle for a revelation regarding felicity, we should classify this tradition as a "true" religion. A true religion, then, is one whose texts, beliefs, and practices preserve a divine revelation regarding the nature and achievement of happiness after death.[73]

The crucial point for our purposes is that it is precisely the "truth" of a religion that establishes the "authority" of texts such as the Bible. Grotius's argument proceeds as follows:

> On behalf of the authority [*auctoritate*] of the books of the New Covenant. One who… believes that the religion which Christians profess is the true and best must be sent to the most ancient books which contain that religion [*eam religionem continentes*] to study its components. [These are the books] we speak of as the New Testament or, preferably, Covenant. For one would act unjustly if one were to deny that this religion is contained [*contineri*] in those books, as all Christians affirm…Therefore, since the truth of the Christian religion [*veritas religionis Christianae*] has now been proved above, and since at the same time it is agreed that this religion is contained [*contineri*] in these books, then its authority [*auctoritas*] has been sufficiently provided to those books by this alone.[74]

For Grotius, once we establish" the "truth" of a religion, we "must be sent to the…books which contain that religion" and can invest them with "authority." That is, once we have reasons for identifying a religion as the bearer of a revelation regarding eternal felicity, we should explore the core texts of this religion in order to better grasp its content, and we have grounds for treating the claims advanced by these texts as meriting our assent.[75] After all, if a religion preserves a divine revelation, then the texts which are central to this religion become worthy of study, and the claims advanced by those texts merit at least qualified acceptance[76]—with the texts becoming worthy of study because they constitute sources from which we can extract divine instruction, and with the claims meriting at least qualified acceptance because they might constitute elements of that instruction. For Grotius, then, once we classify religion as "true" in the sense of preserving a revelation regarding eternal felicity, we have reasons for ascribing to the religion's core texts an authority that renders their claims worthy of assent. If we have grounds for

concluding that a religious tradition preserves a teaching issued by God, then we have grounds for concluding that the claims advanced by this religion's core texts might constitute elements of that teaching, and we therefore have grounds for affirming these claims—or at least provisionally affirming these claims—as elements of an omniscient deity's teaching.

What are the factors—the "proofs" and "motives of credibility"—that allow us to reach this conclusion, classifying a religion as true and treating its texts as authoritative? To be sure, Grotius suggests, the truth of a religion rests, in part, on "arguments which come from facts"—on arguments which derive from the basic elements of a religion's narrative. For example, he cites records which present Jesus as claiming to transmit a divine revelation, provides reasons for accepting reports of Christ's miracle-working and resurrection,[77] and argues that these "facts" point to Christianity's association with a divine revelation—that it would "be contrary to divine justice and wisdom" for these wondrous events to be associated with an individual who falsely claimed to transmit such a message, since a just and wise God would not reward the disseminator of lies with the power to perform miracles and conquer death.[78] At the same time, Grotius continues, a religion's truth does not rest solely upon these "arguments…from facts":

> If [some] arguments came from facts, we [now] come to those that come from the nature of the doctrine…This religion must be admitted—not only on account of the testimonies of the facts regarding which we have now delivered a discourse, but also on account of those which are internal to the religion. For no [religion] can be adduced from all the ages and nations that is more excellent with respect to [its] reward, more perfect with respect to [its] precepts, and more worthy of admiration with respect to the manner in which it was decreed that it should be propagated [*aut praemio excellentior, aut praeceptis perfectior, aut modo quo propagari jussa est admirabilior*].[79]

The idea here seems to be that Christianity's truth emerges not only from the religion's "facts," but also from its "internal" content. If we consider the conception of eternal felicity which this religion proclaims, the concrete practices which this religion requires, and the manner in which this religion spread, we find additional reasons to treat Christianity as the bearer of a divine

revelation. More precisely, we discover that the conception of eternal life which this religion presents seems to be "true,"[80] that there is "no form of worship more worthy of God" than "the Christian religion's form of worship,"[81] and that "the Christian religion's unbroken continuity is so long-lasting, and its propagation so widely diffused, that this [religion] cannot be referred to any human power"[82]—that this religion's "internal" content is what we would expect from a vehicle of divine revelation, with the religion's views on immortality exhibiting the accuracy we would expect if they had been issued by God, the religion's required practices possessing the excellence we would expect if they had been ordained by God, and the religion's proselytizing efforts achieving the success we would expect if they had been promoted by God. Grotius's point, then, is that arguments from historical "facts," linked to arguments from "internal" content, point to Christianity's truth. If reports present Christianity as the bearer of a divine revelation regarding eternal felicity, and if the content of this religion is what we would expect from such a vehicle, then the most reasonable conclusion is that Christianity is, in fact, a true religion—that Christianity preserves a divine teaching regarding eternal felicity.

Let us review. The *Theodicy* suggests that the first task associated with affirming the mysteries is to offer "proofs for truth of the religion," and that this task is in some sense linked to establishing the "authority of Holy Scripture." Leibniz, in turn, understands the "authority" of the Bible as justifying the provisional acceptance of this text's claims, and he identifies as a model for his approach Grotius's *Christian Religion*—a text which argues that the facts and content of Christianity point to its status as a vehicle of revelation, that this status allows us to classify Christianity as a "true" religion, and that this "truth" invests Christianity's core texts with authority, since we have grounds to accept the claims advanced by a religion judged to preserve a divine revelation. For Leibniz, then, the first task involved in affirming the mysteries

is to secure the Bible's authority by assessing Christian life—by showing that Christian texts, beliefs, and practices preserve a revelation regarding felicity. To be entitled to affirm doctrines such as the Trinity, we must show that Christianity's core texts advance claims which merit provisional acceptance, and we achieve this goal by showing that the "facts" associated with this tradition, along with its teachings and practices, point to Christianity's status as a "true religion."

We can now turn to the second task involved in affirming the mysteries—the task of ensuring that we are "able to uphold" them "against objections." The background here is Leibniz's distinction between objections that are "demonstrative" and show the mysteries to contain "absurdities," and objections that concern "probabilities" and present the mysteries as "contrary to appearances."[83] The former type of objection would provide rigorous proofs that affirming the mysteries involves logical contradictions. For example, such objections would demonstrate that it is incoherent to affirm a trinitarian view of God, since the concept of "being one God" excludes the possibility of also being three persons; that it is untenable to assert the occurrence of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, since the concept of "being a deity" implies the impossibility of also being human; and that it is absurd to posit Christ's presence during the Eucharist, since the concept of "being Christ's body" excludes the possibility of being present in the space occupied by sacramental bread. By contrast, the latter type of objection would show merely that the mysteries are improbable in the sense of diverging from regularly observed phenomena. For example, such objections would argue that one God is unlikely to be three persons, since we do not typically observe entities which are both one and three; that it is unlikely for this one God to have become a human being, since the transcendent deity normally remains distinct from mortals; and that it is unlikely for Christ's body to be present in sacramental bread, since human bodies are not typically present in this type of space.

This distinction allows Leibniz to clarify the task of upholding against objections:

> One is not disturbed by objections that only attain probability. Everyone agrees that appearances are against Mysteries, and that they are by no means probable…It suffices that they have in them nothing of absurdity. Thus demonstrations are required if they are to be refuted…The motives of credibility justify, once and for all, the authority of Holy Scripture before the tribunal of reason, so that reason in consequence gives way before it, as before a new light, and sacrifices thereto all its probabilities.[84]

The *Theodicy* begins by suggesting that if we establish "the authority of Holy Scripture" by offering motives of credibility, then "reason in consequence gives way before it…and sacrifices thereto all its probabilities"—that once we establish the truth of a religion and invest its texts with authority, these texts merit our provisional assent even with respect to unlikely propositions. After all, if we have grounds to conclude that a text's claims reflect a divine teaching, then we have grounds to affirm this text's claims even if they seem improbable, since their apparent improbability would be outweighed by the credibility they possess as the declarations of an omniscient deity.[85] The *Theodicy* then applies this principle to the mysteries, arguing that insofar as the mysteries are endorsed by the biblical text,[86] "one is not disturbed by objections that only attain probability," and "demonstrations are required if they are to be refuted" as containing an "absurdity"—that if an authoritative text merits provisional assent even with respect to improbable propositions, we should affirm the mysteries proclaimed by the Bible even if they seem unlikely, and we are required to reject these doctrines only if a "demonstration" shows them to entail contradictions. That is, if biblical books possess authority such that their improbable claims are to be provisionally affirmed, then we are required to reject such claims only if their affirmation is shown to result in logical contradictions. Upholding the mysteries against objections, then, involves appealing to an authoritative text in order to ground the affirmation of contested beliefs. Once we establish the authority of Christianity's texts by securing this religion's truth, we invoke this authority as a basis for affirming the mysteries.

Of course, Leibniz continues, if we would be required to reject the mysteries in the face of a demonstrated contradiction, then upholding the mysteries will also involve showing that no demonstrated contradiction exists—that no objection has yet shown the affirmation of the mysteries to entail logical absurdities. One way to accomplish this goal, the *Theodicy* suggests, is to examine existing objections which claim to reveal the presence of such difficulties:

> When it is claimed to be a "demonstration"…one has only to examine the argument…and it will always be possible to see whether it is lacking in form or whether there are premises such as are not yet proved by good argument.[87]

For Leibniz, if we wish to establish that no objection has yet shown the mysteries to involve logical contradictions, we can explore existing challenges and show that they are "lacking in form" or rely on "premises such as are not yet proved"—that such objections rely on arguments which suffer from flawed reasoning, and thus cannot be taken to establish the mysteries' absurd nature. For example, his *Defense of the Trinity* examines an attempt to establish the absurdity of God being both the Father and Christ, arguing that this objection rests on a flawed understanding of concepts such as the copula, and that this error results in the failure of the reasoning which purports to establish the Trinity's absurdity.[88] For Leibniz, then, if defending the mysteries involves establishing that these doctrines have not been shown to entail absurdities, one way to achieve this goal is to show that existing objections have not revealed such contradictions.

Indeed, Leibniz continues, we can also establish the absence of proven contradictions in a second manner. While insisting that we cannot provide an account of *the* mechanism behind the mysteries, Leibniz acknowledges that we might be able to outline *one* mechanism behind these principles—for example, that while we cannot definitively establish *the* way in which God became human, we might be able to identify *one* way in which such a state of affairs *could* emerge.[89] This idea already appears in a 1671 text which reflects on the Eucharist:

> To *demonstrate the possibility* of some matter is to explain some *hypothesis* or possible way…such that, if it is supposed, it follows that the matter is produced…We are able to demonstrate a possible way in a clear and distinct manner, and it is now our objective to perform this regarding the Mysteries of the Eucharist…One clear demonstration is a way to save a thousand responses. Once possibility has been clearly set forth in this way, it is apparent, immediately, that all the posited impossibilities depend on a false hypothesis.[90]

Leibniz suggests that we "demonstrate the possibility" of the mysteries by revealing a "possible way" in which "the matter is produced"—for example, by clarifying the nature of concepts such as "Christ's body" and "sacramental bread," and by proposing a non-contradictory account of such entities' behavior that results in the former being present in the latter. The key point for us is that Leibniz presents this move as an effective response to attacks on the mysteries, arguing that such an account would undermine "all posited impossibilities" and "save a thousand responses"—that such a move would undermine "all" objections which present the mysteries as generating contradictions, for if we possess one non-contradictory account of how the mysteries could be true, we know that there is at least one explanation of these principles which does not entail logical absurdities, and thus that we *can* affirm these beliefs without falling into contradictions. This idea reappears in the *Theodicy*'s opening section, which cites an account of how Christ's body could be present in sacramental bread,[91] acknowledges that it can be difficult "to prove the possibility of Mysteries" but does not deny that such proofs would constitute effective responses,[92] and insists that "he who upholds the Mystery may answer with the plea from one straightforward possibility [*d'une simple possibilité*]"—that upholding the mysteries can involve asserting "one" way in which these doctrines could be true.[93] For Leibniz, then, upholding the mysteries involves appealing to authority in order to ground beliefs that have not been shown to entail contradictions, and we can establish the absence of demonstrated contradictions in at least two ways[94]—by showing that existing objections fail to prove the existence of absurdities, and by outlining one way in which these beliefs could be true.

Finally, for Leibniz, upholding the mysteries against objections involves publicly engaging the details of some potential challenges. While the *Theodicy* emphasizes the importance of being "able" to respond to objections against the mysteries,[95] this text denies that "we are always obliged to examine the objections we may have to face"—that we are required to explicitly address the details of *all* potential objections.[96] On one level, this denial coheres with an approach that might involve providing a possible explanation of the mysteries, since if such accounts undermine "all posited impossibilities" and "save a thousand responses," such accounts render us "able" to address objections without scrutinizing every potential challenge—since if such accounts establish that we *can* affirm the mysteries without contradiction, such accounts establish that all arguments to the contrary will turn out to be flawed. On another level, however, Leibniz's posture reflects a conviction regarding the lives of most individuals:

> Persons whose condition allows not of exact researches should be content with instructions on faith, without being disturbed by the objections…I think that one must not present them with that which might be poisonous for them; or, if one cannot hide from them what is only too public, the antidote must be added to it.[97]

The claim here is that if most individuals are not in a position to pursue the "exact researches" involved in addressing objections, we should explicitly discuss only the details[98] of challenges which are already "public"—that insofar as many individuals' lives do not permit philosophical reflection, it would be wrong to "disturb" the public with details of unfamiliar objections, and our writings should therefore focus on the details of objections that are already likely to be known. We should engage details of the challenges most likely to be familiar to our audience.

Leibniz's model now emerges. For the *Theodicy*, we are entitled to affirm the mysteries if we have satisfied two conditions—if we possess "proofs of the truth of the religion" with which the mysteries are linked, and if we are "able to uphold" these mysteries against potential "objections." The first condition involves considering Christianity's basic facts and internal

content, drawing on these factors to show that this religion preserves a divine revelation regarding eternal felicity, and concluding that the religion's core texts advance claims which merit provisional acceptance. The second condition, in turn, involves responding to attacks on the mysteries by making three types of moves: appealing to the authority associated with a true religion in order to ground the affirmation of contested beliefs, establishing that these beliefs have not been shown to entail a contradiction that would require their repudiation, and engaging details of the potential challenges most likely to be familiar to our audience. Affirming the mysteries, then, involves determining that Christianity is a true religion, and responding to objections in a manner which builds on this determination—which assumes that Christianity's core texts possess sufficient authority to ground improbable propositions, and which invokes this authority to support beliefs not yet shown to contain contradictions. Leibniz, in other words, insists that our affirmation of the mysteries depends on a prior assessment of Christian life. Our affirmation of the mysteries depends on showing that Christianity's texts, beliefs, and practices preserve a revelation regarding eternal felicity, since this determination allows us to affirm contested beliefs provided that they have not been shown to entail contradictions.

Mendelssohn and Leibniz

To be sure, I know of no text in which Mendelssohn claims to draw on Leibniz's epistemology when discussing the Masoretic text and rabbinic exegesis. Moreover, important differences separate the *Biur*'s arguments regarding these topics from Leibniz's claims regarding the mysteries. For example, while Leibniz's arguments revolve around what we might call metaphysical questions, Mendelssohn's arguments focus on what seem to be historical and hermeneutical issues: while Leibniz is concerned with beliefs regarding issues such as divine

unity, Mendelssohn is concerned with beliefs regarding the Bible's transmission and exegesis. Nevertheless, if we revisit the *Biur*'s account of the Masoretic text and rabbinic exegesis, we discover striking affinities with Leibniz's epistemological framework.

Consider, first, the *Biur*'s introduction. As we have seen, the *Biur* appeals to authority in order to ground the affirmation of contested beliefs, outlines a way in which it would be possible for these beliefs to be correct, and engages details of the potential difficulties most likely to be known to readers. More precisely, Mendelssohn (1) invokes authority in order to ground disputed beliefs regarding the Bible, arguing that the authority of Masoretic and rabbinic statements permits us to accept the reliability of the text and exegesis they yield; (2) explains how it *could* be the case that his historical and hermeneutical views are correct, outlining "plausible" scenarios which would have resulted in Masoretic and rabbinic reliability; and (3) engages details of the potential difficulties most likely to be familiar to the *Biur*'s readers, scrutinizing pre-modern Jewish texts but speaking more vaguely of European biblical scholarship. These arguments strongly echo the moves which Leibniz links to upholding the mysteries. Like Mendelssohn, Leibniz treats appeals to sources possessing authority as crucial to defending contested beliefs: just as the *Biur* invokes the authority of statements in Masoretic and rabbinic works to ground beliefs regarding the Bible's text and exegesis, so too does the *Theodicy* present the authority of core Christian writings as grounding belief in the mysteries. Similarly, like Mendelssohn, Leibniz treats a hypothetical account of contested beliefs as an element of defending these commitments: just as the *Biur* outlines a process which could have resulted in a reliable Masoretic text, as well an account of how rabbinic exegesis could yield reliable interpretations, so too does Leibniz suggest that we might establish the absence of proven contradictions by outlining a "possible way" in which the mysteries are "produced."

Finally, like Mendelssohn, Leibniz is content to engage the details of challenges likely to be known to his audience: just as the *Biur* scrutinizes pre-modern claims likely to be familiar to its readers, so too does the *Theodicy* urge us to address challenges which are already "public." The *Biur*'s response to scholarly threats thus echoes Leibniz's response to attacks on the mysteries.

Moreover, the *Biur* not only makes moves similar to those involved in upholding the mysteries against objections, but also appears after Mendelssohn has developed arguments similar to those involved in the task such upholding presupposes—namely, the task of providing "proofs of the truth of the religion" associated with these doctrines. As we have seen, when Leibniz calls on us to establish the truth of a religion, he is calling on us to establish that this religion preserves a divine revelation regarding eternal felicity, and to see this determination as investing the religion's central texts with authority. Similar ideas appear in Mendelssohnian writings composed prior to the *Biur*—more specifically, in works composed during the Lavater affair of 1769-1770, including Mendelssohn's letters to Lavater, *Counterreflections*, and correspondence with Bonnet.[99] For example, just as Leibniz calls on us to establish the truth of a religion, so too does Mendelssohn claim to engage in "investigations" regarding Judaism's "truth [*Wahrheit*]," and to recognize the "Jewish religion" as "the *true* one [*die <u>wahre</u>*]."[100] Similarly, just as Leibniz's model takes a true religion to be the bearer of a revelation regarding eternal felicity, so too does Mendelssohn insist that "the Jewish religion" which counts as "true" is the vehicle for such a message—that Judaism presents individuals with a "path to eternal felicity [*ewigen Glückseligkeit*],"[101] and preserves "orders" which God "found it good to reveal" as a way of "arriving at felicity [*Glückseligkeit*]."[102] Finally, just as Leibniz's model ascribes authority to the central texts of a true religion, so too does Mendelssohn move from classifying the "Jewish religion" as "true" to endowing its core texts with authority, insisting that norms

outlined by works such as the Talmud count as "binding for our nation."[103] When composing the *Biur*, then, Mendelssohn makes moves similar to those involved in upholding the mysteries, and has already advanced claims similar to those involved in the task such upholding presupposes.

These similarities extend even to the details of Mendelssohn's arguments regarding the identification of a true religion. As we have seen, the model deployed by Leibniz presents this identification as resting on two pillars: on "facts" such as the occurrence of miracles, and on a religion's "internal" content. Mendelssohn's writings from the Lavater affair endorse a similar approach, with the *Counterreflections* insisting that "miracles are the means" to indicate the occurrence of "revelation," but that such wonders—on their own—might prove to be deceptive:

> One sees, then, that during an investigation of the proofs for the religion [*Beweise für die Religion*]…the investigation of whether the doctrines of this faith agree with the purest and most noble principles of reason is of the greatest importance. If the individual who is alleged to be an interpreter of God's miraculous speech at the same time transmits doctrines which are contrary to those agreed-upon truths of reason, then all miraculous deeds, which he offers for the sake of the credibility of his mission, are without power.[104]

The claim here is that both reports regarding facts such as "miracles," and inquiries into "the doctrines of this faith," are "of the greatest importance" for "the proofs for the religion"—that offering such proofs involve determining not only whether miracles occurred and point to the transmission of divine revelation, but also whether this religion's doctrines are sufficiently rational to be ascribed to an omniscient God. Mendelssohn, then, both exhibits the concern with establishing a religion's "truth" central to Leibniz's epistemological model, and pursues this goal with arguments similar to those employed by that framework. Just as this model links "proofs" of a religion to facts such as miracles and a religion's content, so too does Mendelssohn link "proofs" for a religion to reports regarding miracles and "the doctrines of this faith."

Further similarities emerge when we move from Mendelssohn's discussion of "religion" in general to his defense of Judaism. As we have seen, the Leibnizian model insists that when

we attend to the content of a religion to establish its status as the bearer of revelation, we should explore factors such as required practices and views on immortality—that we should determine, for example, whether a tradition's practices exhibit the excellence we would expect if they had been ordained by God, and whether this religion's views on immortality exhibit the accuracy we would expect if they had been issued by God. We discover strikingly similar ideas when we turn to Mendelssohn's writings from the Lavater affair, for these writings not only defend Judaism by discussing issues such as the occurrence of miracles[105] and Mosaic prophecy,[106] but also insist that the following argument belongs among our "proofs for the religion":[107]

> The ceremonial laws of the Jews seem to have…the concomitant purposes of visibly singling this nation out from all others and ceaselessly reminding it through many religious actions of those holy truths that should be unforgettable to us all…The [religious customs] are supposed to remind us that God is a unique God; that He created the world; that He rules it according to His wisdom…and so forth.[108]

Like his early modern predecessors, Mendelssohn holds that one "proof" for a religion is the excellence of that tradition's practices; after all, if he includes among "the proofs for the religion" the capacity of its "actions" to highlight "truths that should be unforgettable," he is claiming that the excellence of a religion's practices—their capacity to highlight key truths—counts as a "proof" for this tradition. Indeed, he advances a similar argument regarding views on immortality, noting that the following claim also belongs among our "proofs for the religion":[109]

> Sacred reason gives me the most certain conviction that God calls human beings to salvation through the practice of virtue. The divine religion into which I was born teaches me that all the peoples of the earth are saved if they live in accordance with the laws of reason, that is, if they practice virtue; and that…God has imposed on my nation alone certain special beliefs and obligatory actions…This doctrine is divine; it is worthy of the wisdom, justice, and infinite goodness of that being who is worthy of worship.[110]

Mendelssohn advances a claim which is strongly suggestive of the reasoning we saw in the text by Grotius which Leibniz endorses. Like Grotius, Mendelssohn argues that a specific religion's views on immortality exhibit the accuracy we would expect if they had been issued by God, and

that this point counts as an argument in favor of the tradition we are exploring—that Judaism's conception of "salvation" corresponds with the teachings of "sacred reason," that this conception is therefore "divine" in the sense of being "worthy" of a wise God, and that this point belongs among our "proofs for the religion" in question. Mendelssohn's Lavater writings, then, echo Leibniz's model both with respect to their focus on establishing a religion's "truth," and with respect to their approach to accomplishing this goal. Like his Christian predecessors, Mendelssohn devotes attention to "facts" such as miracles and to "internal" content, and he takes the latter focus to involve examining a religion's required practices and views on immortality.

We will revisit issues such as status of miracles later in this dissertation.[111] For now, however, let us review. When responding to scholarly attacks on the Masoretic text and rabbinic exegesis, the *Biur*'s introduction makes moves similar to those linked by Leibniz to upholding the mysteries against objections. Moreover, by the time Mendelssohn composes the introduction to his commentary, he has advanced claims similar to those involved in the task such upholding presupposes—namely, the task of providing proofs for the truth of a religion. When responding to biblical scholarship in the *Biur*'s introduction, then, Mendelssohn advances, or has already advanced, arguments which echo his predecessor's epistemology. The *Biur* echoes a model which insists that our affirmation of the mysteries depends on a prior assessment of Christian life—on showing that Christianity preserves a divine revelation, since this determination allows us to affirm contested beliefs provided that they have not been shown to entail contradictions.

We can now return to the question I posed earlier in this chapter: the question of whether Mendelssohn seeks to substantively engage scholarly challenges to the binding nature of Jewish practice. Mendelssohn, we will recall, worries that the historical study of Scripture might leave the norms governing Jewish practice without the biblical basis crucial to their authority, for this

approach portrays as unreliable both the Masoretic text to which laws are traced and the rabbinic exegesis by which laws are derived. Initially, the *Biur*'s response to these challenge did not appear to constitute a substantive argument, for this response seemed to suffer from flaws that called its seriousness into question. Read against the backdrop of the religious epistemology deployed by thinkers such as Leibniz, however, this response now begins to take on a different appearance. Insofar as the *Biur*'s response proceeds in a manner that resembles an approach endorsed by Mendelssohn's Christian predecessors—in a manner that involves, and can presuppose, reasoning which resembles these thinkers' arguments—this response begins to look less like a series of claims that could not have been intended as a serious argument, and more like an implicit appropriation of a complex epistemological framework. That is, it seems possible that Mendelssohn is aware of an early modern model deployed to secure Christianity's disputed mysteries, and that he now mobilizes this framework for the defense of Judaism's own contested commitments. Taking himself to have already shown this religion to be true and invested its texts with authority, he sees himself as entitled to address scholarly objections by building on this prior argument—by invoking this authority to ground the affirmation of contested beliefs regarding the Bible, by showing that these beliefs have not been proven to entail a contradiction that would require their repudiation, and by addressing the potential difficulties most likely to be known to his readers. We must determine, then, how to assess this possibility. Should we conclude that Mendelssohn *is*, in fact, appropriating the epistemological model utilized by his predecessors? If so, do we have reasons to think that he would take this model's application to supply adequate grounds for rejecting the threats emerging from biblical scholarship? Is the *Biur* appropriating Leibniz with the aim of addressing, *in a substantive manner*, the historical study of Scripture?

The *Biur* Revisited

Let us begin with the question of whether the *Biur* should be read as appropriating the Leibnizian model. The first point to note is Mendelssohn's familiarity with texts that articulate and utilize this approach. He seems to know both Leibniz's *Theodicy* and Grotius's *Christian Religion*, the two texts on which we drew to outline the contours of this epistemology: Chapter 2 of this dissertation discussed Mendelssohn's long-standing engagement with the *Theodicy*,[112] and an exploration of his personal library reveals a copy of Grotius's treatise on Christianity.[113] Moreover, Mendelssohn is familiar with additional Leibnizian works that invoke specific aspects of this model. For example, he owns the 1765 edition of Leibniz's writings that includes the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, which discusses several aspects of Leibniz's approach to the mysteries—for instance, which emphasizes the role of motives of credibility and explicates the presumption linked to biblical claims.[114] Similarly, Mendelssohn owns the 1768 edition of Leibniz's writings that includes the *Defense of the Trinity*, which notes the presumptive validity to which the mysteries are entitled, and emphasizes the importance of establishing that these doctrines have not been shown to entail contradictions;[115] indeed, Mendelssohn discusses this essay in his correspondence with Lessing.[116] We thus possess an initial sign that the *Biur* may be mobilizing the framework associated with Leibniz, for the model that Mendelssohn echoes is a model that he seems to know—a model that appears in diverse texts with which he is familiar.

Moreover, Mendelssohn not only is familiar with texts that discuss Leibnizian religious epistemology, but also explores these texts during the years in which he formulates the arguments echoing this approach. He invokes Leibnizian writings on the mysteries during the Lavater controversy, explicitly comparing Bonnet's work with "the theological writings of the great Leibniz" on "the particular doctrines of Christianity"[117]—a phrase which Mendelssohn uses

to denote the mysteries.[118] Even more striking is the following passage from *Jerusalem*, written during the same period in which Mendelssohn composes the *Biur*:[119]

> One calls eternal truths those propositions which are not subject to time and remain the same in all eternity. They are either *necessary*, in themselves *immutable*, or *contingent*… Examples of the first kind are the propositions of pure mathematics and of the art of logic; examples of the second are the general propositions of physics and psychology, the laws of nature…The former are immutable even for the Omnipotent…[T]he latter, however, are subject to the will of God and are immutable only insofar as it pleases his holy will…His omnipotence can introduce other laws in their place and can, as often as it may be useful, allow exceptions to occur.[120]

Readers have long noted that Mendelssohn borrows dimensions of this position from Leibniz, and more specifically from the opening section of the *Theodicy*—a text which, like *Jerusalem*, distinguishes necessary "truths" such as logical principles from contingent "truths" such as natural laws, and denies that the deity can violate the former but permits God to suspend the latter.[121] The key point for us is that the section of the *Theodicy* on which *Jerusalem* draws is the very section that outlines Leibniz's approach to the mysteries; indeed, Leibniz connects the conception of truth invoked by *Jerusalem* to the possibility of affirming these doctrines, arguing that we must reject such commitments if they conflict with "truths" whose "necessity is logical… or geometrical."[122] We thus possess a second sign that Mendelssohn may be borrowing the Leibnizian framework, for he echoes this approach as he explores texts in which it appears.

A third factor involves the role of Leibniz's writings on the mysteries in Mendelssohn's account of Judaism. Consider one of the ideas which is central to *Jerusalem*:

> Judaism consisted, or, according to the intention of the founder, was to consist of: (1) Religious doctrines and propositions or *eternal truths*…These are not forced upon the faith of the nation under the threat of eternal or temporal punishments, but, in accordance with the nature and evidence of eternal truths, recommended to rational acknowledgement.[123]

Mendelssohn is repeating the point, discussed in Chapters 1-3, that Judaism encourages reflection on rationally accessible "eternal truths." We have just seen, in turn, that he derives

this category of "eternal truths" from a text which outlines Leibniz's religious epistemology. *Jerusalem*, then, articulates its conception of Judaism by drawing on a Leibnizian text concerned with the epistemology underlying the mysteries. We thus possess a third indication that the *Biur* may be drawing on Leibniz's religious epistemology, for if Mendelssohn is willing to draw on a text outlining this model when discussing Judaism in *Jerusalem*, we have grounds to suspect that he might also draw on such texts when discussing Judaism in the *Biur*. We have grounds to suspect that just as Leibnizian writings on the mysteries inform *Jerusalem*'s account of the Jewish tradition, so too do these texts inform the *Biur*'s defense of the Masoretes and the rabbis.

The implications should be clear. When Mendelssohn addresses trends in biblical scholarship that might deprive Jewish practice of its scriptural basis, he responds in a manner suggestive of early modern Christian epistemology. Moreover, the model that Mendelssohn echoes is one that he knows and utilizes—that appears in texts with which he is familiar and engaged and on which he is willing to draw. Taken together, these factors strongly suggest that Mendelssohn is appropriating the religious epistemology associated with figures such as Leibniz. Aware of an early modern framework deployed to secure Christianity's disputed mysteries, Mendelssohn mobilizes this model for the defense of Judaism's contested commitments. Taking himself to have already shown Judaism to be true and invested its texts with authority, he responds in the *Biur* to the historical study of Scripture by building on this prior argument—by invoking this authority to ground the affirmation of contested beliefs regarding the Bible, by showing that these beliefs have not been proven to entail a contradiction that would require their repudiation, and by addressing the potential threats most likely to be known to his readers.

This conclusion, of course, immediately begs a further question: how should we assess the *Biur*'s appropriation of this Leibnizian model? As we have seen, Leibniz's claim is that our

affirmation of the mysteries depends on a prior assessment of Christian life, since once we determine that Christianity preserves a divine revelation, we are entitled to reject all but the most conclusive attacks on these doctrines—to invest Christianity's core texts with authority that grounds unlikely beliefs, and thus to affirm those beliefs as long as they have not been shown to entail contradictions. By appropriating this model, then, Mendelssohn is claiming that our affirmation of Jewish practice's scriptural basis depends on a prior assessment of Jewish life, and that this assessment entitles us to dismiss challenges emerging from biblical scholarship. That is, he is arguing that if we determine that a revelation has been preserved by Judaism's writings, beliefs, and practices, then we invest core texts—such as Masoretic and rabbinic works—with authority that justifies assent, possess grounds to accept those works' claims regarding the Bible's text and exegesis, and are thus entitled to affirm the scriptural basis of the laws governing Jewish practice; more precisely, we are entitled to affirm the belief in Masoretic and rabbinic reliability on which this scriptural basis rests, since if appeals to authority allow us to affirm this belief provided that it has not been shown to entail contradictions, then insofar as this belief has not been proven to generate such problems, this belief retains sufficient grounding—the authority of a true religion—to merit affirmation in the face of attacks. Should we read Mendelssohn as endorsing such a view? Do we have any reason to think that he intends his appropriation of Leibniz as a substantive response to the historical study of Scripture?

I believe that we should answer this question in the affirmative. First of all, Mendelssohn's writings provide strong indications that he endorses the Leibnizian epistemological model outlined above. On the one hand, Mendelssohn continues to affirm central elements of this model throughout his career, with *Jerusalem* repeating in 1783 the Leibnizian ideas presented in 1769-1770—the claims that we should ask whether religions preserve divine revelations

regarding eternal felicity,[124] that assessing religions requires attending to reports regarding miracles and the content of doctrines,[125] and that our assessment of such factors can bestow authority on a religion's texts.[126] On the other hand, while Mendelssohn is willing to criticize elements of Leibniz's approach to Christianity,[127] I know of no Mendelssohnian text which criticizes the epistemology linked by Leibniz to the mysteries; indeed, when Mendelssohn discusses the *Defense of the Trinity* in his correspondence, he offers no criticism of the epistemological framework on which this essay relies.[128] The available evidence, then, suggests that Mendelssohn endorses the Leibnizian approach deployed in the *Biur*, for he not only refuses to extend his criticism of Leibnizian Christianity to this model, but also consistently affirms central elements of this framework throughout his career. We thus have an initial indication that Mendelssohn intends for his appropriation of Leibnizian epistemology to generate a substantive argument, for he is appropriating an epistemological framework that he takes to be persuasive.

Consider, moreover, the structure of Mendelssohn's position. As we have seen, the historical study of Scripture takes as its primary starting point an insistence on the Bible's historically conditioned nature, and on this basis advances claims which undermine the Masoretic text and rabbinic exegesis.[129] By contrast, by appropriating Leibniz's epistemological model, Mendelssohn advances an argument which begins from an assessment of Jewish life, and which on this basis affirms the reliability of the Masoretic text and rabbinic exegesis. Structurally, then, Mendelssohn's appropriation of Leibnizian epistemology yields an argument which rejects his opponents' premise in order to reject their conclusions. That is, rather than accept his opponents' central assumption but reject the reasoning this assumption yields, he challenges the starting point on which biblical scholarship builds its arguments. He refuses to recognize the methodological principle from which the historical study of Scripture begins.

The crucial point for us is that Mendelssohn elsewhere endorses this type of argumentative strategy. The best known example of this endorsement appears in the second half of *Jerusalem*, in which Mendelssohn addresses a negative review of his 1782 *Preface*:

> In the *Göttingische Anzeigen*, the reviewer quotes my assertion…and he then adds, "all this is new and harsh. First principles are negated, and all dispute comes to an end." Indeed, it is a question of first principles which one refuses to recognize. But should there be an end to all dispute on account of this? Must one never doubt principles? If so, men of the Pythagorean school could dispute forever how their teacher happened to come by his golden hip, and no one would dare ask: Did Pythagoras actually have a golden hip?[130]

Jerusalem suggests that a "dispute" can involve "refusing to recognize" an opponent's "first principles"—that one way to challenge an opponent is to "refuse to recognize" the premises on which she builds her argument.[131] That is, *Jerusalem* endorses the very strategy that Mendelssohn employs in the *Biur*, a text which "refuses to recognize" the "first principles" of biblical scholars—which refuses to begin from a view of the Bible as historically conditioned, and instead employs a model that begins from an assessment of Jewish life. We thus possess a second indication that Mendelssohn intends to provide a substantive response to biblical scholarship, for his response pursues a strategy that he elsewhere describes as effective.

A final factor involves the *Biur*'s audience. Insofar as this text is composed primarily for Jewish readers unlikely to familiar with Leibnizian epistemology,[132] it is difficult to see why Mendelssohn would so painstakingly follow this model unless he takes it to yield a substantive argument. For example, insofar as few (if any) of the *Biur*'s intended readers would consider themselves to be Leibnizians, it is implausible to treat Mendelssohn's argument merely as an attempt to appeal to his audience—to mobilize Leibnizian epistemology not because he finds it to be sound, but rather because he suspects that it is endorsed by his readers. Similarly, insofar as few (if any) of the *Biur*'s intended readers would recognize the text's Leibnizian background, it is implausible to treat the *Biur*'s argument merely as an attempt to draw on Leibniz's prestige

—to mobilize Leibnizian epistemology not because Mendelssohn finds it to be persuasive, but rather because he hopes to subtly invoke the support of an influential thinker. We thus possess a third sign regarding Mendelssohn's intentions, for it is unclear why he would mobilize a model largely unknown to his readers unless he takes it to generate a substantive argument.

We can now address the question that motivates this chapter—the question of whether Mendelssohn seeks to substantively engage challenges to Jewish practice emerging from the study of history. Chapter 1 showed that even as *Jerusalem* links the authority of the norms governing this system to their biblical basis, Mendelssohn recognizes that the historical study of the Bible threatens to undermine belief in this scriptural grounding. Chapter 4 has now revealed that when the *Biur* responds to these threatening developments during the years surrounding *Jerusalem*'s composition, the *Biur* does so by appropriating an epistemological model deployed by Leibniz to secure Christian doctrine—a model which insists that our affirmation of the mysteries depends on a prior assessment of Christian life, since once we determine that Christianity preserves a divine revelation, we are entitled to affirm contested beliefs provided that they have not been shown to entail contradictions. Moreover, Chapter 4 has uncovered strong reasons for thinking that this appropriation of Leibniz is intended as a substantive argument, for this appropriation both relies on a framework which Mendelssohn affirms and generates a strategy which he endorses; indeed, given his audience, he has little reason to rely on this model unless he takes it to yield a sound response. We should conclude, then, that during very time in which Mendelssohn affirms in *Jerusalem* the authority of the norms governing Jewish practice, he strives in the *Biur* to provide what he would see as a substantive response to threats emerging from biblical scholarship. That is, while we might doubt that he pursues this aim if we were to lack some of the evidence cited above, such a conclusion loses much of its

plausibility in light of the totality of factors surveyed here. After all, such a conclusion would have to insist that Mendelssohn sees as inadequate an argument which rests on a model and strategy he endorses, and that he offers this flawed argument even though doing so would win him little favor. The most compelling conclusion, then, is that Mendelssohn intends for his appropriation of Leibnizian epistemology to yield a substantive response to biblical scholarship—to provide adequate grounds for rejecting arguments which threaten the biblical grounding of Jewish practice.[133] Implicitly relying on a model developed to secure Christian doctrine, Mendelssohn argues that if we take Judaism to preserve a divine revelation, we invest Judaism's central works with authority that justifies assent, possess grounds to accept those works' claims regarding the Bible, and are thus entitled to affirm the scriptural basis of the laws governing Jewish practice—to affirm the belief in Masoretic and rabbinic reliability on which this scriptural basis rests, since if appeals to authority allow us to affirm this belief provided that it has not been shown to entail contradictions, then insofar as this belief has not been proven to generate such problems, this belief retains sufficient grounding to merit affirmation in the face of attacks. Arguing in *Jerusalem* that the authority of Jewish practice is linked to the biblical basis of this system, Mendelssohn holds in the *Biur* that an affirmation of this basis depends on a prior assessment of Jewish life, and that such an assessment permits us to dismiss challenges posed by the historical study of Scripture. Mendelssohn seeks to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing a textual danger grounded in the study of history—the danger that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the scriptural basis of Jewish law.

Two types of objections might now emerge. One type might take aim at my reconstruction of Mendelssohn's reasoning, asking whether we can plausibly ascribe to the *Biur* the argument outlined above. Some readers might wonder whether we can suggest that Mendelssohn, who

rejects the mysteries, accepts an epistemological model developed to secure these doctrines. Is it plausible, these individuals might ask, to read him as refusing to affirm the mysteries despite endorsing a framework structured to generate such an affirmation? Other readers might wonder when we can read Mendelssohn as advancing, with respect to Judaism, the type of argument envisioned by the Leibnizian model. On my analysis, the *Biur* argues that once we have grounds for classifying as a vehicle of revelation the Jewish tradition to which Masoretic and rabbinic works are central, we are entitled to invest these texts with sufficient authority to ground assent. More precisely, Mendelssohn borrows the idea that we can move from classifying a religion as true to investing its core texts with authority—the idea that if we have grounds for concluding that a religious tradition preserves a teaching issued by God, we have grounds for concluding that the claims advanced by this tradition's core texts might constitute elements of that teaching, and we thus have grounds for affirming these claims as elements of an omniscient deity's teaching. However, while it might be reasonable to adopt this view when discussing the Bible, would Mendelssohn present such an argument regarding Masoretic and rabbinic works? Insofar as the Jewish tradition does not typically treat the Masoretes and rabbis as recipients of direct divine revelation,[134] is it plausible to read him as advancing, with respect to their statements, an argument analogous to the one outlined above? Is it plausible to read him as arguing that Masoretic and rabbinic claims which are not directly revealed nevertheless constitute elements of a divine teaching, and that these claims therefore possess authority capable of grounding assent?

A second type of concern would focus less on my *reconstruction* of Mendelssohn's claims, and more on my *assessment* of this reasoning. On my reading, when Mendelssohn addresses the historical study of Scripture in the *Biur*'s introduction, he takes himself to have already shown Judaism to be true and invested its texts with authority, and he therefore responds to biblical

scholarship by building on this prior argument. However, some readers might ask, is it plausible to claim that Mendelssohn takes himself to have adequately established Judaism's truth? Insofar as his defense of Judaism involves an appeal to "facts" such as Mosaic miracles and prophecy, and insofar as these "facts" are under attack from thinkers such as Spinoza,[135] is it plausible to suggest that Mendelssohn would take himself to have provided an adequate argument for "the Jewish religion"? If not, can we suggest that he intends to provide a *substantive* response to biblical scholarship? If this response relies on an argument—about Judaism's truth—which itself rests a contested premise, can we claim that he seeks to provide adequate grounds for the conclusions he wishes to defend?

These objections are not compelling. With respect to the worry that we should not read Mendelssohn as accepting Leibnizian epistemology because this reading would imply that he also accepts the mysteries, I would call attention to his view of Christianity. The key here is the *Counterreflections*, which insists that Christianity's doctrinal content is too problematic to be ascribed to a rational God, and that this religion therefore should not be treated as preserving a divine revelation; in Mendelssohn's words, "I cannot consider the founder of a faith who proclaims these doctrines as one who is divinely sent."[136] If we adopt the Leibnizian model, this claim would provide us with grounds for rejecting the mysteries, since we would not be required to accept these doctrines if we were to conclude that Christianity does not preserve a divine revelation (more precisely, that Christianity does not preserve a revelation beyond the one preserved by Judaism);[137] after all, in this scenario, we would be entitled to conclude that Christianity is not a true religion, and thus that its core texts do not possess the authority that would ground an affirmation of the mysteries. We need not worry, then, that Mendelssohn's rejection of the mysteries undermines my suggestion that he accepts Leibnizian epistemology,

for his view of Christianity allows him to adopt both postures—to accept a Leibnizian epistemological model but reject the doctrinal conclusions at which this model aims.

Problems also turn out to plague the other concern regarding my reading—the worry that Mendelssohn would not advance, with respect to Judaism, the type of argument envisioned by the Leibnizian model, and more specifically that he would not move from identifying Judaism as true to investing Masoretic and rabbinic works with authority. As we have seen, when the Leibnizian model moves from truth to authority, the idea is that if we have reasons to identify a religion as the vehicle of a revelation, then the texts on which the religion is built become worthy of study, and the claims advanced by those texts merit at least qualified acceptance—with the texts becoming worthy of study because they constitute sources from which we can extract divine instruction, and with the claims meriting at least qualified acceptance because they might constitute elements of that instruction. A similar argument would allow Mendelssohn to treat Masoretic and rabbinic claims as possessing authority even though they are not directly revealed. More precisely, he might argue that if we have grounds for concluding that Judaism has preserved a divine revelation, then we have grounds for concluding that the Masoretic and rabbinic works central to this religion constitute sources from which we can extract divine instruction, and that these works' claims merit acceptance because they constitute our best indication of that instruction's content. That is, he might argue that if a religion built on Masoretic and rabbinic works is judged to preserve a divine revelation, we have reason to conclude that these works helped accomplish this preservation, and thus that these works possess authority which justifies assent. After all, he might suggest, if we determine that a religion which has relied on Masoretic claims regarding the Bible's text has successfully preserved a divine teaching, then we have reason to think that such claims have pointed to content revealed

by God, and thus that such claims are worthy of acceptance—that such claims have served as effective guides to the text which God meant to reveal, and should therefore be treated as authoritative when we wish to clarify the content of that text. Similarly, he might argue, if we determine that a religion which has relied on rabbinic claims regarding the Bible's meaning has successfully preserved a divine teaching, then we have reason to think that such claims have pointed to content revealed by the deity, and thus that such claims merit our affirmation—that such claims have served as effective guides to the meaning God intended to reveal, and should therefore be treated as authoritative when we wish to clarify the content of that meaning. There is no reason, then, to think that Mendelssohn would not advance, with respect to Judaism, the type of argument envisioned by the Leibnizian model. Although he does not clarify the details of the reasoning which derives textual authority from Judaism's truth, there is no reason to think that this reasoning would not resemble the argument advanced by the Leibnizian framework.

Indeed, the second type of concern regarding my analysis—the suggestion that I have failed to properly assess Mendelssohn's reasoning—also turns out to be unpersuasive. The objection here, we will recall, is that it is not plausible to portray Mendelssohn as intending to provide a substantive response to biblical scholarship, since he relies on an argument (a defense of Judaism's truth) which itself rests on a contested premise (Mosaic miracles and prophecy). We will explore this issue in greater depth in the notes and body of Chapter 5, discovering that Mendelssohn may take himself to have offered arguments which not only undermine assaults on miracles and prophecy advanced by thinkers such as Spinoza, but also address other challenges associated with such figures.[138] For now, though, the key point is that the existence of attacks on the "facts" which point to Judaism's truth should not undermine my assessment of the *Biur*. As I suggest at various points in this dissertation,[139] there are reasons to think that Mendelssohn takes

the threats posed by figures such as Spinoza to be less pressing than threats posed by attacks on the Masoretes and the rabbis, and that he therefore takes himself to be being entitled to respond to the latter without responding to the former: for example, there are indications that he sees Spinozistic attacks as significantly less widespread than attacks on the Masoretes and the rabbis, and thus as not *requiring* a response in the way that the other challenges *demand* a refutation. Mendelssohn's reliance on a contested premise regarding miracles and prophecy, then, does not undermine my assessment of his reasoning, for the available evidence suggests that he does not take himself to be required to address attacks on this premise in order to advance a substantive argument—in order to provide adequate grounds for rejecting the claims of biblical scholars.

Looking Ahead: Reconsidering Mendelssohn's Thought and Relevance

Chapters 2-4 have done much to dispel our initial concerns regarding the prospects for explicating *Jerusalem*'s account of Jewish practice, shedding light on three key claims about the value and authority of this system. Mendelssohn, we have learned, is advancing arguments about an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history, an ethico-political danger grounded in social history, and a textual danger grounded in the study of history. He is attempting to address perils grounded in historical change and in historical knowledge.

The remainder of my dissertation will explore the implications of this analysis. Chapter 5 will focus on our understanding of Mendelssohn's thought, reflecting on his philosophical goals and intervening in ongoing scholarly debates. My conclusion will then go beyond this thinker and address two sets of broader conversations. My reading of Mendelssohn, I will suggest, might contribute to discussions in the study of history about the emergence of Jewish modernity, and to debates in contemporary religious thought about practice, tradition, and social life.

[1] See pages 57-65 in Chapter 1.

[2] While I will note points of contact between the argument reconstructed in this chapter and recent work on revelation, I will argue that Mendelssohn's contemporary relevance emerges from other dimensions of his work. See pages 267-280 and notes 24-25 in my conclusion.

[3] As we will see in Chapter 5, adjudicating between these two readings will play an important role in shaping our interpretation of Mendelssohn's thought, helping us to intervene in one of the central debates in contemporary scholarship—an ongoing debate regarding whether Mendelssohn is best understood as a covert Deist or as a traditionalist Jew.

One additional point is in order. When I contrast the claim that Mendelssohn's "primary goal is to divert attention from serious challenges," and the claim that his "primary goal is to provide substantive grounds for rejecting those challenges," the word "primary" is crucial, for many readers—myself included—would take both goals to be elements of Mendelssohn's project. For example, while Breuer emphasizes the way in which the *Biur* diverts attention from attacks on the Masoretic text, he acknowledges that Mendelssohn seeks to offer—on at least some occasions—a more substantive response to attacks on rabbinic exegesis (see note 144 in Chapter 1). Similarly, while I will argue that Mendelssohn means to provide a substantive response to such attacks, I will concede that one element of this response is a willingness to shield readers from some threats—that while he takes himself to have offered a substantive response to various attacks, he does not see himself as required to fully engage their details in a public setting. The contrast I draw, then, is between the claim that Mendelssohn is *primarily* seeking present a substantive response to scholarly attacks, and the claim that Mendelssohn is *primarily* seeking to divert attention from the threat posed by such challenges.

[4] On Mendelssohn's posture towards Spinozist views, including the question of whether he has read the *Theological-Political Treatise*, see note 139 in Chapter 1.

[5] On the possibility that Mendelssohn attempts to address a variety of additional attacks (including assaults associated with Spinoza), see pages 240-242, and especially notes 42-45, in Chapter 5. Indeed, as I show during that discussion, it would be wrong to posit too strong a division between the issues discussed in this chapter and Spinoza's critique of the Bible, since the topics which will occupy our attention—for example, the reliability of the Masoretic text—are raised by Spinoza: see, e.g. Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 86-127.

[6] In this dissertation's conclusion, I will show that Mendelssohn's arguments regarding philosophical "changeability" (Chapter 2) exhibit important points of contact with MacIntyre's work. Similarly, I will show that Mendelssohn's views on Jewish practice and collective "felicity" (Chapter 3) bear important affinities with the work of thinkers such as Stout and Stanley Hauerwas. Finally, I will show that the Mendelssohnian arguments reconstructed in Chapter 3 also anticipate aspects of claims associated with Bell and Asad.

[7] For contemporary scholarly assessments of the Masoretic text, see, e.g., Revell, "Masoretic Text," 4:597-599; Mulder, "The Transmission," 87-115.

[8] See pages 233-244 in Chapter 5.

[9] As we saw, following pre-modern sources, Mendelssohn understands Jewish practice as the behavior required by two sets of norms: norms explicitly presented in the Pentateuch, and norms outlined in the rabbinic literature of late antiquity. While presenting some aspects of the latter as the enactments of human authorities, he insists that most norms governing Jewish practice should be understood as divinely ordained. Moreover, while not specifying the full

range of factors that render laws binding, Mendelssohn insists that norms seen as divine commands depend on this status for their authority—that being issued by God is a necessary, although perhaps not sufficient, basis for the authority of much of Jewish law. Finally, he insists that the text of the Pentateuch provides Jews with a basis for recognizing much of this normative material as divinely ordained, and thus as enduringly binding—that norms which can be traced back to God's words in the Pentateuch can be seen as divinely ordained, and thus that laws explicitly outlined in that text, as well as norms presented by the rabbis as derivable from that text, continue to possess authority. See pages 54-56 in Chapter 1.

[10] See pages 57-63 in Chapter 1.

[11] To review, the Masoretic edition advances claims about the *consonantal text*, the *vocalization*, and the *accentuation* of the Hebrew Bible—the consonants which should be included in the biblical text, the vowels which should be added to those consonants, and the accents which should govern the syntax and liturgical recitation of the resulting words.

[12] As we saw, the translation and commentary are composed over the course of several years between the mid-1770s and early 1780s. Moreover, the key text for this chapter—the *Biur*'s introduction—is composed during the very months in which Mendelssohn is writing *Jerusalem*—namely, during the second half of 1782. See page 55 and note 125 in Chapter 1.

[13] While I will occasionally draw on other sections of the *Biur* to clarify Mendelssohn's argument, most of my focus will remain on the commentary's introduction.

[14] Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 78-87.

[15] Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 174-175. Strictly speaking, Breuer is referring here to the *Biur*'s defense of the Masoretic text; indeed, he offers a more positive assessment of Mendelssohn's treatment of rabbinic exegesis (see, e.g., 184-201). However, Arkush extends these concerns to Mendelssohn's treatment of rabbinic exegesis. See pages 64-65 in Chapter 1.

[16] While Mendelssohn's focus at this point in the *Biur* lies with Christian "translators" of the Bible, his description of these individuals—his claim that they "alter the Eternal's Torah," and that they change "not only the vowels and accents, but sometimes even the letters and words"—makes it clear that he is referring to scholarly critics of the Masoretic text. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, efforts to translate the Hebrew Bible were closely linked to criticism of the Masoretic text, since the production of an accurate vernacular translation was taken to require the production of an accurate Hebrew text. See Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 86-90.

[17] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:242-243; I have slightly altered my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 196-197. For Mendelssohn, if some scholars find it "plausible" to alter the Masoretic text, this move reflects a particular hermeneutic focus. See note 116 in Chapter 1.

[18] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 243; I have slightly altered my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 197.

[19] In his 1761 *Logical Terms*, Mendelssohn claims that individuals who count as *ne'emanim* transmit statements classified as *mekubalot* (opinions held on the basis of tradition), and that the Latin equivalent of *mekubalot* is *auctoritate verum*. See Mendelssohn, *Biur Milot Hahigayon*, 14:71-72, 77; see also Mendelssohn to Emden, 26 October 1773, in *JubA*, 19:179.

[20] Later in this chapter, we will consider one type of authority that might justify assent—the authority which statements possesses in virtue of their place within a "true" religion. See the discussion of Mendelssohn, Leibniz, and Hugo Grotius below.

[21] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:213-218. The history of the vocalizations and accents—the question of whether they constitute traditions that the Masoretes received and preserved or

innovations that the Masoretes developed and disseminated—is debated in pre-modern Jewish texts. On these disputes, see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 43-44; for contemporary scholarly views, see Revell, "Masoretic Text," 4:597-599. On the role of the accents in Mendelssohn's thought, see, e.g., Levenson, "Moses Mendelssohn's Understanding"; Raphael Jospe, "The Superiority of Oral over Written Communication: Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* and Modern Jewish Thought," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fo*x, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Nahum M. Sarna, 4 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 3:138-141; Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 68.

[22] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:218.

[23] I have omitted Mendelssohn's parenthetical reference to an earlier Jewish author.

[24] While the Hebrew refers to "the sages of Tiberias," it is clear that the *Biur*'s reference is to the Tiberian Masoretes: see, e.g., the discussion of "the men of Tiberias" in Ibid., 225.

[25] Ibid., 226-227. The "marks" refer to the symbols indicating the vocalizations and accents, while the "signs" refer to additional Masoretic notes: see, e.g., 224-227.

Mendelssohn borrows much of the language appearing in this passage from the sixteenth-century author Azariah de Rossi: cp. the *Biur*'s language with Azariah de Rossi, *Sefer Meor Einayim* (Mantua: 1574), 180. Nevertheless, insofar as Mendelssohn heavily edits this sixteenth-century source (eliminating much of de Rossi's argument while introducing new language), we can read the text quoted here as reflecting Mendelssohn's views—as reflecting elements of *Meor Einayim* that he is willing to endorse, and notions to which he is so committed that he introduces them into his Renaissance source. Indeed, at least one of the statements crucial to my argument—Mendelssohn's account of what was "possible" during biblical times—does not appear in de Rossi's work, and thus seems to constitute a Mendelssohnian insertion.

[26] Traditionally, while the *ketiv* appears in written Hebrew Bibles, the *keri* is followed during the text's liturgical recitation. On the *keri-ketiv* system, as well as debates surrounding its history, see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 44; for contemporary views, see William S. Morrow, "Kethib and Qere," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:24-30.

[27] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:227-228. The final line of the Hebrew—which I have translated as "the notes in the margins of the Masoretic text and the notes in additional Masoretic lists"—refers, literally, to "the *masora parva* and the *masora magna*" (see Haim Borodianski, "Anmerkungen," in *JubA*, 14:lxxxviii). The former is a collection of notes preserved in the margins of the Masoretic text, while the latter includes additional notes presented elsewhere in this edition. On the *masora parva* and *magna*, see Mulder, "The Transmission," 111-113.

[28] See pages 12-13 in my introduction.

[29] Indeed, even when the *Biur*'s introduction explicitly cites specific non-Jewish scholars, this text does not fully engage the details of the arguments associated with these thinkers' works. More specifically, as Breuer has shown, while Mendelssohn discusses the work of specific biblical scholars who claim to possess a pre-Masoretic version of the Bible (the Samaritan Pentateuch), it is difficult to view Mendelssohn's argument as an attempt to fully engage the details of European biblical scholarship, since the reasoning he employs had already been fiercely criticized in works with which he is familiar—since his argument is subject to objections which he knows but neglects to address. See Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 167-173.

[30] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:242-243.

[31] While these pre-modern sources do not reject the authority of the Masoretic text, they highlight significant ways in which this text differs from the original version of the Bible, and

thus seem to run the risk of generating—or least reinforcing—worries regarding the reliability of this edition. On this point, see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 163-173.

[32] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:218-223. Mendelssohn is concerned here with rabbinic and medieval discussions of the suggestion—presented most famously in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b-22a)—that the Pentateuch was originally written not in standard Hebrew characters (known as the *k'tav ashuri*), but rather in a different script (known as the *k'tav ivri*). On this debate, see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 166-171.

[33] Mendelssohn, *Or Linitivah*, 14:224. Mendelssohn traces this claim back to medieval kabbalistic traditions and the writings of Nahmanides.

[34] Ibid., 14:225-227. Mendelssohn is concerned here with the work of Elijah Bahur, a German-Jewish writer active during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

[35] Ibid., 14:244-245. I have slightly altered my translation in "From *Light for the Path*," 199-200.

[36] On Mendelssohn's use of *peshat* and the pre-modern background of this term, see pages 61-62 and note 130 in Chapter 1. On Mendelssohn's use of *derash*, *derush*, and *derashah*, see, e.g., Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 184-206; on the term *derash* (and its relation to *peshat*) in pre-modern sources, see Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, 3-88. As we will see later in this chapter, Mendelssohn provides an additional account of the methodologies informing these two types of readings—of the textual features to which *peshat* and *derash* readings attend.

Mendelssohn does not deny the existence of rabbinic interest in straightforward readings. Rather, he claims that in addition to focusing on the *peshat*, rabbinic exegetes adopt a second approach which ascribes further layers of meaning to the Bible. See Mendelssohn, *Hakdamah L'Megilat Kohelet*, 14:151; see also note 129 in Chapter 1.

[37] While Mendelssohn does not explicitly cite these passages as examples of the two types of scenarios that he envisions, the manner in which he discusses these texts makes it clear that they exemplify his two types of cases—that Exodus 21 is an example of an genuine contradiction between straightforward and rabbinic readings, while Genesis 44 is an example of a mere difference between these two approaches. See the sources cited in notes 38-39 below.

[38] On the rabbinic reading of these verses as permitting only the imposition of monetary fines, see the discussion of the Babylonian Talmud in Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 21:24, in *JubA*, 16:206-207. While Mendelssohn's comment on verse 24 does not explicitly describe this line as a site of interpretive contradiction, this verse appears in a biblical chapter that Mendelssohn describes as involving such contradictions: see *Biur* on Exodus 21, in *JubA*, 16:198-199. Moreover, insofar as Mendelssohn urges readers to follow "rabbinic tradition" with respect to this verse (rather than to adopt a straightforward reading), he urges readers to adopt precisely the course of action that he takes to appropriate in cases of interpretive contradiction.

[39] See Mendelssohn, *Hakdamah L'Megilat Kohelet*, 14:149; this follows my translation in "From Introduction to *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 178. This rabbinic reading appears in the midrashic collection Genesis Rabbah and is cited by the medieval exegete Rashi.

[40] To be sure, Mendelssohn's argument retains some ambiguity. When he urges us to leave aside "what seems to us to be the path of the *peshat*," is he suggesting that what "seems to us" to be a passage's straightforward reading is *not* a sound literal reading, or that our reading of the relevant passage does not yield a meaning God intends to communicate? That is, when rabbinic and straightforward readings yield contradictory results, is it the case that we have failed

to properly grasp the text's literal sense, but that a better reading would be compatible with the rabbinic approach? Or is it the case that while we *have* properly grasped the meaning that would emerge from a straightforward reading, this meaning is not one that God seeks to communicate?

[41] See Mendelssohn, *Alim L'Trufah*, 14:327; see also *Or Linitivah*, 14:242-243. As noted earlier, Mendelssohn composes the former text in collaboration with Dubno: see note 133 in Chapter 1. Indeed, Breuer has persuasively argued that concerns with such scholarship lurk behind Mendelssohn's treatment of rabbinic exegesis throughout the *Biur*: see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 117-222.

[42] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 21, in 16:198-199; I have altered my translation in "On Peshat and Derash," 205-206. While this passage explicitly discusses the work of the medieval Jewish exegete Rashbam, the problem that this passage addresses is associated by Mendelssohn with European biblical scholarship.

[43] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Biur Milot Hahigayon*, 14:71-72.

[44] See, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Alim L'Trufah*, 14:327.

[45] Mendelssohn, *Hakdamah L'Megilat Kohelet*, 14:148-149; this follows my translation in "From Introduction to *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*," 176-178. For background on Mendelssohn's commentary, as well as an account of ways in which this text addresses European scholarship, see Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 35-45; Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 184-201.

[46] As I discussed in note 36 above, Mendelssohn does not deny the existence of rabbinic interest in *peshat*, but rather insists that this interest coexists with an additional approach.

[47] See Mendelssohn, *Hakdamah L'Megilat Kohelet*, 14:149-150; *Biur* on Exodus 20:8, in *JubA*, 16:191; *Biur* on Deuteronomy 5:12, in *JubA*, 18:339 (on Mendelssohn as the author of this section of the *Biur*, see Sandler, *Habiur Latorah*, 153).

[48] Mendelssohn, *Hakdamah L'Megilat Kohelet*, 14:150-151; I have altered my translation in "From Introduction to *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*," 179-181.

[49] Mendelssohn, *Hakdamah L'Megilat Kohelet*, 14:148; this follows my translation in "From Introduction to *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*," 176. This text at times uses stronger language, stating that "there is no doubt that one who speaks through prophecy or the holy spirit says nothing without a specific intention" and that "there is no doubt that every utterance and lip movement of one who speaks through the holy spirit is intended for a specific matter"—that "there is no doubt" that biblical words are intended to express subtle nuances (these lines appear in 14:149 and 151 of the Hebrew original, and follow 178 and 181 in my English translation). However, when discussing the question of whether the Bible communicates meanings beyond the text's plain sense, Mendelssohn consistently uses the language cited in the body of this chapter—language which suggests that it *could* be the case that rabbinic exegesis accurately captures dimensions of the Bible's message.

[50] See page 62 in Chapter 1.

[51] See Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 21:24, in 206-207. In addition to noting the existence of such objections, Mendelssohn offers an interpretation of the text from the Babylonian Talmud (Bava Kamma 83b-84a) in which these objections are recorded. Moreover, he cites a variety of reasons for adopting the rabbinic reading of these biblical lines.

[52] See Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 14:30, in *JubA*, 16:124. In addition to summarizing the medieval readings in question (advanced by Rashbam and Ibn Ezra), Mendelssohn argues that careful attention to the biblical accents undermines the claims advanced by these exegetes.

[53] On the emergence of scholarly interest in Leibniz's writings on the mysteries, see Goldenbaum, "Spinoza's Parrot, Socinian Syllogisms, and Leibniz's Metaphysics: Leibniz's Three Strategies for Defending Christian Mysteries," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2002): 551-552. See also the sources cited in note 56 below.

On the identification of these doctrines—the Trinity, Incarnation, and Eucharist—as "mysteries," see the sources cited in note 56 below. While some thinkers might not identify the Eucharist as a "mystery," Leibniz explicitly describes this doctrine in such a manner: see, e.g., Leibniz, *De Demonstratione Possibilitatis Mysteriorum Eucharistae*, 6.1:515. In taking the Eucharist to claim that "Christ's body and blood are in some sense present in bread and wine," I mean to leave aside the question of whether this presence is understood in Catholic terms as transubstantiation or Lutheran terms as real presence.

[54] On Mendelssohn's negative attitude towards the mysteries, see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:92-95; for Bowman's English, see "Counterreflections," 17-20.

[55] See pages 201-203 of this chapter.

[56] A comprehensive survey of the relevant literature lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Some examples include Walter Sparn, "Das Bekenntnis des Philosophen: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz als Philosoph und Theologe," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Philosophie und Religionsphilosophie* 28, no. 2 (1986): 169-177; Marcelo Dascal, "Reason and the Mysteries of Faith: Leibniz on the Meaning of Religious Discourse," in *Leibniz, Language, Signs, and Thought: A Collection of Essays*, Foundations of Semiotics 10 (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1987), 93-124; Daniel C. Fouke, "Metaphysics and the Eucharist in the Early Leibniz," *Studia Leibnitiana* 24, no. 2 (1992): 145-159; Goldenbaum, "Die *Commentatiuncula de judice* als Leibnizens erste philosophische Auseinandersetzung mit Spinoza nebst der Mitteilung über ein neuaufgefundenes Leibnizensstück," in *Labora Diligenter*, ed. Martin Fontius, Hartmut Rudolph, and Gary Smith (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1999), 61-107; "Leibniz as a Lutheran," 169-192; "Transubstantiation," 79-102; "Spinoza's Parrot," 169-192; Eric Cave, "A Leibnizian Account of Why Belief in the Christian Mysteries is Justified," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 463-473; Adrian Bardon, "Leibniz on the Epistemic Status of the Mysteries," *Philosophy and Theology* 13, no.1 (2001): 143-158; Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*.

[57] See, e.g., Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation.*

[58] While Dascal suggests that this epistemology shifts throughout Leibniz's life (Dascal, "Reason and the Mysteries of Faith," 93-124), Goldenbaum and Antognazza have shown that Leibniz's position emerges at an early date and remains remarkably stable. See Goldenbaum, "Spinoza's Parrot," 571-574; Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, xiv-xv.

The issue of continuity in Leibniz's metaphysics continues to generate scholarly debate. For some of the key issues, see, e.g., the readings in Garber, *Leibniz*; Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[59] Leibniz, *Theodicy*, PD §5 (76/6:52). I have altered Huggard's translation.

While Dascal, Antognazza, and Goldenbaum have discussed aspects of the framework I outline below, these commentators have not—as far as I know—reconstructed the full range of arguments associated with this model. For example, these scholars have not fully clarified Leibniz's account of the "proofs of the truth of the religion"—in part because these readers have not discussed the sources (such as Grotius's writings) which Leibniz claims to utilize. While I have drawn on the work of these scholars when reconstructing Leibniz's views, then, the analysis outlined below is my own, and I will note the ways in which I diverge from previous readings.

[60] Two remarks are in order. The first involves my claim that, for Leibniz, we are entitled to affirm the mysteries if we satisfy *two* conditions. Strictly speaking, Leibniz also identifies a third task—the task of providing some "confused knowledge" of the mysteries' meaning—as crucial to belief in these doctrines. The background here is the idea that while the mysteries are not fully intelligible, these doctrines must receive some minimal interpretation in order to make belief possible (see the sources cited in note 56 above). However, insofar as this condition will not prove crucial to the broader issue at stake in this chapter—to Mendelssohn's appropriation of Leibniz, a move which does not revolve around potentially unintelligible doctrines—I will leave this issue for my notes, continuing to speak of the *two* conditions for belief in the mysteries.

The second point involves the relationship between my reading and the work of earlier commentators. By adopting the position outlined in the body of my chapter—by distinguishing proofs for a religion's truth (the "motives of credibility") from the capacity to address objections—I am breaking with Antognazza, who identifies the capacity to "uphold" the mysteries against objections as one of the "motives of credibility" for these doctrines. See, e.g., her account of such "motives" in Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, xix, , 69, 166, et al.

While I accept many of the claims advanced in Antognazza's excellent study, I believe that she misconstrues Leibniz's position on this point, for the passage cited in the body of my paper explicitly distinguishes "motives of credibility" from a capacity to address objections. This passage states that "all that remains for us then, after [*apres*] having believed in the Mysteries by reason of the proofs of the truth of the religion (which are called "motives of credibility") is to be able to *uphold* them against objections." The claim here is that providing "motives" and addressing objections are two distinct tasks—that we undertake the latter *"after"* we have accomplished the former. (Part of the problem here, it seems to me, is that Antognazza does not attend to the works that Leibniz explicitly identifies as exemplifying the search for motives of credibility.) Rather than accept Antognazza's reading, then, I will distinguish the task of providing "proofs" and "motives" from the task of "upholding" against objections, and I will attempt to determine what each task involves.

[61] For example, the *Theodicy* takes the "Christian religion" to involve texts such as "Holy Scripture," "articles" such as "original sin," and practices such as "the Eucharistic Sacrament." See Leibniz, *Theodicy*, PD §18 (84/6:60), 29 (91/6:67), 43 (91/6:74-75), 52 (102/6:79).

[62] Ibid., §29 (91/6:67). I have slightly altered Huggard's translation.

[63] On Leibniz's notion of "moral certainty," see, e.g., Adams, *Leibniz*, 197-198.

[64] Leibniz, *Defensio Trinitatis contra Wissowatium*, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, 6.1:522. Strictly speaking, this text acknowledges not only that biblically endorsed principles such as the Trinity are to be presumptively accepted, but also that any proposition *could* be presumed to be possible. As readers such as Antognazza have shown, however, Leibniz's central point is that a doctrine such as the Trinity, which is to at least some degree biblically endorsed, is entitled to a presumption of truth—to be provisionally affirmed until the emergence of a decisive proof to the contrary. On this presumption of truth, see Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, xvii, 16-27, et al; on the Bible and doctrines such as the Trinity, see note 86 below.

[65] Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), §4.14 (456); for the original French, see *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, in *Philosophische Schriften*, 5:439; I alter the translation. Future references will appear as Leibniz, *New Essays*, section (English/French).

[66] On this text's background, content, and reception, see Jan-Paul Heering, *Hugo Grotius*

as Apologist for the Christian Religion: A Study of His Work De Veritate Religionis Christianae, 1640, trans. J.C. Grayson, Studies in the History of Christian Thought 111 (Leiden: Brill, 2003). On Mendelssohn and this text, see page 201 below.

Two additional remarks are in order. First, by focusing on Grotius, we are by no means neglecting the other texts Leibniz cites; on the contrary, insofar as Grotius draws heavily on at least one of the other texts cited by Leibniz (the work of Phillipe Duplessis Mornay), a focus on Grotius is a focus on the broader tradition to which Leibniz alludes (on Grotius and Mornay, see Heering, *Hugo Grotius*, 93-162). Second, my point is not that we should *equate* Leibnizian and Grotian approaches to religion: most importantly, while Leibniz draws on Grotius's work in order to defend the mysteries, Grotius does not himself explicitly seek to defend these doctrines in the *Christian Religion* (see, e.g., 73-75). Rather, my point is that if Leibniz describes this Grotian text as exemplifying key dimensions of his own approach, we can draw on this text in order to reconstruct the Leibnizian model—that Grotius's work illuminates the epistemological framework mobilized by Leibniz to secure the Christian mysteries.

[67] On the reception of this text, see Ibid., xix-xx, 199-241.

[68] Like Leibniz, Grotius seems to understand a "religion" as a constellation of texts, beliefs, and behaviors: for example, the analysis of "the Christian religion" in books 2-3 of his treatise explores texts such as the New Testament, beliefs such as views on immortality, and practices such as "form of worship." See Hugo Grotius, *De Veritate Religionis Christianae*, Elibron Classics (Boston: Adamant Media Corporation, 2006), 22-57. References will appear as Grotius, *De Veritate*, section (page).

[69] Ibid., §1.25-26 (20-21). The underlined lines are section headings.

[70] See, e.g., Ibid., §1.21-25 (19-21), 2.10 (28-30), et al.

[71] For example, Grotius seems to admit that some small number of corruptions might have crept into core Christian texts: see, e.g., Ibid., §3.15 (52).

[72] Ibid., §1.26-2.1 (21-22).

[73] Mornay, cited by Leibniz, also advances this claim: see Heering, *Hugo Grotius*, 96.

[74] Grotius, *De Veritate*, §3.1 (43).

[75] While Grotius proceeds to provide additional arguments for the "authority" of key Christian texts, he insists that "authority has been sufficiently provided…by this alone."

[76] While Grotius does not clarify the acceptance to which these claims are entitled, there are hints in his treatise that this acceptance might be provisional. For example, he does not rule out the possibility that proofs *might* emerge, in the future, that undermine *some* claims endorsed by the New Testament—implying, perhaps, that acceptance of the New Testament's claims is provisional in the sense that it does not rule out the possibility of some future shift in belief. See Ibid., 3:12 (50). Nevertheless, Grotius does not address this issue in a clear manner.

[77] Ibid., §2.2-8 (22-28).

[78] Ibid., §2.8 (28).

[79] Ibid., §2.9 (28).

[80] Ibid., §2.10 (28-30).

[81] Ibid., §2.12 (32). See also §2.14-2.17 (33-36), which discuss Christian "precepts" governing sexual relations, the use of property, oath-taking, and the pursuit of the virtues.

[82] Ibid., §2.23 (42). Grotius also discusses the origins of Christianity, suggesting that the circumstances surrounding its emergence point to the tradition's truth: see §2.19 (37-38).

[83] Appearing throughout Leibniz's writings, this distinction receives its best known expression in Leibniz, *Theodicy*, PD §2-3 (74-75/6:50-51). I have altered Huggard's translation.

[84] Ibid., §28-29 (91/6:67).

[85] A similar idea appears, e.g., in Leibniz, *Commentatiuncula de Judice Controversarium*, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, 6.1:553.

[86] While Leibniz is troubled by the question of whether the mysteries are endorsed by the Bible, he concludes that the Bible, read through the lens of ecclesiastical tradition, speaks in favor of these doctrines. See Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, 74-76.

[87] Leibniz, *Theodicy*, §27 (90/6:66-67).

[88] On the background and content of this essay, see Goldenbaum, "Spinoza's Parrot," 561-563; Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, 20-30.

[89] Dascal and Antognazza have argued that by the time Leibniz composes the *Theodicy*, he has rejected even this second approach—that he permits us neither to definitively establish *the* way in which the mysteries come to pass, nor to identify *one* way in which these states of affairs *could* emerge. In order to clarify one way in which these states of affairs could emerge, Dascal and Antognazza suggest, we would have to clearly and distinctly explain the concepts involved in these doctrines, and we would thus rob these principles of the very feature that renders them *mysteries*—their mysteriousness (that is, their partial unintelligibility). See Dascal, "Reason and the Mysteries of Faith," 111-120; Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, 59-60.

Goldenbaum has shown this reading to be mistaken. Identifying one way in which the mysteries could be true need not rob these doctrines of all mysteriousness, for if we have merely identified *one* way in which the mysteries *could* be true, we have not determined *the* way in which they *are* true, and these doctrines thus retain a non-trivial degree of unintelligibility. Moreover, Leibniz continues to offer accounts of possible mechanisms behind the mysteries through the end of his life, including during the years of the *Theodicy*'s composition. Finally, he alludes to potential mechanisms in the *Theodicy* itself, and we can understand why—given his audience—this approach does not figure more prominently in this text. See Goldenbaum, "Spinoza's Parrot," 563-566, 571-574. We thus possess compelling textual and philosophical evidence for reading the *Theodicy* as continuing to endorse this approach. That is, when the *Theodicy* declares that we cannot fully grasp "the *how*" of mysteries (see, e.g., Leibniz, *Theodicy*, PD § 54 [103/6:80], 56 [104/6:81], 63 [109/6:86], 77 [118/6:96], 85 [121/6:99]), Leibniz claims only that we are unable to establish *the* way in which the mysteries come to pass, and not that we are unable to identify *one* way in which these states of affairs *could* emerge.

[90] Leibniz, *De Demonstratione Possibilitatis Mysteriorum Eucharistae*, 6.1:515.

[91] Leibniz, *Theodicy*, PD §19 (85-86/6:61-62). While Leibniz seems not to endorse this account, he does not suggest that offering such an argument would be methodologically unsound, and thus does not seem to hold that we must avoid pursuing this type of inquiry—that we should not attempt to outline possible mechanisms behind doctrines such as the Eucharist.

[92] Ibid., §86 (121-122/6:99-100).

[93] Ibid., §79 (118/6:96). I have altered Huggard's translation.

[94] Leibniz may envision other approaches, as well. For example, he seems to suggest that we can show mysteries to be free from contradiction by discovering analogies in nature—for instance, that we can point to natural cases of unity-in-multiplicity as indications that the Trinity is not absurd. See Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, xviii, 34-47, et al.

[95] See the passage cited on page 183 above.

[96] Leibniz, *Theodicy*, PD §26 (89-90/6:65-66).

[97] Ibid., §40 (97/6:40). Of course, Leibniz admits that, in some cases, a public discussion of objections might be useful: see, e.g., the text cited in the previous note.

[98] Insofar as Leibniz is discussing content whose examination and refutation would require "exact researches," he seems to be discussing the *details* of potential objections.

[99] On the Lavater affair, see pages 4-5 in my introduction.

[100] Mendelssohn, *Schreiben an den Herrn Diaconus Lavater zu Zürich*, in *JubA*, 7:9-10. I follow Bowman's translation in "Open Letter to Lavater," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*, 7-9.

[101] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:101. I diverge slightly from Bowman's translation in "Counterreflections," 26. Insofar as Mendelssohn takes personal *Glückseligkeit* to refer to the happiness that emerges as an individual engages in self-cultivation, he seems to view eternal *Glückseligkeit* as the happiness that emerges as this pursuit continues after death. Indeed, as is well known, Mendelssohn frequently insists that individuals continue to pursue perfection after death (see, e.g., Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 56-62). On individual and collective *Glückseligkeit* for Mendelssohn, see pages 48-52 in Chapter 1.

[102] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:75-76. Strictly speaking, the German reads "*zur G.*"; however, it is clear from the context—which repeatedly refers to *Glückseligkeit*—that the "*G*" is an abbreviation for this term. Moreover, it is clear from the context—which is concerned with the fate of individuals—that Mendelssohn's focus lies with personal rather than collective *Glückseligkeit*.

[103] Mendelssohn, *Schreiben an Lavater*, 7:10; see also "Open Letter," 9. On Mendelssohn and rabbinic texts, see *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:101; see also pages 55-56 above.

[104] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:82-83; see also 89-90. Mendelssohn also suggests that we must inquire into whether the doctrines proclaimed by such an individual cohere with other statements which we take to be divinely revealed—for example, into whether the doctrines proclaimed by a figure such as Christ cohere with the content of the Hebrew Bible.

[105] Ibid., 86-87. For further discussion of this dimension of Mendelssohn's argument, including the question of how to understand this reasoning in light of early modern attacks on Mosaic miracles, see pages 212-213 below, as well as note 44 in Chapter 5.

[106] Mendelssohn to Bonnet, 9 February 1770, in *JubA*, 7:321-325. For further discussion of Mendelssohn's position, including the question of how to understand his view in light of attacks on Mosaic prophecy, see pages 212-213 below, as well as note 44 in Chapter 5.

[107] Insofar as Mendelssohn advances this argument shortly after his discussion of potential "proofs for the religion"—after his account of what these proofs involve (Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:82-90) and a utilization of this model for the assessment of Christianity (90-95)—he indicates that we are to understand this argument as another application of his theory of "proofs." That is, insofar as he appends this argument to an extended discussion of such "proofs," it seems reasonable to conclude that this argument *also* involves such proofs.

[108] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:98. I follow Bowman's translation in "Counterreflections," 23.

[109] The factors which led us to treat Mendelssohn's argument regarding Jewish practice as a "proof for the religion" point to a similar reading of this claim: see note 107 above. Indeed, insofar as this passage appears *in the midst* of Mendelssohn's application of his theory of

"proofs" to Christianity, it seems difficult to deny that he understands this passage as another application of this theory—as another attempt to provide a "proof" for the Jewish religion.

[110] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:90-91. I follow Bowman's translation in "Counterreflections," 16.

[111] See pages 212-213 in this chapter and note 44 in Chapter 5.

[112] See page 103 and note 46 in Chapter 2.

[113] This text is listed in Meyer, *Verzeichniss*, 40.

[114] I am referring to the 1765 *Oeuvres philosophiques latines & fraçoises de feu Mr. de Leibnitz*; this text is listed in Meyer, *Verzeichniss*, 19. For the *New Essays*' reference to motives of credibility, see Leibniz, *New Essays*, §4.18 (497/5:480), 4.20 (510/5:492); this invocation is obscured in the English translation, which renders *motifs de credibilité* as "rational grounds for belief." For this text's discussion of presumptive truth, see pages 184-185 above.

[115] I am referring to the 1768 *Opera Omnia*; this text is listed in Meyer, *Verzeichniss*, 7. For the *Defense*'s concern with contradiction and presumption, see pages 184 and 191 above.

[116] See Mendelssohn to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, 1 February 1774, in *JubA*, 12.2:39-41. On the background of this letter, see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 556-558.

[117] See Mendelssohn to Bonnet, 9 February 1770, in 7:319. More precisely, Mendelssohn suggests that Leibniz's "theological writings"—unlike Bonnet's work—"become involved with the particular doctrines of Christianity and seek to render them agreeable with reason."

[118] Mendelssohn describes the "particular doctrines of Christianity" as the "doctrines which are proper to Christianity, and through which Christianity is distinguished from the other religions" (Ibid., 318-319). The *Counterreflections*—written during the same period—identifies the mysteries as such doctrines, suggesting that these principles are central to Christianity (*Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:91-92) and distinguish it from a religion such as Judaism (95).

[119] See note 12 above.

[120] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 90-91/8:157-158. As we have seen, *Jerusalem* suggests that beyond these two types of "eternal truths," we also confront "temporal, historical truths."

[121] See Leibniz, *Theodicy*, PD §2-5 (74-76/6:50-52). On Mendelssohn's use of this text (including the ways in which he breaks with Leibniz), see Altmann, "Commentary," 206-208.

[122] See the *Theodicy* citation in the previous note. Despite alluding to this position's role in Leibniz's account of the mysteries, Altmann focuses on this view's role in Leibniz's theory of miracles. See Altmann, "Commentary," 206-207; "Moses Mendelssohn's Concept," 236-238.

[123] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 126/8:191.

[124] See, e.g., Ibid., 89-90/8:156-157.

[125] See, e.g., Ibid., 99/8:165.

[126] See, e.g., Ibid., 98-99/8:165, 127/8:192.

[127] Most famously, Mendelssohn criticizes what he takes to be Leibniz's Christian views on eternal punishment. On this topic, see, e.g., Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 48-64.

[128] See Mendelssohn to Lessing, 1 February 1774, in 12.2:39-41.

[129] See pages 57-63 in Chapter 1.

[130] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 80-81/8:148.

[131] In this passage, the phrase "first principles" refers to the premises of an individual's argument: for example, this text's example of a "first principle" is a view regarding the question of whether "Pythagoras actually ha[d] a golden hip."

[132] See pages 12-13 in my introduction.

[133] I wish to avoid confusion. There are reasons to think that when Mendelssohn defends contested beliefs at various points in his German and Hebrew writings, he is influenced not only by the Leibnizian model I discuss, but also by other conceptual models. For example, as various readers have pointed out, when *Jerusalem* defends the believability of one of Judaism's core narratives (the historicity of Sinaitic revelation), this treatise draws heavily on arguments associated with medieval Jewish thinkers such as Saadia Gaon and Judah Halevi (see, e.g., Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 168-177). Similarly, Leora Batnitzky has suggested—in correspondence—that when the *Biur* defends contested beliefs such as Masoretic and rabbinical reliability, Mendelssohn might be influenced by the writings of Maimonides. After all, just as Mendelssohn defends these contested beliefs by appealing to authority and outlining a way in which it would be possible for his views to be correct, so too does Maimonides defend a contested belief—the notion of creation in time—by invoking the authority of key figures and asserting the possibility of the doctrine in question. See, e.g., Maimonides, *Guide*, 2.21-25 (2.314-330); for Mendelssohn's familiarity with Maimonides's argument, see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Exodus 20:2, in 16:187. (I leave aside as beyond the scope of this dissertation the controversial question of whether Maimonides *actually* endorses creation in time, or *secretly* affirms the eternity of the world. For an introduction to this issue, see Seeskin, "Metaphysics and its Transcendence," in *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, 91-100.)

I agree that Mendelssohn might be influenced by, and even draw on, models other than one he discovers in the work of Leibniz. Nevertheless, whatever other sources we identify as shaping Mendelssohn's arguments, it seems to me that the Leibnizian model I discuss in this chapter is crucial to his thought. The key point here is that central aspects of Mendelssohn's reasoning—in particular, his insistence on describing Judaism as a "true" religion, his view that this "truth" is linked to the preservation of a revelation regarding "eternal felicity," and his move from the "truth" of a religion to the authority of core texts—constitute elements of the Leibnizian model but are absent from the other approaches cited above, strongly suggesting that it is this early modern Christian approach which provides Mendelssohn's basic framework. Put differently, while Mendelssohn might draw on (and be influenced by) a variety of sources, a central element of his work is a covert turn to a model inherited from Christian predecessors—an implicit mobilization of an epistemological framework deployed to secure the Christian mysteries.

[134] While there are rabbinic stories in which God speaks to sages, the rabbis of late antiquity (as well as later figures such as the Masoretes) are not typically taken to derive their authority from a prophetic capacity. See, e.g., Urbach, *The Sages*, 577-579, et al.

[135] See note 139 in Chapter 1 as well as pages 240-242 (and notes 37-45) in Chapter 5.

[136] Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:94. I have altered Bowman's translation in "Counterreflections," 19.

[137] If Christianity does not preserve a revelation beyond the divine instruction preserved by Judaism (that is, beyond the Hebrew Bible), then on the Leibnizian model there would seem to be no grounds for treating Christianity as a distinct *true* religion.

[138] See pages 240-242 and notes 42-45 in Chapter 5.

[139] See, in particular, note 139 in Chapter 1 and note 45 in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5
Rethinking Mendelssohn

I began this dissertation by expressing uncertainty regarding the prospects for explicating Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, wondering whether we can clarify what this thinker means to argue when he presents his theory of Jewish practice—whether we can reconstruct the details of his approach to Judaism's "living script," or whether we should harbor doubts about the sincerity and relevance of his philosophy of Judaism. Chapters 2-4, in turn, have done much to dispel this uncertainty, establishing that we can reconstruct key dimensions of Mendelssohn's position if we attend carefully to his writings and context. More specifically, by drawing on his well-known German writings, on his little-known Hebrew works, and on neglected developments in early modern thought, these last three chapters have shed light on key claims which have long generated confusion—his claims that Jewish practice enables adherents to avoid "disfiguring" their religious beliefs, that Jewish practice serves to promote "the felicity of the nation," and that modern Jews have not been freed "from the strict obedience" they "owe to the law."

The remainder of my dissertation will explore the implications of this analysis, both for the issues of sincerity and relevance raised in Chapter 1, and for a variety of additional questions in fields ranging from history to philosophy. Chapter 5 will focus on my reading's implications for our understanding of Mendelssohn's work, synthesizing the results of the previous chapters to advance my dissertation's central interpretive thesis, and addressing two ongoing debates about the character of his thought. The key conclusion emerging from Chapters 2-4, I will argue, is that we should read Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice as a response to his views on the nature of history—that one of his central goals is to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing perils grounded in history. Moreover, I will suggest, this reading sheds light on two questions that continue to generate considerable debate: the question of whether

Mendelssohn is best read as a covert Deist or a traditionalist Jew, and the connected question of how his engagement with Enlightenment thought is related to his view of the Jewish tradition. My answer to the first question is that Mendelssohn is best understood neither as a Deist, nor as a traditionalist, but rather as an innovative thinker who at times adopts conservative positions—as a sincere defender of the Jewish tradition who exhibits striking continuities with pre-modern thinkers, but who also breaks with such figures in order to present Judaism as a religion well suited to modern life. My answer to the second question, in turn, is that Mendelssohn presents Judaism as a path out of dilemmas associated with Enlightenment thought.

Mendelssohn on Jewish Practice

Let me begin by revisiting a question I posed in my introduction: how should we understand Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice? Chapter 2 revealed that when he links this system to conceptual "disfiguring" at a crucial moment in *Jerusalem*, he means to suggest that Jewish practice can address an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history—the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems. For Mendelssohn, if Jewish practice leads adherents to privilege actions over specific sets of words and thereby discourages fixed verbal formulas, Jewish practice can protect us from allowing preexisting creedal formulas to impede our ability to revise our views, and thus from distorting our religious beliefs by rejecting emerging commitments we should affirm—commitments that we have grounds to accept as following from what we take to be compelling philosophical models. Chapter 3 then established that a concern with history also animates a second key element of *Jerusalem*, for when Mendelssohn repeatedly links Jewish practice to the emergence of collective "felicity," he is claiming that Jewish practice can address

an ethico-political danger grounded in social history—the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human flourishing and political harmony. According to Mendelssohn, insofar as Jewish practice requires actions even in seemingly mundane areas of life and thereby generates frequent reflection, Jewish practice can orient cognition and desire in a way that impedes the development of harmful social conditions, and thus cultivate the emergence of Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving society—citizens who will strive to ensure that social change promotes perfection and civic accord, rather than corruption and civic strife. Finally, Chapter 4 showed that a concern with history also lies behind *Jerusalem*'s insistence on "strict obedience" to Jewish law, for even as Mendelssohn links these norms' binding status to their basis in the Hebrew Bible, he defends belief in this biblical foundation by presenting an argument about history, and more specifically by attempting to address a textual danger grounded in the study of history—the danger that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the scriptural basis of Jewish law. Implicitly relying on an epistemological model deployed by Leibniz to secure the Christian mysteries, Mendelssohn argues that the historical study of Scripture has not deprived the laws governing Jewish practice of the biblical basis crucial to their authority. Mendelssohn's perplexing claims about Jewish practice thus turn out to be claims about history—about the ways in which Jewish practice functions as a safeguard against dangers linked to historical change, and about the grounds on which this system remains binding despite a threat linked to historical knowledge. One of his central goals, in other words, is to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing perils grounded in history. We should read his conception of Jewish practice as a response to his views on the nature of history.

To be sure, in advancing this thesis, I am breaking with previous interpretations of Mendelssohn's thought. More specifically, beyond revealing arguments which have gone

unrecognized by other scholars, I am breaking with the widespread view that Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice is best understood as revolving around his claim about idolatry—the claim, discussed in Chapter 1, that Judaism combats idolatry by replacing pictorial symbols that might be venerated with meaningful actions unlikely to be worshipped.[1] After all, this reading notes, *Jerusalem* devotes several pages to this theme, even suggesting at one point that the "main purpose" of Jewish law is to eliminate "imagery" that might generate improper worship;[2] indeed, echoing this point, the *Biur* insists that God revealed "the commandments to protect [Jews] from abominations" such as "the errors of idols."[3] By contrast, while not denying the importance of idolatry in Mendelssohn's thought, I am suggesting that we more accurately capture the concerns animating his work when we focus on the theme of history, since a concern with this theme turns out to be the factor that unifies diverse Mendelssohnian claims. Even though the notion that Jewish practice combats idolatry receives considerable attention in *Jerusalem*, and even though this text at one point casts the struggle against idolatry as Jewish law's "main purpose," my analysis shows that this argument is *only one* of Mendelssohn's many claims about the value and authority of Jewish practice, and that his additional arguments revolve around perils linked to historical change and historical knowledge.[4]

Indeed, Mendelssohn's account of idolatry *itself* lends support to my reading, for this account *is itself* an argument about historical change. Consider *Jerusalem*'s reasoning:

> The first visible signs which men used to designate their abstract concepts were presumably the things themselves…Thus did the first physicians carry live snakes with them as a sign that they knew how to render the harmful harmless. In the course of time, one may have found it more convenient to take images of the things;…later, for the sake of brevity, to make use of outlines, and next, to let a part of the outline stand for the whole, and at last, to compose out of heterogeneous parts a shapeless but *meaningful whole*; and this mode of designation is called *hieroglyphics*…These different modifications of writing and modes of designation must also have had different effects…The great multitude was either not at all or only half instructed in the notions which were to be associated with these perceptible signs. They saw the signs not as mere signs, but believed them to be the things

> themselves. As long as one still used the things themselves or their images and outlines, instead of signs, this error was easily made… Hieroglyphic script could, to be sure, partly correct this error, or at least did not foster it as much as the outlines did, for its images were composed of heterogeneous and ill-matched parts, misshapen and preposterous figures which had no existence of their own in nature and could, therefore, as one should think, not be taken for writing. But this enigmatic and strange character of the composition itself afforded superstition the material for all sorts of inventions…One sees how this could have given rise to the worship of animals and images, the worship of idols and human beings.[5]

Mendelssohn describes idolatry as the result of a historical process, suggesting that "the worship of idols" emerges "in the course of time" from "modifications of writing"—that cultures undergo a process involving the emergence of symbolic "images" and subsequent development of "hieroglyphics," and that just as the first stage can "easily" generate a situation in which "signs" are conflated with "the things themselves," so too does the second stage fail to correct this error because hieroglyphics are "enigmatic" and foster "superstition." The idea here is that as cultures develop images and then turn to hieroglyphic script, these cultures might find themselves mired in idolatrous worship. After all, Mendelssohn suggests, images and hieroglyphics run the risk of being treated not merely as symbols but also as objects of reverence, since images can be seen as bearing an essential relation to the deity they depict and thus as sharing in the deity's holiness and meriting veneration, and since hieroglyphics are so mysterious that a community might give up on the task of understanding their meaning and instead treat them with "superstition"—since hieroglyphics are so mysterious that they might be treated less as symbols of a powerful deity and more as powerful objects in their own right, and thus as objects we should approach with the awe and reverence we would otherwise direct exclusively to God.[6] When Mendelssohn claims that Jewish practice combats idolatrous worship, then, he is advancing *precisely* the type of claim we encountered elsewhere in this dissertation: a claim that Jewish practice is capable of addressing a danger grounded in history—in this case, idolatry that emerges from a historical process involving the development and transformation of signs.[7] The specifically historical

dimension of Mendelssohn's position is even more explicit in the *Biur*, which declares that "the errors of idols" emerge from a flawed attitude towards "signs" that takes shape "over the length of time and the corruption of the ages."[8] Far from challenging my interpretation, then, Mendelssohn's treatment of idolatry lends support to the new reading I am proposing. If three of his key claims about Jewish practice are claims about dangers associated with history, and if a fourth claim—about idolatry—is *also* concerned with "the course of time" and "the corruption of the ages," then the best way to read his position is as fundamentally concerned with history.

Of course, in breaking with the widespread reading that focuses on idolatry, I am echoing aspects of an interpretive approach which *does* acknowledge Mendelssohn's concern with history—which suggests that his treatment of Judaism is driven, in part, by a desire to defend this tradition from historical challenges. More specifically, various commentators have suggested that when *Jerusalem* discusses the value of Jewish practice, Mendelssohn means to show that Jewish law merits adherence despite early modern views on history. For example, Breuer has suggested that Mendelssohn is worried about "historicist notions that viewed religion in terms of conditioned development and progressive evolution," and that therefore presented Judaism as susceptible to reform or rejection in light of historical developments.[9] Similarly, Michael Morgan has suggested that Mendelssohn is worried about a widespread view which holds that "the destruction of the Jewish state made the ceremonial laws of Judaism defunct," and which therefore insists that adherence to Jewish practice is not required of modern Jews.[10]

Despite agreeing with aspects of these readings, my analysis constitutes a significant break with this interpretive tradition. Like Breuer and Morgan, I take Mendelssohn to be worried about historical threats to Judaism, for I argue that he seeks to address developments in the historical study of Scripture that threaten the biblical basis of Jewish law. However, unlike

these readers, I am arguing that Mendelssohn's concern with historical perils extends far beyond a concern with threats *to* Judaism.[11] While other scholars have presented a Mendelssohn who sees Judaism as *requiring* protection against historical perils, I have uncovered a Mendelssohn who also sees Judaism as *offering* protection against such dangers—against conceptual distortion associated with the rise and fall of philosophical systems, and against corrupting and destabilizing developments arising from social change. While other scholars have suggested that Mendelssohn is concerned with the question of *how Jews can protect Judaism* from threats grounded in history, I have shown that he is also deeply concerned with the question of *how Judaism can protect Jews* from such perils; for him, history functions not only as a source of threats that Jews should resist for the sake of the Judaism, but also as a source of threats that Judaism can resist for the sake of Jews. My reading, then, suggests that history plays a more fundamental role in Mendelssohn's thought than has been recognized. My reading suggests not only that his conception of Jewish practice is centrally concerned with dangers linked to history, but also that this concern extends far beyond a worry about historical threats to Judaism.

Traditionalist or Deist

The previous pages have addressed the first question raised in my introduction, offering a new reading of Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice. What I now wish to do is to consider the second question I posed in that earlier section, reflecting on what we learn from offering a reconstruction of this position. More specifically, I will suggest that my reading sheds light on two issues that continue to generate considerable debate—the question of whether Mendelssohn is best read as a covert Deist or a traditionalist Jew, and the connected question of how his engagement with Enlightenment thought is related to his view of the Jewish tradition.

Let us begin with the first question. As noted in my introduction, recent years have seen conflicting assessments of Mendelssohn's thought, with Sorkin presenting this eighteenth-century figure as a traditionalist Jew and Arkush suggesting that *Jerusalem*'s author is best read as a covert Deist.[12] To review, Sorkin's Mendelssohn is a thinker who uses "novel means for conservative ends," and who is "closer in matter to the Andalusian tradition" than to other views —who uses Enlightenment philosophy to defend revealed religion, and who exhibits continuities with authors belonging to a strand of medieval Jewish thought that "kept philosophy subordinate to piety and observance."[13] By contrast, Arkush's Mendelssohn is a thinker who defends Judaism with arguments that are "more rhetorical than real," who might have been a "pure Deist…merely pretending…to be a believing Jew," and who seeks to "retain his credentials" for the sake of "propagating a version of Judaism suitable to modern times." The idea here is that Mendelssohn does not intend to provide adequate reasons for fidelity to Judaism, that he may have secretly rejected Judaism's claim to preserve a divine revelation, but that he feigns loyalty to this tradition in order to fashion a religion suitable to the modern world—that he seeks to maintain his influence among Jews by professing a commitment to Judaism, and that he hopes to use this influence to win support for a new form of this religion appropriate to modern life.[14]

I believe that my reading sheds new light on this debate, lending strong support to, but also going beyond, a "middle position" recently proposed by Michah Gottlieb—a reading which agrees with Arkush that Mendelssohn seeks to fashion a form of Judaism appropriate to modern life, but which follows Sorkin in insisting that Mendelssohn is a sincere defender of the Jewish tradition.[15] In keeping with Sorkin's proposal, my analysis suggests that there are occasions where Mendelssohn should be read as using "novel means for conservative ends." The key here is Chapter 4, which reveals a Mendelssohn who seeks to retain beliefs central to pre-modern

Jewish thought despite widespread attacks, but who pursues this goal by relying on epistemological models derived from distinctively modern sources. That is, Chapter 4 reveals a Mendelssohn who adopts "conservative" positions in the sense that he retains inherited views such as a belief in Masoretic reliability,[16] but who employs "novel" tools in the sense that this retention depends on Leibnizian epistemology. Indeed, Chapter 4 reveals a Mendelssohn whose use of "novel" means brings him into proximity with the very medieval Jewish thinkers discussed by Sorkin: for example, when the *Biur* draws on early modern theology to affirm the reliability of rabbinic exegesis, Mendelssohn's conclusions echo claims advanced by the prominent Andalusian thinker Nahmanides.[17] My reading thus suggests that Sorkin's emphasis on Enlightenment and Andalusian thought captures a key dimension of Mendelssohn's work.

At the same time, if my analysis highlights Mendelssohn's use of "novel means for conservative ends," my reading also suggests that he diverges in key ways from the Andalusian predecessors cited by Sorkin. An instructive example emerges if we turn to the work of Judah Halevi, a twelfth-century Andalusian figure whose thought is singled out by Sorkin for its affinities with Mendelssohn's views.[18] Consider the following text from Halevi's best known work, his fictional dialogue between a Jewish sage and the non-Jewish king of the Khazars:

> THE RABBI: I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the Israelites out of Egypt with signs and miracles;…who sent Moses and His Law, and subsequently thousands of prophets, who confirmed His Law by promises to those who observed, and threats to the disobedient. We believe in what is contained in the Torah—a very large domain.
>
> THE KHAZARI:…Shouldst thou, O Jew, not have said that thou believest in the Creator of the world, its Governor and Guide, who created and keeps thee, and such attributes which serve as evidence for every believer, and for the sake of which he pursues justice in order to resemble the Creator in His wisdom and justice?
>
> THE RABBI: That which thou dost express is speculative and political religion, to which inquiry leads; but this is open to many doubts. Now ask the philosophers, and thou wilt find that they do not agree on one action or on one principle, since they rely on theories;

> some of these can be established by arguments, some of them are only plausible, some even less capable of being proved.[19]

In Chapter 2, we saw that Mendelssohn presents Judaism as encouraging adherents to draw on emerging philosophical systems to lend determinate content to categories such as providence. By contrast, in the text cited above, Halevi seems to be rejecting a similar view of this tradition, for while Mendelssohn envisions a Judaism in which individuals generate core commitments on the basis of emerging philosophical models, Halevi suggests that what Jews "believe" is not "speculative…religion, to which inquiry leads"—that Judaism is *not* a tradition which encourages adherents to develop core commitments on the basis of "philosophers" and their "theories."[20] Similarly, in Chapter 3, we saw that Mendelssohn presents Judaism as a tradition which trains adherents to foster social well-being by pursuing a goal rationally recognized as divinely endorsed—which trains adherents to assess society's works and to act on the results of such judgments, and which accomplishes this task by disposing individuals to recognize and seek the divinely endorsed *telos* of perfection. By contrast, in the passage cited above, Halevi seems to be rejecting a similar view of this tradition, for while Mendelssohn envisions a Judaism in which adherents secure political well-being by conforming their pursuits to rationally recognized divine ends, Halevi insists that what Jews "believe" is not a "speculative and political religion" in which an adherent "pursues justice in order to resemble the Creator"—that Judaism is *not* a tradition which seeks to promote social well-being through the pursuit of a goal rationally recognized as divinely endorsed.[21] My analysis, then, suggests that Mendelssohn exhibits continuities with, but also diverges from, medieval thinkers such as Nahmanides and Halevi. My analysis suggests that while Mendelssohn's treatment of the Bible combines "conservative" and "novel" elements in the manner that Sorkin proposes, Mendelssohn's emphasis on philosophical systems and collective felicity breaks with the Andalusian tradition that Sorkin highlights.[22]

We can go further. I have just suggested that my analysis reveals a Mendelssohn who diverges from an Andalusian predecessor such as Halevi in order to advance a claim about the use of philosophy—in order to present Judaism as a tradition which encourages adherents to draw on emerging philosophical systems to lend determinate content to categories such as providence. This point lends support to Arkush's claim that Mendelssohn seeks to fashion a type of religion suitable for the modern world. When Mendelssohn advances the claim about philosophical systems which separates him from Andalusian thought, he is presenting Judaism as a religion that encourages conceptual flexibility—that permits adherents to revise their understandings of religious truths in light of shifting philosophical systems. If we revisit his comments on these models, in turn, we learn that he views modernity as an era which requires the conceptual flexibility Judaism fosters. Recall his comments in the *Prize Essay*:

> The criticism is commonly advanced against philosophy that, in its doctrines, no particular conviction is ever to be hoped for since in every century new systems rise up…In the dark ages Aristotle meant far more to philosophers…For a long time his proclamations were considered certain, that is, until Descartes and Leibniz came along.[23]

Mendelssohn suggests that while the medieval world was characterized by philosophical stability, modernity involves philosophical turmoil which requires conceptual flexibility—that while Aristotelianism for a long time" was "considered certain" during "the dark ages," modernity has witnessed a sequence of "new systems" that require us to revise "doctrines." Consider, as well, his comments in the *Morning Hours* regarding his intellectual context:

> My philosophy is no longer the philosophy of the times. Mine has too much of the stench of that school in which I was educated…Since then, this school's reputation has fallen considerably, and has dragged into its decline the reputation of speculative philosophy as such. Germany's best minds recently speak of all speculation with scornful disdain. They insist throughout on facts, restrict themselves merely to evidence of the senses…It is time to give the wheel a push, to again bring up what, in the circular course of things, for too long has been brought under foot. But I am too aware of my weakness…The business should be reserved for better powers, for the profundity of a *Kant,* who hopefully will again build up with the same spirit with which he pulled down.[24]

Mendelssohn claims to live in an era requiring conceptual flexibility—an era that will involve "build[ing]" a new rationalist system after the "decline" of old models, and that might therefore require the revision of commitments grounded in the latter. When my analysis reveals a Mendelssohn who links Judaism to conceptual flexibility, then, my analysis reveals a Mendelssohn who attempts to fashion a form of Judaism well suited to modern life—who breaks with medieval thinkers in order to argue that Judaism cultivates a posture crucial to modernity.

Consider, moreover, the other divergence from an Andalusian predecessor noted above—Mendelssohn's decision to present Judaism as a religion which trains adherents to pursue social well-being. As we saw in Chapter 3, his point is that Jewish practice can cultivate the emergence of Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving society—citizens who will strive to ensure that social change promotes perfection and civic accord, rather than corruption and civic strife. If we consider Mendelssohn's views on eighteenth-century society, in turn, we discover that he hopes for the emergence of a modern world to which this type of Judaism would make a key contribution—a world in which it would be important for Jews to engage in practices which train them to pursue society's well-being. Consider the following text from the *Preface*:

> I take pleasure in reflecting along with Mr. Dohm on the grounds that the philanthropist has for favoring the civil admission of my brethren, and on the various difficulties…And I take pleasure in comparing these difficulties with the advantages that will accrue to the state that first succeeds in turning these indigenous colonists into citizens and enlisting into its service the many hands and heads born for its service.[25]

Mendelssohn hopes for a world in which Jews are granted equal rights and have opportunities to generate "advantages" for the state—a world that would seem to benefit from precisely the type of Judaism outlined above, for if this tradition's practices can cultivate a commitment to assessing and improving society, then this tradition can foster the emergence of the productive citizens envisioned by the *Preface*. Consider, as well, *Jerusalem*'s appeal for Jewish civic rights:

> And you, dear brothers and fellow men, who follow the teachings of Jesus…should you believe that you cannot love us in return as brothers and unite with us as citizens as long as we are outwardly distinguished from you by the ceremonial law?…If civil union cannot be obtained under any other condition than our departing from the laws which we still consider binding on us, then we are sincerely sorry to find it necessary to declare that we must rather do without civil union.[26]

Mendelssohn hopes for a world in which Jews "unite" with non-Jews in "civil union" while still adhering to "the ceremonial law." The vision here is of a world in which Jews participate in the life of a European state while still enacting their "living script," and thus of a world that would seem to require the type of Judaism envisioned by Mendelssohn—a Judaism whose laws are compatible with, and even conducive to, participation in a modern society. When my analysis reveals a Mendelssohn who presents Judaism as cultivating engaged citizens, then, my analysis reveals a Mendelssohn who is again seeking to fashion a form of Judaism well suited to modern life—who breaks with medieval thinkers in order to cast Judaism as cultivating a posture crucial to modernity. My analysis, in other words, lends support to one aspect of Arkush's reading, uncovering a Mendelssohn who develops "a version of Judaism suitable to modern times."[27]

Nevertheless, if my analysis strengthens one of Arkush's claims, my analysis casts doubt on his broader argument—on the idea that while Mendelssohn professes loyalty to Judaism in order to secure his "credentials," he does not *actually* intend to provide adequate reasons for fidelity to this tradition, and may in fact have secretly rejected Judaism's claim to preserve a divine revelation. Arkush's interpretation rests primarily on three points: (1) the suggestion that many of the arguments with which Mendelssohn defends Judaism are undeveloped or inconsistent, failing to clarify key lines of reasoning or assuming different forms in different texts;[28] (2) the claim that these arguments not only are undeveloped and inconsistent, but also fail to respond to the challenges Mendelssohn confronts, most notably the accusation (associated with Cranz) that Judaism impermissibly endorses religious coercion,[29] and the charge (associated

with Spinoza) that the Hebrew Bible is not a reliable record of an enduringly binding divine revelation;[30] and (3) the demonstration that diverse textual and historical factors are compatible with the view that Mendelssohn denies the occurrence of biblical revelation, with one factor being his insistence that individuals can grasp core religious truths without a miraculous communication from God, and another factor being precedents for covert denials of revelation among thinkers with whom Mendelssohn is familiar.[31] Taken together, Arkush suggests, this evidence casts doubt on the sincerity of Mendelssohn's defense of Judaism. If Mendelssohn defends Judaism with inconsistent and undeveloped arguments which fail to respond to pressing challenges, and if his writings and context can be interpreted as reflecting a denial of revelation, then the most plausible conclusion is that he does not intend to provide a substantive defense of Judaism, and that he might secretly deny this tradition's claim to preserve a divine revelation.

Admittedly, my analysis in Chapters 2-4 does not directly address all of Arkush's claims. For example, I have shown neither that all of Mendelssohn's arguments are consistent and fully developed,[32] nor that these arguments are capable of refuting charges associated with Cranz and Spinoza—that Mendelssohn adequately addresses worries regarding Judaism and religious coercion, or that he successfully addresses each argument associated with Spinoza.[33] Similarly, I mean to dispute neither that Mendelssohn affirms the achievability of religious knowledge without divine revelation, nor that his context offers precedents for covert denials of revelation. Nevertheless, my analysis casts doubt on Arkush's reading. If my claims in Chapters 2-3 are correct, then two of Mendelssohn's central arguments about Jewish practice are neither undeveloped nor inconsistent. After all, on my reading, Mendelssohn not only works out detailed accounts of how Jewish practice resists conceptual "disfiguring" and promotes collective "felicity," but also repeats key aspects of these accounts across diverse writings:

Mendelssohn emphasizes the importance of conceptual flexibility throughout his German and Hebrew works,[34] and he presents accounts of Judaism's contribution to collective felicity in both *Jerusalem* and the *Biur*.[35] Similarly, if my argument in Chapter 4 is correct, then Mendelssohn attempts to provide what he would see as a substantive response to at least one of the key challenges he confronts. That is, regardless of how we assess his response to the claims about coercion and revelation associated with Cranz and Spinoza, I have shown that the *Biur* is supposed to provide an adequate defense of Jewish law in the face of widespread attacks from the study of history: familiar with an early modern model deployed to secure Christianity's controversial mysteries, Mendelssohn mobilizes this framework for the defense of Judaism's contested commitments regarding the Bible, painstakingly following the steps Leibniz describes as necessary for the affirmation of disputed beliefs. My analysis thus reveals a Mendelssohn different from the thinker we encounter in Arkush's work. My analysis reveals a Mendelssohn whose arguments might exhibit flaws and fail to address all challenges, but who nevertheless works out detailed accounts of Jewish practice's value, and who seeks to provide adequate grounds for rejecting at least one widespread attack on this system's authority.[36]

Indeed, although I know of no text in which Mendelssohn *explicitly* claims to address Spinoza's critique of revelation, Chapters 2-4 also raise the possibility that Mendelssohn *might* have worked out responses to some of seventeenth-century thinker's claims. The key here is that Spinoza's attack rests on several distinct lines of reasoning,[37] and that Mendelssohn's arguments seem to undermine some of these Spinozistic moves. For example, consider Spinoza's claim that biblical "books were not so preserved by posterity as not to suffer the intrusion of some errors"—that the text of the Bible has undergone considerable corruption, and thus should not be treated as a record of an enduringly binding divine revelation.[38] While Mendelssohn does not

explicitly identify this claim as a Spinozistic argument, we saw in Chapter 4 that his engagement with the historical study of Scripture leads him to respond to this type of accusation—to provide what he takes to be a substantive account of our grounds for rejecting charges of textual corruption. Consider, as well, Spinoza's well-known critique of biblical law, which appears shortly after he equates "our supreme good and blessedness" with "knowledge…of God":[39]

> Ceremonial observances—those, at least, that are laid down in the Old Testament—were instituted for the Hebrews alone…So it is evident that they do not pertain to the Divine Law, and therefore do not contribute to blessedness and virtue. They have regard only to the election of the Hebrews, that is…to their temporal and material prosperity and peaceful government, and therefore could have been of practical value only while their state existed…The observance of ceremonies has regard only to the temporal prosperity of the state and in no way contributes to blessedness…The Hebrews are not bound to practice their ceremonial rites since the destruction of their state.[40]

Spinoza claims that the "ceremonial observances…laid down in the Old Testament…do not contribute to blessedness," that these "observances" served only to secure "material prosperity and peaceful government" for the ancient Hebrews, and that Jews therefore "are not bound to practice their ceremonial rites since the destruction of their state." The idea here is that if performing the actions required by biblical law does not promote knowledge of God, and if these actions instead served only to foster the well-being of the ancient Hebrew state, then these actions are no longer relevant in the modern era, and the Bible is not a record of an enduringly binding divine revelation. While Mendelssohn does not explicitly claim to refute this Spinozistic argument, the reasoning reconstructed in Chapters 2-3 seems to address precisely these issues. More specifically, while these Mendelssohnian arguments *agree* that the actions required by biblical law[41] can promote collective well-being,[42] these arguments *reject* the conclusion which Spinoza attempts to derive from this point—the conclusion that the actions required by biblical law are no longer relevant in the modern era. Insofar as these arguments suggest that Jewish practice encourages the use of compelling philosophical systems to understand principles such as

divine providence, these arguments suggest that Jewish practice can promote knowledge of God, and thus that Spinoza is wrong to treat this system as tied exclusively to the ancient Israelite state. Similarly, insofar as these arguments suggest that Jewish practice can promote the well-being of a modern society, these arguments suggest that Jewish practice retains its social relevance even after the collapse of the Hebrew commonwealth, and thus that Spinoza is wrong to treat this system as linked exclusively to an ancient polity.[43] My analysis, then, reveals a Mendelssohn who not only works out detailed arguments regarding the value of Jewish practice, and who not only seeks to provide adequate grounds for rejecting attacks emerging from biblical scholarship, but who also might be attempting to address attacks associated with Spinoza.[44]

Let us review. Arkush's Mendelssohn defends Judaism with arguments that are undeveloped or inconsistent, fails to respond to pressing attacks on this tradition, and minimizes the importance—and is familiar with attempts to deny the occurrence—of biblical revelation. By contrast, while I deny neither that *some* of Mendelssohn's arguments might exhibit flaws, nor that *some* aspects of his writings and context are compatible with suspicions regarding his sincerity, my analysis suggests that Arkush does not appreciate the degree of development and consistency exhibited by Mendelssohn's arguments, as well as the degree to which Mendelssohn seeks to address pressing challenges he confronts. More precisely, my reading reveals a Mendelssohn who (1) works out detailed accounts of Jewish practice's role in preventing "disfiguring" and promoting "felicity," (2) repeats aspects of these claims with a high degree of consistency across his German and Hebrew writings, and (3) addresses at least one type of pressing threat to Judaism with what he would see as adequate argumentation, painstakingly appropriating a complex epistemological model central to Leibniz's defense of the Christian mysteries. Indeed, my analysis even suggests that Mendelssohn (4) might be advancing claims

which respond to another line of attack on the Jewish tradition. It seems to me, then, that my analysis points to the conclusion that Mendelssohn presents a sincere, albeit perhaps incomplete, defense of the Jewish tradition: even if he might fail to develop *some* claims and address *some* challenges, and even if he minimizes the indispensability of revelation and is familiar with covert denials of such communication, he seems to be sufficiently committed to Judaism to work out complex arguments linking Jewish practice to epistemological and social goods, and to formulate what he sees as a substantive response to widespread attacks on this tradition.[45] Put differently, while we cannot *rule out* the possibility that Mendelssohn secretly denies Judaism's claim to preserve a divine revelation, such a reading becomes more difficult to maintain given the evidence I cite. Such a reading, after all, would commit us to dismissing as mere efforts to retain "credentials" a constellation of sophisticated and recurring philosophical moves—to suggesting that when Mendelssohn decides to feign loyalty to the Jewish tradition, he believes that the best way to do so is to work out detailed arguments about conceptual distortion and collective felicity, to repeat aspects of these arguments across his German and Hebrew writings, and to perform a complex appropriation of an epistemology associated with the Christian mysteries.

We are now in a position to assess the character of Mendelssohn's thought. I began by noting that while my analysis lends supports to Sorkin's claim that Mendelssohn draws on Enlightenment philosophy to defend pre-modern views, my reading also highlights differences between Mendelssohn and the Andalusian thinkers Sorkin emphasizes. I then argued that while my analysis also lends support to Arkush's claim that Mendelssohn means to fashion a form of Judaism appropriate modern life, my reading casts doubt on Arkush's broader account of Mendelssohn's project—that my reading challenges the idea that Mendelssohn does not mean to present a substantive defense of the Jewish tradition, and may have covertly rejected Judaism's

claim to preserve a divine revelation. My analysis, then, suggests that Mendelssohn is best read neither as a Deist, nor as a traditionalist, but rather as an innovative thinker who at times adopts conservative positions. He should be understood as a sincere defender of the Jewish tradition who exhibits striking continuities with pre-modern Jewish thinkers, but who also breaks with such figures in order to present Judaism as a religion well suited to modern life.

As noted above, this conclusion provides support for Gottlieb's vision of a "middle position" between Arkush and Sorkin, for I agree with Gottlieb that Mendelssohn is advancing his arguments sincerely while trying to shape Judaism for the modern world. Nevertheless, my analysis goes beyond Gottlieb's reading in at least two important ways. First, my analysis reveals innovative and conservative elements of Mendelssohn's thought that are not discussed by Gottlieb—innovative elements such as attempts to present Judaism as fostering the conceptual flexibility and engaged citizenship crucial to the modern world, and conservative elements such as a sustained defense of Masoretic and rabbinic reliability.[46] Second, my analysis provides grounds for affirming Mendelssohn's sincerity that do not appear in Gottlieb's work. While Gottlieb neither addresses Arkush's charges that key Mendelssohnian claims are too undeveloped to be treated as serious arguments, nor asks whether Mendelssohn would have taken his sustained defense of the Masoretes and the rabbis to adequately address historical challenges,[47] I explore both of these issues, showing that Mendelssohn works out the details of key arguments regarding the value of Jewish practice, that he seeks to offer sufficient reasons for rejecting the claims of biblical scholars, and that we therefore have grounds for affirming his sincerity. My analysis thus supports, but goes beyond, Gottlieb's call for a "middle position," providing diverse new reasons for describing Mendelssohn neither as a traditionalist, nor as a Deist, but rather as a thinker whose arguments blend innovative and conservative elements.

Enlightenment and Judaism

We can now turn to a second debate. As noted in my introduction, Gottlieb has described the Sorkin-Arkush clash as the most recent round in a long-running dispute regarding the unity of Mendelssohn's work—regarding the question of how his engagement with Enlightenment thought is related to his view of the Jewish tradition.[48] Sorkin follows scholars who argue that Mendelssohn's philosophical commitments cohere with his professions of fidelity to Judaism: presenting Mendelssohn as endorsing a stream of Enlightenment thought that is compatible with, and even conducive to, adherence to the Jewish tradition, Sorkin argues that this use of Enlightenment philosophy results both in a defense of revealed religion and in continuities with medieval Jewish thought.[49] By contrast, Arkush echoes and extends the claims of scholars who insist that Mendelssohn's philosophical commitments stand in tension with his professed loyalty to Judaism: suggesting that key strands of Enlightenment liberalism and rationalism clash with tenets of the Jewish tradition, Arkush raises the possibility that *Jerusalem*'s author might have rejected central aspects of this tradition in light of critiques by thinkers such as Spinoza.[50]

My goal here is not to endorse either of these views, but rather to highlight a neglected aspect of the relationship between Enlightenment and Judaism in Mendelssohn's thought. As I argued in Chapter 2, when Mendelssohn presents Jewish practice as addressing the danger of conceptual "disfiguring," he is concerned with the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems—the danger that creedal formulas might lead us to reject emerging commitments which we have grounds to endorse, for if formulas composed under the influence of one philosophical system are incompatible with beliefs generated by later models, a requirement to affirm those sentences might tempt us to reject well-grounded commitments for the sake of affirming communally sanctioned words. The

key for us now, in turn, is that Mendelssohn seems to understand this danger as a threat facing Enlightenment thinkers—thinkers who draw on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy to generate determinate religious content. Three pieces of evidence are crucial here. First, one concrete example of conceptual "disfiguring" Mendelssohn is likely to have encountered is an example that involves Enlightenment thinkers—Christian thinkers who accept the mechanical philosophy associated with the Enlightenment over the Aristotelian natural philosophy of the Middle Ages. As we saw, he is likely to have been familiar with debates in which some Christian thinkers formulate new conceptions of doctrines such as transubstantiation on the basis of the mechanical philosophy, but are urged to reject these understandings on the grounds of incompatibility with pre-existing verbal formulas.[51] Moreover, Mendelssohn not only is likely to have been familiar with an Enlightenment-inflected case of conceptual "disfiguring," but also presents seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought as conducive to such situations. Insofar as the passages cited in Chapter 2 emphasize that Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy generates understandings of religious principles different from the understandings produced by earlier models,[52] Mendelssohn implicitly acknowledges that Enlightenment thought generates the type of commitments which creedal statements might force individuals to renounce—commitments which, diverging from the views of earlier eras, might be incompatible with pre-existing formulas. Finally, Mendelssohn's engagement with medieval Jewish thought leads him recognize a link between Enlightenment commitments and a situation similar to the one involved in conceptual "disfiguring." After all, as we have seen, when he appropriates but alters Nahmanidean words regarding immortality and providence, he is recognizing that medieval formulations might fail to express conceptions of religious truths grounded in Leibnizian-Wolffian thought, and he is therefore acknowledging that a commitment to this system is

associated with a situation similar to the one involved in conceptual distortion—a situation in which pre-existing words clash with beliefs generated by newly emerging models.[53] Taken together, then, this evidence suggests that Mendelssohn sees conceptual "disfiguring" as a threat facing Enlightenment thinkers. When he claims that Jewish practice can address the danger that we will distort our beliefs in light of the rise and fall of philosophical systems, he is claiming that Jewish practice can address a danger which Enlightenment thinkers run the risk of confronting. He is claiming that Jewish practice can address a danger which thinkers might encounter insofar as they embrace seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy—insofar as they turn to models such as Leibnizian-Wolffian thought to generate determinate religious content, since the conceptions of religious principles arising from such models might clash with inherited formulas.

A similar conclusion arises from my claim that Mendelssohn presents Jewish practice as addressing the danger that society will evolve in ways which generate corrupting and destabilizing developments—the danger that a society will evolve in ways which threaten human flourishing and political harmony. Consider the following passage from a 1756 work:

> *What have we gained in society? Is the condition of being in a society afflicted with certain bodily weaknesses, certain depraved inclinations, from which the natural man is free?* It might be. In a social life, new faculties develop among us and attain their actuality…New weaknesses must emerge when we improve our condition, when we become more social. But should this move us to refrain from pursuing the improvement itself? By no means! …The good that is thereby obtained must necessarily outweigh the small amount of evil.[54]

Mendelssohn seems to be referring to the problem which the *Biur* will later take Jewish practice to address, for just as the *Biur* is concerned with social developments that leave individuals "disorderly and corrupt,"[55] so too is this passage concerned with a process of "becom[ing] more social" that generates "weaknesses" such as "depraved inclinations." Mendelssohn's goal, in turn, is to clarify the manner in which we should assess this danger, and his conclusion is that once we acknowledge the contributions of social life to the task of self-cultivation, we are

committed to treating the danger of corrupting social developments as an enduring possibility associated with the formation of our faculties. The idea here is that once we recognize that "in a social life, new faculties develop among us and attain their actuality," we will "by no means" choose to "refrain from" participating in societies despite the possibility of "depraved inclinations," since we will understand that "the good that is thereby obtained must necessarily outweigh the small amount of evil." Put differently, if we recognize that many of the tasks associated with self-cultivation become possible only in social settings,[56] we will not "refrain" from participating in social life despite the danger of corrupting developments, and we will instead recognize such developments as a price that we pay for self-cultivation—as a potential consequence of engaging in the pursuit of perfection.

The key point is the status of the claim which leads to this view—the claim that social life contributes to self-cultivation. Consider Mendelssohn's comments in a letter to Thomas Abbt:

> I have read Wolff's *Law of Nature*…For an unpractical, brooding head like me, *Wolff* is the single author whom one must read regarding this subject. His investigations…shed such light on this subject that one can most clearly discern the false steps of those who branch off in both directions—[the false steps of thinkers ranging] from a *Hobbes*, who throws men in iron chains, to a *Rousseau*, who wishes to send [men] into the forests.[57]

Mendelssohn suggests that Wolff provides the resources that allow us to correct Rousseau's desire "to send [men] into the forests"—to correct what Mendelssohn in other passages describes as Rousseau's valorization of life outside society.[58] Elsewhere, in turn, Mendelssohn identifies the key to rejecting Rousseau as an affirmation of society's role in self-cultivation. For example, in his *Notes on Abbt's Friendly Correspondence*, Mendelssohn responds to a challenge to "refute Rousseau"[59] by arguing that individuals can "promote their felicity with common powers…in a societal association," and that their "inner drive for perfection will encourage them to unite…in a political body"—by arguing that if "a societal association" makes possible the pursuit of human

"perfection" and "felicity," then Rousseau errs by valorizing life outside these social settings.[60] It seems to me, then, that Mendelssohn is presenting his insistence on society's role in self-cultivation as a point he derives from Leibnizian-Wolffian thought—that if Mendelssohn presents the key to the rejection of Rousseau as deriving from Wolff's writings, and if Mendelssohn elsewhere identifies this key as an affirmation of society's role in self-cultivation, then Mendelssohn is claiming to derive this affirmation of society's role in self-perfection from Leibnizian-Wolffian thought.[61]

The implications should be clear. Mendelssohn suggests that once we accept the role of social life in the task of self-cultivation, we are committed to treating corrupting social developments as an enduring possibility associated with self-perfection. We have just seen, in turn, that he presents the role of society in self-cultivation as a premise which he derives from Wolff's writings. Mendelssohn, then, seems to hold that we will recognize the enduring possibility of corrupting social developments once we adopt a Leibnizian-Wolffian perspective. In other words, when he claims that Jewish practice can address the danger that social developments will leave individuals "corrupt," he is claiming that Jewish practice can address a danger which Enlightenment thinkers are committed to accepting. He is claiming that Jewish practice can address a problem which Enlightenment thinkers are committed to treating as a price we pay for self-cultivation—as a potential consequence of engaging in the pursuit of perfection.

We are now in a position to better understand the relationship between Enlightenment and Judaism in Mendelssohn's thought. Insofar as my analysis shows that *Jerusalem*'s author presents Jewish practice as addressing the danger of conceptual "disfiguring," my analysis shows that he presents Jewish practice as addressing a danger which Enlightenment thinkers run the risk of confronting. Moreover, insofar as my analysis shows that he presents Jewish practice as

addressing the danger of corrupting social developments, my analysis shows that he presents Jewish practice as addressing a danger which Enlightenment thinkers are committed to accepting. My reading, then, suggests that Mendelssohn presents Judaism as a path out of dilemmas associated with Enlightenment thought. My reading suggests that he treats the Jewish tradition as offering a solution to problems plaguing Enlightenment philosophy.[62]

Broadening the Discussion

In one sense, we have arrived at a natural point to conclude a study of Mendelssohn. My analysis has not only shed light on arguments which have generated confusion, and not only proposed a new reading of his approach to Jewish practice, but also intervened in two of the ongoing debates regarding his philosophy of Judaism. It is tempting, then, to treat my arguments about the basic character of Mendelssohn's thought as this project's final claims.

My dissertation's conclusion will resist this temptation, arguing that my reading of Mendelssohn can contribute to broader conversations about modernity and religion. First of all, I will show that my reading can advance discussions in the study of history about the emergence of Jewish modernity, illuminating the rise of the "historical consciousness" often taken to be central to modern Jewish life. Moreover, taking up the question—raised earlier in this project—of Mendelssohn's contemporary relevance, I will suggest my analysis reveals dimensions of his work that might contribute to ongoing discussions in religious thought—to debates about the relationship between practice and belief, about the development of religious traditions, and about the capacity of religious communities to cultivate socially relevant beliefs and dispositions. My reading of Mendelssohn, I will conclude, not only offers a new understanding of a foundational figure in modern Judaism, but also contributes to broader conversations in a variety of fields.

[1] For a discussion of this argument, see page 40 in Chapter 1. For examples of readers who emphasize the theme of idolatry, see Guttmann, "Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*," 374-375; Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 545-547; Funkenstein, "The Political Theory," 13-28; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 208-218; Kaplan, "Mendelssohn and Maimonides," 423-456; Weber, "Fending Off Idolatry," 522-543; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 51-55; Freudenthal, "Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast," 351-372; idolatry is also identified as a central Mendelssohnian concern in Freudenthal's recently published *No Religion Without Idolatry* (see note 24 in my introduction). Some of these scholars focus on this dimension of *Jerusalem* but use terms such as "paganism" instead of "idolatry." Idolatry also plays an important role in Hilfrich, *"Lebendige Schrift,"* 105-172. While these scholars generally describe themselves as reconstructing Mendelssohn's theory of Jewish law, we can treat them as discussing his approach to Jewish practice: see note 55 in my introduction.

Gottlieb has noted the centrality of idolatry to a different aspect of Mendelssohn's work: his view of religious diversity. See Gottlieb, "Mendelssohn's Metaphysical Defense," 205-225

[2] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 119/8:184.

[3] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Numbers 15:39, in 18:133; on Mendelssohn as the author, see note 39 in my introduction. See also Freudenthal, "Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast," 360-368.

[4] On *Jerusalem* as presenting multiple arguments, see pages 40-44 in Chapter 1.

[5] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 107-112/8:173-177.

[6] Mendelssohn suggests that the veneration of hieroglyphics arises not only from confusion among the masses, but also from manipulation by elites: see Ibid., 111/8:177. As noted in Chapter 1, my reconstruction of Mendelssohn's argument regarding idolatry is indebted to Freudenthal, "Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast," 351-372.

[7] For a different (albeit compatible) account of the sense in which Mendelssohn's argument about idolatry is an argument about history, see Erlin, "Reluctant Modernism," 94-96.

[8] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Numbers 15:39, in 18:133.

[9] Breuer, "Rabbinic Law and Spirituality," 304-305; cp. to "Politics, Tradition, History," 357-383; "Of Miracles and Events Past," 27-52; *Limits of Enlightenment*. See also Liebeschütz, "Mendelssohn und Lessing," 167-182; Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 78-87, 127-146

[10] Morgan, "History and Modern Jewish Thought," 467-468; this quote appears on 469. Morgan links this view to Spinoza; Morgan offers a revised reading of Mendelssohn's response to this Spinozistic position in "Overcoming the Remoteness of the Past," 160-173. On Mendelssohn and this Spinozistic view, see note 139 in Chapter 1 and pages 240-242 below.

It is important to note that Mendelssohn also worries about historical threats to Judaism emerging from *within the tradition itself*—for example, threats emerging from views on history associated with movements such as Sabbateanism. See Schwartz, "Hahitpathut shel Hamin Haenoshi," 109–121; Kajon, "*Madness of Mankind*," 205-227.

[11] I do not mean to suggest that when Breuer and Sorkin invoke history, they focus solely on historical threats to Judaism. On the contrary, these scholars also discuss issues such as the role of historical beliefs—for example, beliefs regarding God's actions in history—in Judaism: see the sources cited in note 9. Rather, my point is that when these scholars link Mendelssohn's conception of Judaism to his views on historical dangers, these readers leave aside what I have shown to be one central type of historical threat: threats from which Judaism protects Jews, rather than threats from which Jews protect Judaism. Sorkin and Breuer correctly emphasize the role of historical dangers in Mendelssohn's work, but do not recognize the full extent to which

this issue structures this thought—the fact that his concern with historical dangers extends beyond perils from which Judaism must be guarded to perils from which Judaism offers refuge.

I should also note that least one commentator *does* hint at a reading of Mendelssohn similar to the view I advance in this dissertation. More specifically, Matt Erlin has argued that Mendelssohn presents Judaism as offering protection against manifestations of a danger linked to history—against "the dilution of experiential knowledge created by the objectivity of cultural production" (Erlin, "Reluctant Modernism," 92). On Erlin's account, Judaism addresses the possibility that individuals will misuse knowledge made available by society if they are not familiar with the circumstances which generated this knowledge—the possibility that societies will produce knowledge (for example, written texts) which then become available to all individuals, but which later generations will then misuse in a variety of ways (for example, by focusing on written texts to the exclusion of conversation with others). See 93-102. On the one hand, I agree with much of what Erlin has to say in this insightful essay. On the other hand, while his claim that Mendelssohnian Judaism offers a safeguard against a threat linked to history echoes my argument, I believe that the reading I present goes well beyond his analysis. For example, I highlight a variety of dangers linked to history which he does not discuss; I explicate in greater detail the sense in which Judaism resists such dangers; and I advance the claim, absent from his essay, that we should read Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice as *fundamentally* concerned with history. See also note 21 in Chapter 3 for Erlin's brief reference to a text—the *Biur*'s account of the tabernacle—central to my project.

[12] When I frame this debate as a question of whether Mendelssohn is best understood as a "traditionalist" or a Deist, I am drawing on Gottlieb's description of the interpretive options. More specifically, while descriptions of Mendelssohn as a "Deist" appear in Arkush's writings (see note 14 below), the description of Mendelssohn as a "traditionalist" is one which I borrow from Gottlieb's summary of Sorkin's position. See, e.g., the reference to Mendelssohn as a "Jewish traditionalist" in Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 8; see also references to Mendelssohn's "traditionalism' in Gottlieb, "Between Judaism and German Enlightenment," 30, 32.

[13] The lines I quote appear in Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, xxii-xxiii, 155. In referring to the "Andalusian" tradition, Sorkin has in mind thinkers such as Saadia Gaon, Judah Halevi, and Nahmanides, and is drawing on, e.g., Bernard Septimus, "'Open Rebuke and Concealed Love': Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides*, 11-34.

In linking Mendelssohn to the Andalusian tradition, Sorkin means, in part, to highlight the differences between Mendelssohn and Maimonides, who—on this scheme—does not belong to this strand in medieval thought. However, as Gottlieb notes, Sorkin may recently have become more open to the view that Mendelssohn draws on Maimonidean thought. See Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 151n175; the reference here is to Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna*, Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 168.

[14] The lines I quote appear in Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, xiv-xv, 260. Arkush focuses on Mendelssohn's attempts to fashion a form of Judaism appropriate to *political* modernity.

As Gottlieb points out, Arkush has recently acknowledged the possibility that Mendelssohn might have been internally conflicted, rather than purposefully deceptive. See Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 123n46; the reference here is to Arkush, "The Liberalism of Moses Mendelssohn," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 46.

[15] See Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 8-9, 55-58.

[16] Indeed, Breuer points out that Mendelssohn is at times more "conservative" than he has to be—for example, that he is even more insistent on the antiquity of Masoretic vowels and accents than many medieval Jewish scholars. See Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 165-167; see also the discussion of Mendelssohn and biblical criticism in Raphael Jospe, "Moses Mendelssohn: A Medieval Modernist," in *Sepharad in Ashkenaz*, 107, 118-122.

[17] See the discussion of Nahmanides in Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 67-69.

[18] See, e.g., Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, xxii, 37, 60, 129, et al. For another discussion of Mendelssohn's relationship with Halevi, see Raphael Jospe, "Moses Mendelssohn," 108-117.

[19] Yehudah Halevi, *Kuzari: A Book of Proof and Argument: An Apology for a Despised Religion*, 1.11-13, ed. and trans. Heinemann, in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, ed. Hans Lewy, Altmann, and Heinemann, 3rd ed. (New Milford: The Toby Press, 2006), 357-358.

[20] This is not to say, of course, that Halevi rejects *all* use of philosophy; on the contrary, he draws heavily on medieval philosophy and even seems, in at least some passages, to be open to taking seriously the rise and fall of conceptual models. Instead, his point seems to be that Judaism is not a tradition which *calls for* the use of compelling philosophical models—or what we take to be compelling philosophical models—to generate the content of principles such as providence. See, e.g., Barry Kogan, "Judah Halevi and His Use of Philosophy in the *Kuzari*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 111-135.

Two additional points are worth noting. First, I do not mean to suggest that what Mendelssohn has in mind is *identical* to what Halevi is rejecting. Rather, I am suggesting that Mendelssohn presents an understanding of Judaism *similar* to a conception of religion rejected by Halevi; I also agree, of course, that there are affinities between Mendelssohn and Halevi. Second, there is a resemblance—but *not* an identity—between the position Mendelssohn outlines and a view we encounter in Maimonides's writings. While Maimonides does not imagine history as involving the type of "changeability" that Mendelssohn envisions, the medieval thinker recognizes the limits of the version of Aristotelianism he has inherited from Islamic thinkers, and he seems to acknowledge that we might be required to reimagine the determinate content of core principles in light of future philosophical developments. See, e.g., his treatment of astronomy and creation in Maimonides, *Guide*, 2.24-2.25 (2.322-330); on creation in Maimonides's thought, see note 133 in Chapter 4. I hope to pursue this affinity in a future study.

[21] This phrasing—my reference to an end "*rationally recognized* as divinely endorsed"—is important, since Halevi seems to focus on a religion with *philosophically generated* content that is politically relevant. On Halevi and politics, see, e.g., Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 95-141; Menachem Lorberbaum, "Medieval Jewish Political Thought," in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 180-186; Sarah Stroumsa, "Prophecy versus Civil Religion in Medieval Jewish Philosophy: The Cases of Judah Halevi and Maimonides," in *Tribute to Michael: Studies in Jewish and Muslim Thought Presented to Professor Michael Schwarz*, ed. Sara Klein-Braslavy, Binyamin Abrahamov, and Joseph Sadan (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2009), 79-102.

The points I raised in my previous note are again relevant here. I do not mean to suggest that Mendelssohn's politically relevant Judaism is *identical* to the vision that Halevi rejects. Rather, my point is that Mendelssohn develops an interpretation of Judaism *similar* to the account of religion rejected by Halevi; I do not deny, of course, that there are also many

affinities between Mendelssohn and Halevi. Moreover, there is an important resemblance between the conclusion Mendelssohn defends and a view we encounter in Maimonides's work. While Maimonides does not envision the cultivation of engaged citizens described by Mendelssohn, the medieval philosopher insists that adherence to Jewish law promotes the well-being of a *polis*. See, e.g., his account of "divine law" and Jewish law in Maimonides, *Guide*, 2.40 (2.381-385), 3.27-28 (2.510-514); on Maimonidean politics, see Harvey, "Ben Philosophyah Medinit L'halakhah B'mishnat Harambam," *Iyyun* 29 (1980): 198-212; Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*. I hope to explore this similarity in a future work; see also Eisen, "Divine Legislation," 259; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 53-54.

[22] Insofar as Sorkin does not clarify precisely how similar he takes Mendelssohn and Andalusian thinkers to be, it is difficult to assess the precise degree to which I am breaking with Sorkin's reading—whether my focus on Mendelssohn's divergence from Andalusian thought merely calls attention to an issue neglected in Sorkin's analysis, or whether my emphasis on this divergence actually posits a degree of intellectual discontinuity that Sorkin would wish to deny.

[23] See page 90 in Chapter 2.

[24] See pages 95-96 in Chapter 2.

[25] Mendelssohn, *Vorrede*, 8:4-5. I follow Bowman's translation in "From the Preface to *Vindiciae Judaeorum*," 42.

[26] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 135/8:199-200.

[27] Two points are worth noting. First, as noted above, in taking Mendelssohn to break with some thinkers (such as Judah Halevi), I am taking Mendelssohn to exhibit affinities with other figures (such as Maimonides). Second, while I claim to be lending support to one aspect of Arkush's argument, I am also going beyond the analysis he offers. When claiming that Mendelssohn seeks to fashion a form of Judaism appropriate to modernity, Arkush means that Mendelssohn seeks to develop a form of Judaism appropriate to life in a liberal state: see Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 241-288. By contrast, I am suggesting that Mendelssohn means to present an interpretation of Judaism suited not only to *political* modernity, but also to *philosophical* modernity—to an era characterized by a high degree of conceptual "changeability."

[28] For example, Arkush raises questions about Mendelssohn's approach to the content and purpose of revelation: see Ibid., 180-199, 207-218, et al. Arkush also considers Mendelssohn's account of "moral questions" such as gentile access to salvation: see 199-207.

[29] On Cranz's challenge and Mendelssohn's response, see pages 34-37 in Chapter 1. For Arkush's critique of Mendelssohn's response, see Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 222-229.

[30] Arkush is concerned with Mendelssohn's response—or failure to respond—not only to Spinoza, but also to a tradition of thinkers who appropriate and extend Spinozistic arguments—thinkers such the English Deists, Voltaire, and Hermann Samuel Reimarus. See the discussion of their arguments and Mendelssohn's response in Ibid., 133-158; 167-222. For scholarly disputes about whether Mendelssohn is actually concerned with Spinoza's arguments regarding revelation, see note 139 in Chapter 1; Arkush admits that "Mendelssohn made few explicit references to the writings that constitute this heretical tradition" (Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 136), that *Jerusalem* invokes "Spinoza only once by name" and "made no mention of Voltaire or Reimarus" (137), and that although "Mendelssohn replied directly to the challenges and objections raised by Lavater, Cranz, and Mörschel," he "authored no such response…to Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* nor to…the other critiques of biblical revelation" (161).

[31] These are not the only factors Arkush cites. For example, he also points to textual factors such as Mendelssohn's professed willingness to suffer the existence of "prejudice" and error among individuals and societies; similarly, Arkush cites historical points such as the fact that one of Mendelssohn's own friends—Immanuel Kant—raises questions about the sincerity of *Jerusalem*'s author. See the discussion of these and other points in Ibid, 241-288.

[32] For example, I have not asked whether Mendelssohn develops all the details of his arguments regarding Jewish practice and idolatry, and whether his claims about this topic in *Jerusalem* fully cohere with his claims in texts such as the *Biur*.

[33] For example, while I have pointed to arguments that *might* be intended as responses to Spinoza, I have left aside the question of whether they *are* actually intended as such, as well as the question of whether these arguments are philosophically adequate.

[34] While I know of no text other than *Jerusalem* in which Mendelssohn explicitly posits a link between Jewish practice and conceptual flexibility, he emphasizes a key aspect of this argument—the importance of a capacity for philosophical revision—across his writings: see, e.g., the discussion of philosophical "changeability" in German texts such as the 1763 *Essay* and *Morning Hours* (pages 90-97 in Chapter 2), as well as the emphasis on revising prior commitments in Hebrew texts such as the *Biur* on Genesis, the *Elucidation of Logical Terms*, and his letter to Jacob Emden (pages 104-107 in Chapter 2). Indeed, he implicitly acknowledges another key dimension of his argument—the possibility of a clash between pre-existing words and emerging commitments—in the *Biur* on Exodus (pages 107-109 in Chapter 2).

[35] See Chapter 3. *Jerusalem* and the *Biur* present strikingly similar accounts of Judaism and collective felicity, agreeing that adherence to Jewish practice promotes the "felicity of the nation," claiming that Jewish practice fosters this condition through reflection on God, and emphasizing the recurring nature of the contemplation which generates these social consequences. Aspects of this argument also appear in Mendelssohn's 1784 German essay *To Enlighten*. For my reading of a text which might *seem* to reject the idea that Jewish practice fosters religious reflection (the well-known 1783 letter to Homberg), see note 43 in Chapter 1.

[36] Other readers have addressed additional aspects of Arkush's argument: see, e.g., Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 57-58.

[37] On Spinoza's various claims, see Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 138-147.

[38] See Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 122-127.

[39] Ibid., 50.

[40] Ibid., 59-61.

[41] Insofar as Mendelssohn holds that we can trace the laws governing Jewish practice back to the Bible, his claim that the actions required by Jewish law are capable of promoting collective felicity is a claim that the actions required by biblical law can serve this function.

[42] Of course, Mendelssohn's account of how the relevant norms accomplish this goal differs from Spinoza's view. While Spinoza takes biblical law to promote collective well-being but prohibit individuals from "perform[ing] any action at their own discretion" (Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 65), Mendelssohn takes Jewish law to promote collective well-being *by* cultivating individual judgment—by training individuals to assess society's works and act on the results of such reflection. I hope to explore this break with Spinoza in a future study.

[43] I am, of course, not the first reader to suspect that Mendelssohn might be attempting to respond to this critique: see, e.g., sources by Morgan cited in note 10 above. See also Guttmann, "Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*," 361-386; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 51-55.

The Mendelssohnian argument I outline can also be read as a response to a further challenge I noted in Chapter 1: the historical relativizing of biblical law associated with figures such as Michaelis, which suggests that even laws endorsed by God in the Pentateuch possessed authority *only* in the ancient Hebrew state. Quoting Michaelis, Sorkin provides the following summary of this line of attack: "Michaelis saw the Mosaic law 'not as the best categorically, but under the prevailing conditions; not the best in a Platonic, but in an Israelite commonwealth.' Moreover, Michaelis limited the validity of these laws: 'The laws of Moses conformed to the circumstances of the Israelites and are therefore not to be introduced to peoples living under different circumstances.' Yet these laws were also of limited duration and subject to change over time: 'Even were God himself to write a 'politics,' the laws would be different according to circumstances, indeed, they would change over time and through time'" (Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 86-87). It seems to me that the argument I have reconstructed *might* be read as a response to this attack. On one level, Mendelssohn might be advancing with respect to Michaelis the same claim advanced (possibly) with respect to Spinoza: insofar as Mendelssohn's arguments suggest that Jewish practice can promote the well-being of a modern society, these arguments suggest that Jewish practice retains its social relevance even after the collapse of the Hebrew commonwealth, and thus that Michaelis is wrong to link this system exclusively to an ancient polity. On another level, Mendelsohn might be arguing that Jewish law remains relevant *precisely because* of the historical change emphasized by Michaelis: insofar as Mendelssohn's arguments suggest that Jewish practice trains citizens to assess changes in a society's activities and introduce necessary corrections, these arguments suggest that Jewish practice remains relevant in precisely the type of societies Michaelis envisions—in societies that exhibit changing "circumstances." Mendelssohn's arguments, in other words, suggest that far from being rendered irrelevant by historical shifts, Jewish practice is able to cultivate a capacity for historically sensitive decision-making. I hope to develop this point in a future study.

[44] I would add that insofar as "Spinoza's rejection of biblical revelation is rooted, ultimately, in his denial of the existence of an extramundane divine entity capable of bestowing a revelation and in his belief in the inviolability of the natural order" (Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 138), we might suspect that Mendelssohn's life-long work on theism can itself be seen as a response to Spinoza. On Mendelssohn's rational theology, see note 11 in Chapter 1; for a study of this theology concerned with Spinoza, see Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*.

This leads to a question that emerged in Chapter 4: the question of whether Mendelssohn takes himself to have defended belief in Mosaic miracles and prophecy attacked by thinkers such as Spinoza (see pages 209-210 and 212-213). Mendelssohn does not explicitly claim to provide such a defense, but there are reasons to think that he might see himself as having done so.

(a) Mendelssohn's ambivalence towards miracles is well known. While he consistently defends the possibility of such occurrences, and while works such as *Jerusalem* explicitly present miracles as potential sources of credibility, he also expresses distaste for metaphysical schemes that rely excessively on such events, notes the possibility that claims about miracles can be deceptive, and argues—in some texts—that the key feature of Sinaitic revelation is not this event's *miraculous* nature, but rather this event's *public* nature. See Altmann, "Moses Mendelssohn on Miracles," 152-163; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 45-48, 168-177. Nevertheless, there are grounds for thinking that Mendelssohn sees himself as attempting to address the critique of miracles associated with figures such as Spinoza, for Mendelssohn both provides accounts of how we might coherently conceptualize God's miraculous intervention in

history (see, e.g., Mendelssohn, *Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:77-79; for Bowman's English translation, see "On the Possibility of Miracles," 252-254), and offers an argument for why reports regarding events such as Mosaic miracles are worthy of acceptance (*Gegenbetrachtungen*, 7:86-88; that said, in this text, too, Mendelssohn expresses concerns about the possibility of deception and emphasizes the public nature of key events). The first of the two passages cited above explicitly invokes Spinoza (78).

(b) With respect to prophecy, Gottlieb has pointed to two arguments that can be read as responses to Spinoza. Spinoza claims that the biblical text reveals the prophets, including Moses, to be intellectually unreliable—to hold false views of God and therefore not merit assent with respect to metaphysical questions. According to Gottlieb, Mendelssohn responds on the basis of his aesthetics and natural theology. Mendelssohn's aesthetics allow him to offer an alternate assessment of statements which Spinoza treats as indications of the prophets' ignorance: for Mendelssohn, statements which seem to present false views of God are actually sophisticated literary images—images which are intended to present metaphysical truths in emotionally (and motivationally) powerful ways. Mendelssohn's natural theology, in turn, allows him to argue that prophets such as Moses were capable of grasping basic religious truths: for Mendelssohn, insofar as all individuals have access to core principles, the prophets would have been able to affirm core principles and thus cannot be so easily dismissed. For Mendelssohn, then, there is no reason to follow Spinoza in treating the prophets as intellectually unreliable. See Gottlieb, "Aesthetics and the Infinite," 326-353; *Faith and Freedom*, 45.

[45] It is important to address an objection to my reasoning. Arkush suggests that while "Spinoza and his disciples may have posed, in Mendelssohn's day, the greatest theoretical threat to biblical religion" (Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 137), attacks on the Masoretic text and rabbinic exegesis were "some of the less profound challenges with which the Enlightenment confronted Judaism" ("Review of Breuer," 393). The idea here seems to be that while attacks on the Masoretes and rabbis merely take aim at the Jewish tradition's preservation and interpretation of divine revelation, the Spinozistic critique denies that such revelation took place at all, and thus constitutes the more "profound" assault "with which the Enlightenment confront Judaism." Perhaps, then, showing that Mendelssohn addresses attacks on the Masoretes and rabbis is insufficient if we wish to vindicate his sincerity. If the Spinozistic threat is more "profound" than the challenges emerging from the study of history, then a Mendelssohn who *does* address the latter but only *might* have addressed the former is still potentially a covert Deist—a thinker who might *not* have sought to provide a substantive response to the most pressing threat to Judaism, who might *not* been interested in vindicating this tradition's claim to preserve a divine revelation, and who therefore might *not* have actually been committed to the Jewish tradition.

This objection is not compelling. First of all, even if *we* believe that the Spinozistic assault is more "profound" than the attacks on the Masoretes and rabbis, it does not follow that *Mendelssohn* views matters in this light. On the contrary, insofar as he refers explicitly on numerous occasions to attacks on Masoretic and rabbinic reliability, but does not invoke the assaults of thinkers such as Spinoza, we have grounds to think that Mendelssohn sees the former as a more pressing threat. Moreover, Mendelssohn might have had reasons for reaching such a conclusion in his eighteenth-century context, for as Breuer notes, assaults on Masoretic and rabbinic reliability were more widespread than the Spinozistic line of attack, and thus might have struck Mendelssohn as more urgently requiring a response (see Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 77-107); indeed, insofar as many figures with whom Mendelssohn is in contact endorse these

critiques of Masoretic and rabbinic reliability (see pages 57-63 in Chapter 1), he would have had another reason to see these challenges as especially pressing. It seems to me, then, that we should not infer a lack of commitment to the Jewish tradition from Mendelssohn's potential failure to respond to a "profound" assault on Judaism. Rather than conclude that Mendelssohn is not interested in vindicating Judaism's claim to preserve a divine revelation, we have reason to think that he might have been more troubled by widespread assaults on the Masoretes and rabbis, and thus might have been devoting his attention to what he takes to be a key threat.

Indeed, even if we hold that Mendelssohn *himself* takes the Spinozistic challenge to be more "profound" than its competitors, my analysis *still* points to the conclusion that he is a sincere defender of the Jewish tradition. However we assess Mendelssohn's response—or lack of response—to thinkers such as Spinoza, it remains the case that *does* seek to offer a substantive response to attacks on the Masoretes and the rabbis, painstakingly performing a complex appropriation of an early modern Christian epistemological model. It is difficult to see why Mendelssohn would perform so complex an operation if he were not committed to the Jewish tradition. If he is simply attempting to maintain his "credentials" among eighteenth-century Jews, why does he present the argument I have reconstructed? As I noted in Chapter 4, few of Mendelssohn's readers would have been able to recognize the complexity of his response, since few of these readers would have been familiar with Leibnizian epistemology; why, then, would he go to such lengths to follow Leibnizian guidance if he were merely attempting to retain "credentials"? Why would he present an argument which his readers are likely to miss if his primary goal is to impress those readers? It seems more reasonable, then, to hold that Mendelssohn performs his appropriation of Leibnizian epistemology because *he* takes such an appropriation to be necessary—because he remains committed to the Jewish tradition, takes this tradition to be under attack, and therefore sees himself as required to work out (if only for philosophers like himself) the grounds for responding to these attacks. Put differently, given that Mendelssohn's response to attacks emerging from the study of history points to his commitment to the Jewish tradition, I believe that we should treat his potential failure to respond to Spinozistic attacks not as reflecting a lack of interest in vindicating Judaism's claim to preserve divine revelation, but rather as reflecting some other conviction—perhaps a lack of confidence that he has yet worked out an effective response to such challenges.

[46] As noted in Chapter 1, Gottlieb highlights one way in which Mendelssohn understands the role of Judaism in promoting the well-being of the state: on this reading, Mendelssohn takes Judaism to protect society from idolatry, since his "conception of chosenness focuses on the way halakhic observance benefits society as a whole," and more specifically on the way in which "Jewish chosenness involves God assigning Jews the responsibility for being a model community preserving pure monotheism" (Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 54). I uncover an additional layer in Mendelssohn's argument, suggesting that he takes Judaism to promote the well-being of society not only be combating the rise of idolatry, but also by cultivating engaged citizens—Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving the society they inhabit.

[47] See Ibid., 153-154n196: "Radical critics such as Spinoza…question the veracity, unity, and textual integrity of the Bible…I think that Mendelssohn does have a response to the radical critics, which I plan to lay out on another occasion."

[48] See page 8 in my introduction.

[49] As noted in Chapter 1, Guttmann's work offers an early example of a similar view.

[50] On Gottlieb's reading, Meyer, Altmann, and Breuer can also be read as casting doubt upon Mendelssohn's capacity to reconcile his engagement with Enlightenment thought and his commitment to the Jewish tradition. Unlike Arkush, however, these scholars question not the sincerity, but merely the success, of Mendelssohn's reconciliation. See the account of these scholars in Gottlieb, "Between Judaism and German Enlightenment," 22-38. For an early representative of this view, see Bamberger, "Mendelssohn's Concept of Judaism," 343-360.

[51] See pages 101-103 in Chapter 2.

[52] See, e.g., Mendelssohn's comments on providence and moral epistemology in the pages 90 and 105-106 in Chapter 2.

[53] See pages 107-109 in Chapter 2.

[54] Mendelssohn, *Sendschreiben*, 2:87-88. On this text (framed as a discussion of Rousseau), see Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 48-50.

[55] See page 134 in Chapter 3.

[56] See page 49 in Chapter 1.

[57] Mendelssohn to Abbt, 1 May 1764, in *JubA*, 12.1:44.

[58] Mendelssohn is particularly concerned here with what Erlin describes as the "primitivism" advanced by Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, a text which Mendelssohn translates in the 1750s and discusses in the 1756 essay cited in note 54. On Mendelssohn and Rousseau, see, e.g., Erlin, "Reluctant Modernism," 88-92; see also page 144 in Chapter 3.

[59] Mendelssohn is quoting Abbt to Mendelssohn, 21 May 1764, in *JubA*, 12.1:47.

[60] Mendelssohn, *Anmerkungen zu Abbts freundschaftlicher Correspondenz*, 6.1:51-53.

[61] For ways in which Mendelssohn is indebted to, but breaks with, Wolff on these issues, see Altmann, "The Quest for Liberty in Moses Mendelssohn's Political Philosophy," in *Humanität und Dialog: Lessing und Mendelssohn in neuer Sicht*, ed. Ehrhard Bahr, Edward P. Harris, and Laurence G. Lyon (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 46-48; Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 100-104, 111-121. For key aspects of Wolff's politics, including his belief that society contributes to the pursuit of perfection and "felicity," see, e.g., Wolff, *Jus Naturae*, Pars 8, §1-26, in *Werke*, 2.24:1-17; *Vernünfftige Gedancken von der gesellschaftlichen Leben der Menschen und insoderheit dem gemeinen Wesen*, §1-4, 227, in *Werke*, 1.5:1-4, 171-172.

[62] On my reading, Mendelssohn's position bears a formal similarity to a posture that Leo Strauss ascribes to Maimonides and his medieval Islamic predecessors. The key here is Strauss's suggestion that for these medieval thinkers, "the prophetic legislator has fulfilled what the philosopher Plato called for but could only call for"—that Plato recognizes the need for a law capable of promoting social well-being and human perfection, and that these medieval thinkers take Judaism (or Islam) to provide this ideal law and the prophet who serves as its legislator. See Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and his Predecessors*, trans. Eve Adler, SUNY Series in the Jewish Writings of Leo Strauss (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 74-75, 124-133. My reading suggests that the relationship between Judaism and Enlightenment thought in Mendelssohn's work is analogous to the relationship between Judaism and Platonic philosophy in Maimonides's thought. That is, just as Maimonides take Judaism to address a problem—the need for an ideal law—associated with Platonic philosophy, so too does Mendelssohn take Judaism to address problems—relating to epistemology and politics—associated with Enlightenment thought. I hope to explore this point in a future study.

Conclusion
Beyond Mendelssohn

Moses Mendelssohn is a thinker for whom biography can easily overshadow philosophy. Born in rural Prussia and lacking any formal philosophical training, the founder of modern Jewish thought led a life that has long been an object of fascination—a life marked by a meteoric rise to philosophical stardom and friendships with key Enlightenment figures, by repeated attempts to convert him to Christianity despite professions of loyalty to Judaism, and by a defense of rationalism that led his contemporaries to eulogize him as a "martyr" to reason. By contrast, if Mendelssohn's biography is rife with drama that has captured readers' imaginations, his treatment of Judaism seems mired in problems that have generated confusion and frustration, with considerable perplexity continuing to surround the details and basic character of his thought. Indeed, some of his most influential readers express uncertainty regarding the content of his central claims, and even question whether he means to present substantive positions on key issues. My dissertation has attempted to address this confusion, illuminating an aspect of Mendelssohn's writings that has been particularly conducive to perplexity: his account of Jewish practice. More specifically, drawing on his well-known German writings, on his little-known Hebrew works, and on neglected developments in early modern thought, I have argued that we should read Mendelssohn's conception of Jewish practice as a response to his views on the nature of history—that one of his central goals is to develop an account of Jewish practice capable of addressing perils grounded in history. His treatment of Jewish practice, I have shown, is animated by an effort to address an epistemological danger grounded in philosophical history, an ethico-political danger grounded in social history, and a textual danger grounded in the study of history—the danger that we will distort our religious beliefs as we confront the rise and fall of philosophical systems, the danger that a society will evolve in ways that threaten human

flourishing and political harmony, and the danger that developments in biblical scholarship will undermine belief in the scriptural basis of Jewish law.

In the following pages, I will look beyond Mendelssohn and consider the broader implications of my study, arguing that my reading can contribute to ongoing conversations about modernity and religion. I will begin by suggesting that my reading can advance discussions in the study of history about the emergence of Jewish modernity, illuminating the rise of the "historical consciousness" often taken to be central to modern Jewish life. I will then take up the issue, raised in Chapter 1, of Mendelssohn's contemporary relevance, arguing that my analysis reveals dimensions of his work that might contribute to contemporary religious thought[1]—to conversations about the relationship between practice and belief, the development of religious traditions, and the capacity of religious communities to cultivate socially relevant beliefs and dispositions. My reading, I will conclude, not only offers a new understanding of a foundational figure in modern Judaism, but also contributes to broader conversations in a variety of fields.

Jewish Modernity

Let us begin with discussions in the study of history regarding the rise of Jewish modernity. For many scholars, one of the central features of modern Jewish life is a distinctive "historical consciousness"—an attitude towards past events, and towards the category of history itself, that differs from attitudes we encounter in pre-modern sources.[2] On one level, scholars who posit the existence of this historical sense are advancing a claim about literary genre, arguing that modern Jews engage in historiographic research largely absent from pre-modern sources. More fundamentally, however, historians who hold this view of Jewish modernity are presenting an argument about intellectual orientation, suggesting that many modern Jews treat

history in ways that diverge from pre-modern approaches to this category. For example, modern Jews are often seen as offering "naturalistic" historical explanations that are less common in pre-modern accounts—as shying away from attempts to explain events as the results of divine intervention or providential design, and as instead explaining these events primarily by invoking the actions of human beings. Moreover, modern Jews are frequently described as emphasizing the unceasing development of ideas and societies in a manner that has little pre-modern precedent—as insisting that even if we can identify some "eternal verities" and "timeless institutions," the world is fundamentally characterized by shifting intellectual systems and changing social arrangements. Additionally, modern Jews are typically presented as linking Jewish and non-Jewish history in ways that most pre-modern Jews would have rejected—as insisting that the processes of change which shape non-Jewish texts and societies *also* influence Jewish life. Finally, modern Jews are often seen as granting a more prominent role to history in the explication and defense of Judaism than was allowed by their pre-modern counterparts. More precisely, modern Jews are often described as deriving Judaism's central beliefs and practices from a historical-critical study of Jewish sources, and as defending Judaism's ongoing relevance by emphasizing Judaism's historical significance—by emphasizing this tradition's contributions to broader intellectual and social processes, such as the emergence of monotheism and the development of modern politics.[3] Of course, it is important to avoid overstating the centrality of these moves to modern Jewish life, for just as hints of this posture are present in some pre-modern sources,[4] so too are aspects of this attitude rejected by some modern Jewish thinkers.[5] Moreover, even figures who exhibit the historical sense described above disagree with one another on diverse issues.[6] Nevertheless, there is broad agreement that one widespread feature of modern Jewish life is a distinctive attitude towards history.

The crucial point for our purposes is that while the *content* of modern Judaism's historical consciousness has long been recognized, the *emergence* of this modern attitude continues to be a matter of discussion. It was once was common to trace this posture to the early nineteenth century, with the key figures being the German founders of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*—figures who begin to adopt an academic approach to the study of Jewish sources.[7] More recently, in turn, scholars have argued that modern Judaism's historical sense has eighteenth-century origins—more specifically, that aspects of this attitude go back to post-Mendelssohnian figures associated with the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment, a movement of cultural renewal that emerged in Prussia but eventually spread throughout Europe. On this model, the generation of thinkers younger than Mendelssohn begins to break with pre-modern approaches to history, adopting innovative views which their revered teacher is more hesitant to embrace.[8] What these scholarly accounts share is a presentation of modern Judaism's historical consciousness as a post-Mendelssohnian phenomenon: while diverse studies note the role of beliefs about historical events in Mendelssohn's thought, as well as his occasional attempts to explain biblical narratives by referring to aspects of the ancient world,[9] his writings are not typically cited as exhibiting the features that characterize the historical consciousness outlined above. Indeed, when he *is* linked to this modern posture, the focus is often on the way in which he combines an interest in historical events with a rejection of distinctively modern attitudes—for example, a rejection of biblical criticism and other modes of "historicist" thinking.[10]

I believe that my analysis allows us to tell a more comprehensive story about the rise of modern Judaism's historical sense. To be sure, in keeping with existing scholarship, my reading suggests that some features of this modern historical consciousness are largely absent from Mendelssohn's work. For example, the Mendelssohn who emerged in Chapters 2-3 invokes

providence to explain historical phenomena, suggesting that God's revelation of the norms governing Jewish practice shapes Jews' involvement in philosophical and social history—that these divinely endorsed norms both endow Jews with the conceptual flexibility needed to revise beliefs in light of philosophical developments, and shape Jews into citizens who address social change in a way that promotes human flourishing and civic accord. Similarly, the Mendelssohn who emerged in Chapter 4 resists developments in the historical study of Scripture, appropriating early modern Christian epistemology to reject the claims of biblical scholars—for example, to reject approaches which "treat the words of the Torah as a broken wall," and to instead claim that the Pentateuch has not suffered the corruption that "befalls secular books…over time."[11] Cohering with recent scholarship, then, my dissertation presents Mendelssohn as failing to instantiate, and as actively resisting, aspects of modern Judaism's historical consciousness.

Nevertheless, breaking with the scholarly models outlined above, I believe that my analysis presents Mendelssohn as a key figure in the rise of this historical sense. In Chapter 2, we saw that when *Jerusalem* takes Jewish practice to address the danger that beliefs will be "disfigured" amid the rise and fall of philosophical systems, Mendelssohn is arguing that insofar as Jewish practice discourages the emergence of fixed verbal formulas, Jewish practice discourages situations in which a requirement to affirm preexisting creedal formulas impedes our ability to revise our views, and in which we therefore "disfigure" our beliefs by rejecting emerging commitments we should accept—situations in which a new philosophical model such as Leibnizian thought emerges and is seen as compelling, in which this model generates new understandings of "eternal truths" such as providence and immortality, but in which we reject these well-grounded commitments because they are incompatible with inherited creedal statements, and in which we therefore "disfigure" our beliefs by failing to incorporate views

which we have grounds to accept. This argument exhibits many of the features associated with modern Judaism's historical consciousness. Despite invoking "eternal truths,"[12] Mendelssohn's reasoning emphasizes the unceasing development of intellectual systems: claiming that history involves the rise and fall of conceptual frameworks such as Aristotelian and Cartesian philosophy, Mendelssohn suggests not that Jewish practice halts the occurrence of such "changeability," but rather that Jewish practice allows individuals to participate properly in this ongoing process—that Jewish practice encourages adherents to revise their beliefs in light of new philosophical discoveries, and thus enables these individuals to avoid the "disfiguring" that occurs when such revision does not take place. Similarly, despite implying that Christians have experienced the conceptual "disfiguring" that Jews avoid,[13] Mendelssohn's reasoning posits a deep connection between Jewish and non-Jewish history: on his account, both Jews and non-Jews have revised their beliefs amid the rise and fall of philosophical models, with modern Jews altering medieval views deemed "very strange" and "harder than flint,"[14] and with non-Jewish thinkers such as "Shaftesbury and Leibniz" rejecting medieval conceptions of providence.[15] Finally, while not deriving the content of Judaism from a historical-critical examination of inherited sources, Mendelssohn grants a prominent role to history in the defense of Judaism's value, affirming the ongoing relevance of Jewish practice by emphasizing Judaism's role in philosophical history: for *Jerusalem*, we recognize the value of Judaism, in part, by recognizing that Jewish practice encourages the reinterpretation of "eternal truths" amid philosophical "revolutions."[16] Chapter 2 thus revealed a Mendelssohn who exhibits key aspects of modern Judaism's historical sense.

Moreover, a similar picture emerges if we revisit the Mendelssohnian argument I reconstructed in Chapter 3. As we saw, when Mendelssohn repeatedly links Jewish practice to

the existence of collective "felicity," he is claiming that insofar as Jewish practice generates recurring reflection on God, Jewish practice orients cognition and desire in a way that impedes the development of harmful social conditions, cultivating the emergence of Jewish citizens committed to assessing and improving society—citizens who find themselves in societies which undergo changes such as the introduction of new economic and aesthetic pursuits, and who strive to ensure that these changes promote perfection and civic accord, rather than corruption and civic strife. Like Mendelssohn's account of conceptual "disfiguring," this argument instantiates key aspects of the modern Jewish historical sense. Despite positing an eternal human "vocation" involving the pursuit of perfection,[17] Mendelssohn's arguments emphasize the constant development of human social arrangements, presenting Judaism as addressing the possibility that harmful conditions might emerge from changes in society's "works," but not as attempting to halt the occurrence of social change itself: while claiming that Jewish practice trains individuals "to be on guard against the trap" in "matters which properly change in accordance with time," the *Biur* insists that Judaism does *not* set a "determinate limit…for man, saying 'until here shall you go.'"[18] Similarly, while suggesting that Jewish practice provides protection against a historical peril that occurs in non-Jewish societies,[19] Mendelssohn's arguments posit a deep connection between Jewish and non-Jewish history, insisting that the process of change which shapes non-Jewish societies *also* influences Jewish life: for Mendelssohn, the ancient Israelites experienced the same developments and dangers that every nation confronts, and modern Jews are called to concern themselves with corrupting and destabilizing developments that threaten society as a whole.[20] Finally, Mendelssohn's reasoning places history at the center of an argument regarding Judaism's value, affirming the relevance of Jewish practice by granting this system a role in social change: for the *Biur*, once we recognize that Jewish practice serves to

"guard against the trap" that can emerge as societies develop, we praise God for having "given to us a true Torah, good decrees, and upright laws."

Of course, the analysis I have just presented raises additional questions, such as whether Mendelssohn's arguments shape the historical thinking of later Jewish figures[21] and whether these arguments themselves have precedents in earlier Jewish texts.[22] Nevertheless, regardless of how we address these issues, my analysis casts doubt on the view that modern Judaism's historical consciousness is a post-Mendelssohnian phenomenon. While we must look elsewhere for hints of the critical scholarship and turn from providence associated with this historical sense, Mendelssohn makes many of the other moves associated with this posture, emphasizing the unceasing development of ideas and societies, positing a close connection between Jewish and non-Jewish history, and placing history at the center of efforts to defend Judaism's value. It seems to me, then, that my reading contributes to conversations in the study of history about the rise of Jewish modernity, suggesting that a central feature of modern Jewish life goes back further than is generally assumed. My reading suggests that Mendelssohn's Hebrew and German writings mark an early appearance of modern Judaism's historical consciousness.

Practice, Tradition, and Society

Indeed, my analysis contributes not only to discussions in the study of history, but also to conversations in religious thought. As I noted in my introduction, scholars remain divided regarding the question of Mendelssohn's contemporary relevance, with some readers echoing the much-cited claim that he provides only an "ephemeral" solution to key problems, and other commentators insisting that his work might advance a variety of ongoing conversations.[23] On one level, I share some of the first group's caution regarding attempts to appropriate

Mendelssohn, for I am hesitant to ascribe contemporary relevance to the arguments I reconstructed in Chapter 4: while the reasoning I uncovered in that chapter exhibits intriguing points of contact with recent work on revealed religion,[24] I am not convinced that the *Biur*'s appropriation of Leibnizian religious epistemology can advance twenty-first century conversations.[25] At the same time, I believe that we have grounds for treating the arguments emerging in Chapters 2-3 as relevant for contemporary debates.

To understand this point, it will be helpful to revisit, once again, the details of Mendelssohn's claims. As we have seen, he intends for texts such as *Jerusalem* and the *Biur* to provide a defense of *Jewish* practice—of the specific actions required by Jewish law, ranging from modes of worship to dietary customs to various types of business practices. For example, before presenting Judaism's "living script" as impeding the emergence of conceptual "disfiguring," he declares that he is concerned with the "divine legislation" which "*the Israelites* possess";[26] similarly, when he presents Jewish practice as capable of addressing corrupting and destabilizing social developments, he declares that he is defending the "true Torah" by which God "distinguished us from the peoples."[27] Nevertheless, if we scrutinize Mendelssohn's reasoning, we discover that he ends up—intentionally or unintentionally[28]—presenting claims which seem to possess relevance beyond the Jewish tradition, for his claims focus on what occurs when action plays a central role in religious life—when religious traditions place a strong emphasis on the performance of actions, and when these religiously significant acts take place even in seemingly mundane areas of life. Consider the Mendelssohn emerging from Chapter 2, who takes Jewish practice to prevent a situation in which we fail to revise our religious beliefs in light of emerging philosophical models. The first step in this argument, we will recall, is a claim that insofar as Jewish practice creates a communal life oriented around reflection and

conversation grounded in required deeds, Jewish practice leads adherents to view the actions which generate contemplation and discussion of truths, rather than any specific written formulations of those truths, as the central feature of religious life, and that this privileging of actions over specific sets of words renders unlikely the emergence of "rigid" formulas—that this posture will discourage adherents from treating any specific formula as indispensable to Jewish life, and that these individuals will therefore refrain from demanding that any such sentences be affirmed without revision. Moreover, the argument continues, insofar as Jewish practice leads adherents to privilege actions over specific sets of words and thereby discourages fixed verbal formulas, Jewish practice discourages the rise of creedal statements that might prevent individuals from revising their beliefs, and thus secures conceptual flexibility in light of the dynamic nature of philosophical history, permitting adherents to revise their understandings of key truths and incorporate the entailments of newly emerging philosophical systems—to employ the most compelling account of reality available in a given setting to lend determinate content to categories such as providence. While Mendelssohn means to defend Jewish practice, then, his claim about conceptual flexibility seems to possess broader relevance, focusing on what occurs when actions stand at the heart of religious life. He ends up presenting an argument which focuses on traditions that emphasize action—an argument which insists that such an emphasis discourages the rise of creedal statements and fosters an engagement with emerging conceptual models, preventing adherents from becoming too rigidly attached to specific understandings of key principles, and thus permitting these individuals to revise their commitments and embrace the entailments of new frameworks.

A similar picture emerges if we turn to Chapter 3, which established that Mendelssohn takes Jewish practice to address the danger of corrupting and destabilizing social developments

—to cultivate the emergence of Jewish citizens committed to ensuring that social change promotes perfection and civic accord, rather than corruption and civic strife. Mendelssohn's argument, we will recall, rests on the claim that "in everything a youth saw being done…he found occasion for inquiring and reflecting,"[29] and that God's "upright laws" place "love and reverence for Him…upon our countenance at all times"[30]—that insofar as Jewish law requires actions even in seemingly mundane areas of life such as diet and dress, adherents will frequently perform behavior which generates religious reflection, and they will therefore frequently find themselves contemplating principles such as God's existence. Moreover, he continues, insofar as Jewish practice leads individuals to frequently contemplate a God who wishes for humans to pursue perfection,[31] Jewish practice disposes these individuals to assess their behavior and desire actions deemed good, and thus to evaluate society's activities and combat obstacles to human flourishing—to evaluate society's "works" and act on the results of such reflection, asking whether economic and aesthetic shifts impede or promote the pursuit of perfection, and introducing corrections to eliminate harmful conditions such as economic inequality and civil "war."[32] Once again, then, Mendelssohn's reasoning focuses on the impact of placing action at the center of religious life. He presents a claim about what happens when religiously significant actions occur even in seemingly mundane areas of life—a claim that such actions generate recurring reflection on God and thus orient adherents towards the *telos* of perfection endorsed by the deity, shaping practitioners into individuals who are disposed to assess society's "works," to desire activities deemed good, and thus to act to improve society.

Indeed, if we consider lines in the *Biur*—discussed earlier[33]—that invoke specific practices particular to Judaism, we discover that here, too, Mendelssohn focuses on the centrality of actions in religious life. He begins by considering the customs of non-Jewish "nations":[34]

> Behold, some of the nations made written signs for themselves with threads containing varieties of colors and knots: by means of the signs they possessed, on the basis of the varieties of colors and numbers of knots, the nations would know all [their] ancient stories. As those who crossed the seas in ships recounted, when they conquered all the lands of the new world called America, they discovered in a portion of the southern parts that was called Peru, [and more specifically] in the courts of kings, closed chests full of colored threads with knots of differing numbers. While [the European conquerors] did not know what these were, the inhabitants of this country said that these were all signs—discovered from antiquity—of the stories of their history: they would know everything correctly on the basis of the number of knots and shades.

After describing the Peruvian practice of constructing "threads with…colors and knots" as reminders of "the stories of their history," the *Biur* compares this custom with four practices discussed in my introduction: the practice of circumcising male Jews at the age of eight days; the practice of affixing a *mezuzah*, or case containing biblical verses, to the doorposts of Jewish homes; the practice of tying *tefillin*, or boxes containing biblical verses, to an individual's head and arm during morning prayers; and the practice of wearing garments with *tzitzit*, or fringes with knots and colored thread, throughout the day. Mendelssohn's claim proceeds as follows:

> Behold, the Eternal, Blessed be He, who distinguished us from those who go astray… gave to us the Torah and commandments, to purify our hearts from the impurity of idolatry and to awaken us always, by means of particular practices and actions, to the cornerstones of the true faith and its foundations. He commanded us to perform signs and symbolic reminders regarding [that faith and those foundation] by means of our flesh, our homes, and everything visible and perceptible to us, so that these elevated matters would never depart from our eyes: these are the commandment of circumcision and the commandment [to affix] a *mezuzah* to the openings of our homes and courtyards. Moreover, He commanded [us] to place the sign of the *tefillin* on our heads and left arms, and issued the commandment [to place] *tzitzit* on our garments, so that we would remember Him every time we look upon them. Hence, it seems that in the case of the commandment of the *tzitzit*, the matter of remembering occurs by means of the…method mentioned above, which was common among some of the ancients—namely, by means of color and shade, and by means of the counting of knots and threads.[35]

Mendelssohn's posture lacks the charity and tolerance we might hope to discover in his work, for by presenting Jews as "distinguished…from those who go astray" immediately after discussing Peruvian customs, he implies that Peruvians are guilty of "straying" when they adhere to

inherited modes of behavior; indeed, this posture is a far cry from the Mendelssohnian attitude familiar to readers of *Jerusalem*, which famously warns Enlightenment thinkers to avoid denigrating the behavior of unfamiliar cultures.[36] The important point here, however, is that this elevation of Jewish practice is grounded in this system's centrality to communal life. That is, the *Biur*'s point seems to be that while Peruvian threads are kept in "closed chests" and "the courts of kings" and thus play only a peripheral role in communal activities, Jewish practice involves "practices and actions" which transform "everything visible and perceptible" into "symbolic reminders," and which thus ensure that "elevated matters would never depart from our eyes": while the Peruvian custom of tying threads fosters contemplation only when they are removed from "closed chests" in royal "courts," Jewish practices such as placing a *mezuzah* on a door or wearing clothing with *tzitzit* generate reflection "every time we look upon" a home or garment.[37] Lest we miss this point, Mendelssohn explicitly likens the content of Jewish practice to the content of Peruvian custom, implying that it is not the substance of these systems, but rather their disparate places in communal life, that grounds Judaism's superiority: to quote the *Biur*, "it seems that in the case of the commandment of the *tzitzit*, the matter of remembering occurs by means of the…method mentioned" in the Peruvian case—namely, "by means of color and shade, and by means of the counting of knots and threads." Even when Mendelssohn singles out specific actions required by Jewish law, then, he focuses on their centrality in communal life.

Of course, some readers might view this dimension of Mendelssohn's thought as a potential flaw. After all, this worry might run, if his arguments defending the value of Jewish practice turn out to revolve around the claim that this tradition places action at the center of religious life, then his arguments seem to imply that Jews might secure the benefits associated with Judaism through adherence to *other* religions, provided that religious practice is also central

to these alternate traditions—provided that these traditions also place a strong emphasis on the performance of actions, and provided that these actions also take place in all spheres of communal life. However, these readers might conclude, if Mendelssohn's arguments imply that Jews might secure the benefits associated with Judaism through adherence to other traditions, then his arguments provide Jews with little reason for remaining committed to Judaism. If the benefits of Jewish practice are available elsewhere, why should Jews prefer Judaism over other religions? Why shouldn't Jews adopt a practice-oriented version of some other tradition?

I must confess that I remain unsure how to assess this worry, although I would note that this type of concern is hardly unique to Mendelssohnian thought.[38] What I want to suggest, instead, is that regardless of whether Mendelssohn's focus on the centrality of practice undermines his ability to secure loyalty to Judaism, this aspect of his work grounds his potential relevance for conversations in contemporary religious thought—for conversations about the relationship between practice and belief, about the development of religious traditions, and about the capacity of religious communities to cultivate socially relevant beliefs and dispositions.

Let us begin with practice and belief. In recent decades, theorists such as Catherine Bell and Talal Asad have challenged inherited understandings of religious practice, arguing that while we often understand religious actions as symbolizing or expressing beliefs, we should actually see such actions as forming practitioners into specific types of subjects—into individuals who possess various habits, dispositions, desires, and capacities. For example, rather than seeing the act of kneeling as an expression of the belief that the kneeler is subordinate to God, we should understand this act as forming the practitioner into a subject capable of being subordinate—a subject whose body has been trained to perform acts involved in subordination. Similarly, rather than seeing the practice of wearing a veil as an expression of the belief that an individual is

modest, we should view this practice as generating a subject who is disposed to act modestly—a subject who has acquired, through repeatedly covering her face, the habits involved in modesty.[39]

The key point for us is that these developments have generated concerns among scholars such as Terry Godlove, Jr., who worries that theorists such as Bell go beyond rejecting inherited understandings of the relationship between practice and belief, and instead present the latter as largely irrelevant to the study of religion.[40] After all, Godlove takes Bell to be claiming, if religious practice is primarily concerned with ends such as training bodies and cultivating habits, then religious practice is primarily concerned with ends *other* than those which practitioners take themselves to be pursuing, and inquiring into what these individuals consciously believe thus does little to illuminate religious life.[41] The danger of this view, Godlove argues, is that a neglect of belief leads to a variety of problems, including an inability to deploy the category of religion itself. If we no longer attend to beliefs, Godlove asks, what grounds do we have for classifying some practices as *religious*?[42] Can we distinguish a Christian's contribution to her church from an atheist's donation to a museum without invoking the beliefs associated with these acts—without invoking reasons that these individuals offer for their behavior? Don't we need some way of recognizing the importance of cognitive commitments even as we acknowledge the centrality of practice? One ongoing conversation in religious thought, then, revolves around the relationship between practice and belief. Does a concern with the role of practice in forming subjects imply that we need no longer focus on belief, or can we develop theoretical models which attend to both phenomena—which acknowledge the role of practice in generating subjects, but which also explore the role of belief in the lives of individuals and communities?

My analysis reveals dimensions of Mendelssohn's thought relevant to this discussion. As I noted earlier in this conclusion, when *Jerusalem* and the *Biur* discuss Jewish practice and

collective "felicity," Mendelssohn is presenting an argument about what happens when religiously significant acts occur even in seemingly mundane areas of life—an argument which suggests that insofar as such actions generate recurring opportunities for contemplating God, these actions dispose practitioners to assess their behavior and to desire actions seen as good, and thus to evaluate their society's activities and combat obstacles to human flourishing. Framed in the vocabulary of contemporary theory, Mendelssohn is presenting an argument about the formation of subjects through practice.[43] That is, he is arguing that a specific type of subject is produced by the recurring performance of actions grounded in divinely sanctioned rules, since such performances generate frequent opportunities for reflecting on God that endow practitioners with a constellation of dispositions—that shape practitioners into individuals who are disposed to assess society's works, to desire actions deemed good, and to act to improve social conditions. At the same time, Mendelssohn's reasoning suggests that we cannot understand this dimension of practice without attending to belief, since the process of subject-formation engendered by practice is deeply tied to cognitive commitments. After all, on his model, the formation of subjects by practice depends on the existence of beliefs: practices dispose individuals to assess society and desire the good because these individuals believe in a specific sort of God—because these individuals posit the existence of God who desires the pursuit of perfection, a belief which motivates adherents to assess their behavior, leads them to yearn for the good, and thus moves them to evaluate society's activities and address threats to human flourishing. Moreover, on Mendelssohn's model, the formation of subjects by practice not only depends on, but also results in, the existence of beliefs: the type of subject formed by religious practice is, in part, a believing subject—a subject who becomes accustomed to reflecting on God, and who forms beliefs regarding the link between her society's "works" and the divinely sanctioned pursuit of

perfection. Mendelssohn's arguments thus outline two ways in which we can acknowledge practice's role in subject-formation without neglecting the importance of belief: we can explore ways in which practice forms subjects *because of* religious beliefs, and we can explore ways in which practice forms subjects *who hold* religious beliefs; we can consider ways in which the formation of subjects by practice *presupposes* cognitive commitments, and we can consider ways in which the formation of subjects by practice *results in* cognitive commitments. Mendelssohn, then, might contribute to contemporary conversations by supplying a model for attending to both practice and belief. His arguments point to questions that we might ask as we examine the lives of religious practitioners: even if the individuals we encounter hold conceptions of God and human flourishing very different from views endorsed by Mendelssohn, his arguments suggest that we should ask whether a practitioner's beliefs help determine the type of subject she becomes through participating in religious practice, and whether this participation in religious practice *itself* renders her more likely to form specific types of cognitive commitments.

Moreover, my reading of Mendelssohn points to his relevance not only for debates about the relationship between belief and practice, but also for ongoing discussions about the development of religious traditions. Recent decades have seen a growing interest in the account of traditions developed by Alasdair MacIntyre,[44] who famously defines a "tradition" as "an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined" through various conflicts.[45] For example, he suggests, "the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew."[46] This theory, of course, is a far-reaching model that is not concerned only with *religious* traditions[47]—a theory that explores historically extended conversations such as Aristotelianism, and that is intended to show that rationality depends on conceptual resources and standards of justification provided by

such traditions.[48] My concern, in turn, lies with an aspect of MacIntyre's arguments that has attracted the attention of commentators such as Jennifer Herdt: his account of "epistemological crises."[49] Consider his remarks in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*:

> At any point it may happen to any tradition-constituted inquiry that by its own standards of progress it ceases to make progress. Its hitherto trusted methods of inquiry have become sterile…Moreover, it may indeed happen that the use of the methods of enquiry and the forms of argument…begins to have the effect of increasingly disclosing new inadequacies, hitherto unrecognized incoherences, and new problems…This kind of dissolution of historically founded certitudes is the mark of an epistemological crisis. The solution to a genuine epistemological crisis requires the invention or discovery of new concepts and the framing of some new type or types of theory…[One] central example was of the way in which in the fourth century the definition of the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity resolved the controversies arising out of competing interpretations of scripture by use of philosophical and theological concepts whose understanding had itself issued from debates rationally unresolved up to that point…Boltzman's 1890 derivation of paradoxes from accounts of thermal energy framed in terms of classical mechanics produced an epistemological crisis within physics which was only to be resolved by Bohr's theory of the internal structure of the atom.[50]

The reference here is to situations in which inherited views are no longer taken to be adequate, and in which a tradition therefore requires "the invention or discovery of new concepts and the framing of some new type or types of theory"—for example, a situation in which thinkers must draw on an emerging constellation of "philosophical and theological concepts" to understand a "doctrine" whose determinate content remains unclear,[51] or a situation in which scientists must develop a new model of reality's structure to replace an inherited view that yields "paradoxes."

The Mendelssohn emerging from this dissertation might illuminate ways in which religious traditions deal with such crises. As noted above, his reasoning suggests that a religious tradition's emphasis on action can foster an engagement with emerging conceptual models, preventing adherents from becoming too rigidly attached to specific understandings of key principles, and thus permitting these individuals to revise their commitments and embrace the entailments of new models. Emerging conceptual frameworks, in turn, seem to constitute one

type of resource that might help resolve epistemological crises, since such models can supply new content to core religious principles once existing understandings prove inadequate, and since this replacement of inadequate approaches and revision of core doctrines seems to be what some traditions in crisis require. Building on a MacIntyerian example, Mendelssohn's reasoning implies that if a tradition can overcome failed attempts to understand core doctrines by turning to emerging conceptual schemes, then this tradition is more likely to overcome those failed attempts when adherents place a strong emphasis on action, since such individuals might be more concerned with their practices than with inherited understandings of doctrines, and since these individuals might therefore be willing to reject those inherited understandings and turn to new models.[52] Similarly, building on examples discussed in Chapter 2, Mendelssohn's reasoning implies that if a tradition's principles have been called into question because they have been understood in Aristotelian terms that no longer seems adequate, then this tradition's posture towards action can play a key role in resolving this crisis, since an emphasis on action can encourage an engagement with a newly emerging conceptual scheme, and since this scheme might provide a way to understand beliefs so that they are less vulnerable to challenges—so that they are not vulnerable to the objection of being grounded in an untenable philosophical system.[53] Mendelssohn's reasoning thus outlines a possible role for religious practice in the resolution of epistemological crises, suggesting that an emphasis on action can prevent excessive attachment to specific words and concepts, enable us to take seriously new philosophical frameworks, and thus empower us to draw on such models when confronting the collapse of inherited worldviews. Put differently, the Mendelssohn I have presented might contribute to contemporary discussions not only by illuminating the relationship between practice and belief, but also by revealing a role for the former in the development of religious traditions.

Finally, my reading of Mendelssohn reveals his potential relevance for ongoing conversations about religion and society. The key development here is a growing interest among diverse thinkers in the capacity of religious communities to cultivate socially relevant beliefs and dispositions. The core insight animating these discussions is the idea that a polity's health depends not only on laws and institutional arrangements but also on citizens' beliefs and dispositions, that religious communities often contribute to the formation of such beliefs and dispositions, and that religious communities can thus play a key role in fostering the well-being of a society. To offer a somewhat simplistic example, if the health of a democratic polity is enhanced when citizens affirm a belief in human dignity and are disposed to act to secure this value, and if a religious community can foster this affirmation and disposition through practices such as the study of texts that describe human beings as bearing God's image, then this religious community might play a role in sustaining that democratic polity. One ongoing conversation in religious thought, then, revolves around the ways in which religious communities—if not socially indispensable—might be socially relevant, capable of cultivating beliefs and dispositions that turn out to influence a society's health.[54]

My analysis points to the possibility of a Mendelssohnian contribution to this conversation. On my reading, the *Biur* and *Jerusalem* describe citizens who are disposed to pursue reflection and action that promote the well-being of their society—citizens who are disposed to evaluate their society's "works" and act on the results of such reflection, asking whether economic and aesthetic shifts impede or promote the pursuit of perfection, introducing corrections to eliminate harmful conditions and promote collective "felicity," and thereby striving for a society free from perilous economic developments as well as from "strife and contention."[55] At the same time, Mendelssohn suggests that this commitment to assessing and

improving society arises from immersion in religious practice—that this commitment emerges when individuals are called to perform religiously significant acts even in seemingly mundane areas of life, since the frequent performance of actions oriented towards God generates recurring reflection on the deity, and since this recurring contemplation of the divine forms individuals into engaged citizens. After all, Mendelssohn holds that if individuals are moved by their practices to repeatedly contemplate a God who wishes for humans to pursue perfection, then these individuals will be disposed to assess their behavior and desire actions deemed good, and thus to evaluate their society's activities and combat obstacles to human flourishing. That is, if actions direct attention to a God concerned with the good of human beings, then these actions can inculcate a similar concern among religious practitioners, orienting cognition and desire towards the goal of ensuring that this good[56] is promoted by society's activities. Mendelssohn thus outlines one way in which religious communities might cultivate socially relevant beliefs and dispositions: if religious practices can promote reflection on a God similar to the one envisioned by *Jerusalem* and the *Biur*, then these practices might form adherents into individuals who are disposed to examine society's works, address problems such as economic inequality, and combat the emergence of "strife and contention." The Mendelssohn I have uncovered, then, might contribute to ongoing conversations by outlining a possible role for religion in society.

There is more work to be done, of course, before we can go beyond suggesting that Mendelssohn's thought *might* prove relevant today, and instead declare that contemporary thinkers *should* appropriate his insights.[57] I believe, however, that I have pointed to the possibility of a Mendelssohnian future for religious thought. Rather than concluding that Mendelssohn's work merely provides a series of "ephemeral" solutions, we should consider the possibility that his eighteenth-century writings can advance twenty-first century conversations.

On History: Concluding Thoughts

By now, we have moved well beyond the project of reconstructing Mendelssohn's arguments. While I concluded Chapter 1 by asking whether we can clarify what he means when he presents his theory of Jewish practice, my efforts to address this question have led us far beyond texts such as *Jerusalem* and the *Biur*, allowing us to tell a more comprehensive story about the rise of Jewish modernity, and raising the possibility of a Mendelssohnian future for religious thought. My reading, then, not only offers a new understanding of a foundational figure in modern Judaism, but also contributes to broader conversations in a variety of fields.

As we look back on the path that has led to this point, it is worth reflecting on the approach that has animated this study. The previous pages have suggested that Mendelssohn might offer resources of enduring value—that his views on "disfiguring" and "felicity" might contribute to contemporary conversations. However, this argument about Mendelssohn and *our* historical moment arose from a sustained engagement with *his* historical setting, for it was a close reading attentive to issues of context—to the pre-modern sources he inherits and the Enlightenment setting in which he operates—that revealed the details and conclusions of his reasoning. Without focusing on early modern concerns about philosophical "changeability" and debates surrounding the decline of Aristotelianism, we might have failed to recognize the claims regarding conceptual flexibility that shed light on the development of traditions. Similarly, without attending to the pre-modern texts Mendelssohn's audience knows and the Enlightenment sources he reads, we might have missed the arguments regarding social well-being that shed light on belief, practice, and religion's role in society. Methodologically, then, I have sought to illuminate Mendelssohn's enduring relevance by treating him as historically conditioned. It is precisely by wrestling with *his* context that I have allowed him to address *our* concerns.

In adopting this approach, my treatment of Mendelssohn and his thought echoes his treatment of Jews and Jewish practice. Just as I present Mendelssohn's thought as relevant today, so too does he present Jewish practice as enduringly valuable: insisting that Jewish law continues to possess authority, he argues that the actions required by this system serve crucial functions in modernity, encouraging adherents to revise their beliefs as philosophical systems rise and fall, and transforming these adherents into citizens who combat corrupting and destabilizing social developments. Moreover, just as I illuminate the relevance of Mendelssohn's work by treating him as a historically conditioned thinker, so too does he illuminate the relevance of Jewish practice by treating Jews as historically conditioned individuals. That is, while he worries about scholarly attempts to treat the Bible as a text that has been corrupted by history, his arguments about the value of Jewish practice present Jews as shaped by historical processes. When he defends the value of Jewish practice by suggesting that this system encourages the revision of beliefs amid conceptual "changeability," his argument presents Jews as shaped by the dynamics of philosophical history—as figures who attend to the rise and fall of philosophical models, and who constantly revise their commitments in light of such developments. Similarly, when he defends the value of Jewish practice by suggesting that this system trains adherents to address dangers arising from social change, his reasoning presents Jews as shaped by the dynamics of social history—as inhabiting societies characterized by shifting economic and aesthetic pursuits, and as deeply committed to directing such changes in ethically and politically productive ways. In the end, then, my dissertation affirms of Mendelssohn and his thought what he affirms of Jews and their practices: it is precisely by treating individuals as historically conditioned that we recognize what is enduringly valuable. It is precisely by delving into history that we open up new possibilities for the future.

[1] I use the phrase "religious thought" to refer, broadly, to diverse types of conceptual inquiry into issues relating to religion—to conversations that are often described with terms such as "theology," "philosophy of religion," "religious ethics," and "theories of religion." While grouping these types of inquiry under one heading runs the risk of blurring methodological distinctions, I make this move because the conversations that I discuss in this conclusion often extend across disciplinary boundaries. For example, insofar as conversations about religion and society can plausibly be linked all four types of inquiry cited above, I simply describe these conversations as occurring in "contemporary religious thought," rather than listing a number of fields or arbitrarily privileging some approaches over others.

[2] The scholars cited in notes 3-4 use a variety of terms when discussing attitudes towards history—terms such as "historical consciousness," "historical sense," and "historical mindedness." While some of these authors clarify the meanings of these phrase, others leave their terms undefined, and often seem to use concepts in ways that diverge from other scholars. To avoid entering into debates about these terms, then, I will use phrases such as "historical consciousness" and "historical sense" to refer to the type of attitude described in the body of my conclusion—an attitude towards past events, and towards the category of history itself.

[3] A full survey of the literature on Jewish attitudes towards history lies beyond the scope of this conclusion. For overviews of the differences between modern and pre-modern attitudes, see, e.g., Ismar Schorsch, "The Emergence of Historical Consciousness in Modern Judaism," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 28 (1983): 413-437; Michael A. Meyer, introduction to *Ideas of Jewish History*, ed. Meyer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 1-42; Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996); David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought*, Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 13-34. For additional discussions of this issue, as well as examples of scholars who accept aspects of this view while cautioning against minimizing the concern with history in pre-modern Judaism, see the sources cited in note 4 below; see also the overview of scholarly literature in Feiner, *Haskalah and History*, 1-5.

[4] Some scholars raise questions about claims advanced by figures such as Yerushalmi, acknowledging the existence of differences between pre-modern and modern attitudes, but emphasizing the importance of history to pre-modern Jews. See, e.g. Funkenstein, "Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness," *History and Memory* 1, no. 1 (1989): 5-26; Robert Chazan, "The Timebound and the Timeless: Medieval Jewish Narrations of Events," *History and Memory* 6, no. 1 (1994): 5-34; Robert Bonfil, "Jewish Attitudes Toward History and Historical Writing in Pre-Modern Times," *Jewish History* 11, no. 1 (1997): 7-40. Yerushalmi discusses some of these critiques in his prefaces to the 1989 and 1996 editions of *Zakhor*; see also Myers, "Remembering *Zakhor*: A Super-Commentary," *History and Memory*, 4, no. 2 (1992): 129-146.

[5] Yerushalmi already calls attention to this phenomena in Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 92-93. For a study of anti-historicism among German-Jewish thinkers, see Myers, *Resisting History*.

[6] See, e.g., Schorsch, "The Emergence of Historical Consciousness," 420-437.

[7] See, e.g., the survey of scholarly literature in Feiner, *Haskalah and History*, 1-5. For examples of this view drawn from the secondary sources cited earlier in this conclusion, see Meyer, introduction to *Ideas of Jewish History*, 21-23; Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 82-83.

[8] The key work here is Feiner, *Haskalah and History*, which argues—persuasively, to my mind—for the presence of a distinctive historical consciousness among *maskilim* (individuals

connected with the Haskalah): on this model, these eighteenth-century figures exhibit points of contact with, but also constitutes a "front" of historical thinking distinct from, the nineteenth-century founders of *Wissenschafts des Judentums*. Feiner's account has since been incorporated into the narratives of other scholars: see, e.g., Myers, *Resisting History*, 20-21. On the Haskalah more generally, see the sources cited in note 5 in my introduction.

I wish to avoid confusion. While acknowledging that Mendelssohn's writings exhibit select aspects of the attitude emerging in the works of younger *maskilim*, Feiner places his emphasis on the significant differences between Mendelssohn's claims and the views of these younger figures. Moreover, while acknowledging hints of a break with traditional attitudes in the work of one of Mendelssohn's contemporaries (Naphtali Herz Wessely), Feiner goes on to argue that Wessely "retreated" from his innovative views in the face of criticism, and that the decisive break with traditional models appears in the work of a younger *maskil*: for Feiner, "the first modern Jewish theoretical work on 'history'" was written by Isaac Euchel, who was nearly thirty years younger than Mendelssohn, and whose key work—an article entitled "On the Benefits Provided by History"—appeared after the publication of Mendelssohnian works such as *Jerusalem* and the *Biur*. See Feiner, *Haskalah and History*, 19-28, 40-43.

I would add that when I refer to Mendelssohn as the "revered teacher" of younger *maskilim*, I am not reverting to the earlier view of Mendelssohn as the "founder" of a formal intellectual movement who possessed a circle of "disciples." Rather, I am attempting to indicate the respect which these younger thinkers felt for Mendelssohn, as well as their view of him as a model to be emulated. See Feiner "Mendelssohn and 'Mendelssohn's Disciples,'" 133-167.

[9] See, e.g., the sources cited in note 9 in Chapter 5.

[10] See, e.g., the sources cited in note 9 in Chapter 5; see also the discussion of Mendelssohn in Myers, *Resisting History*, 17-18, 20.

[11] For these quotations, see pages 58 and 64 in Chapter 1.

[12] As we saw earlier in this dissertation, while Mendelssohn posits the existence of "eternal truths," he suggests that these truths have been understood in different ways at different points in history—that there have been historically diverse *concepts*, *conceptions*, and *understandings* of "eternal" *truths* and *principles* (such as providence and immortality).

[13] Insofar as Mendelssohn argues that conceptual "disfiguring" arises from creedal statements, he is implicitly claiming that Christianity—which has generated such statements—has experienced this conceptual distortion. Indeed, as we saw, Mendelssohn seems to have been familiar with developments in early modern Christian theology that can be understood as instances of such "disfiguring." See Chapter 2.

[14] See page 106 in Chapter 2.

[15] See page 90 in Chapter 2. Indeed, as we saw, one Mendelssohnian text suggests that if Maimonides had lived through the early modern period, he would have revised his views in light of discoveries by non-Jewish figures: see page 105 in Chapter 2.

[16] See Chapter 2.

[17] See page 48 in Chapter 1.

[18] See page 137 in Chapter 3. While Mendelssohn uses these phrases when discussing the biblical tabernacle, we saw that his claims about the tabernacle are part of a broader argument about Jewish practice.

[19] See pages 138-146 in Chapter 3.

[20] See pages 134-138 and142-143 in Chapter 3.

[21] I believe that pursuing this issue would illuminate modern Jewish intellectual history. It might be instructive, for example, to consider the relationship between Mendelssohn's historical thinking and the work of Nachman Krochmal, a still-understudied Eastern European thinker who plays a key role in the rise of modern Jewish attitudes towards history. On Mendelssohn and Krochmal, see Jay M. Harris, *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age*, Modern Jewish Masters (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 100n54, 140-141, 161-163, et al. I hope to explore Mendelssohn and Krochmal in a future study.

[22] See, e.g., the discussions of pre-modern sources in note 4 above.

[23] See pages 8-9 in the introduction to this dissertation.

[24] More specifically, I believe that there are intriguing points of contact between the approach to establishing a religion's "truth" outlined in Chapter 4, and the account of religion, revelation, and grounds for belief in Samuel Fleischacker, *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World: A Defense of Revealed Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[25] For example, I am not convinced that the manner in which this epistemology urges us to establish a religion's "truth" would yield the conclusion Mendelssohn envisions—namely, the conclusion that Judaism is a "true" religion in the sense of preserving a divine revelation. On this early modern model, one step in establishing a religion's "truth" is establishing that this tradition's "facts" point to the preservation of a divine revelation; however, I wonder whether Judaism's basic "facts"—the central elements of its historical narratives—are sufficiently well-grounded to establish this type of conclusion. Similarly, on this early modern model, another step in establishing a religion's truth is establishing that this tradition's "content" points to the preservation of a revealed message; however, I wonder whether Judaism's "content"—the beliefs and practices traditionally associated with core Jewish texts—is sufficiently free from troubling aspects to point to the existence of a divinely disclosed teaching. To be sure, it might be possible to address these concerns. Nevertheless, this possibility seems sufficiently uncertain to generate worries regarding the application of this model.

[26] See page 37 in Chapter 1; I have added the italics. Mendelssohn's account of "disfiguring" occurs at the end of a section that claims to be concerned with this "legislation."

[27] See page 138 in Chapter 3.

[28] I remain uncertain regarding Mendelssohn's intentions in this matter. Does he inadvertently defend Jewish practice in terms that illuminate religious practice more generally? Or is he purposefully presenting an argument which has implications beyond Jewish life?

[29] See pages 46-47 in Chapter 1. There is a brief reference to a specific practice in the clauses I omit: Mendelssohn notes that one "occasion for inquiring and reflecting" would be present "on all gates and on all doorposts"—a reference to the practice of affixing a *mezuzah*, or small box containing biblical verses, to the doorpost of Jewish homes. However, when Mendelssohn invokes this practice, he does not focus on the specific content of this practice—for example, on the importance of doorposts as opposed to other surfaces, or on the importance of biblical verses as opposed to other religious texts. Rather, he focuses on the fact that the *mezuzah* is an example of the centrality of practice to Jewish life: he takes the practice of affixing *mezuzot* to doorposts is to illustrate the point that "in everything a youth saw being done, in all public as well as private dealings…he found occasion for inquiring and reflecting." See also the *Biur* passage discussed below (which is concerned, in part, with *mezuzot*).

[30] See page 138 in Chapter 3.

[31] On God and perfection in Mendelssohn's thought, see pages 124-125 in Chapter 3.

[32] See Chapter 3. Mendelssohn explicitly states that he is concerned with perilous economic developments and civil "war": the example of economic inequality is one that I construct to illuminate the content of his reasoning.

[33] See pages 9-10 in my introduction.

[34] On Mendelssohn as the author of this passage, see note 39 in my introduction.

[35] Mendelssohn, *Biur* on Numbers 15:39, in 18:133.

[36] See Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 113-115/8:179-181.

[37] Shira Billet has called attention, in conversation, to the gendered aspect of the practices cited here: circumcision is an operation performed on male Jews, and (in Mendelssohn's era) the wearing of *tefillin* and *tzitzit* were seen as incumbent only upon men.

[38] For example, insofar as Maimonides claims that Jewish law counts as a "divine law" because it promotes intellectual perfection and social order, we might wonder whether other legal systems can *in principle* serve similar ends and thus also count as "divine." That is, even though Maimonides insists that Jewish law is the only divine law, we might wonder whether his arguments raise the possibility of another divine legal system, and thus whether his arguments raise the possibility that Jews might have little reason to prefer Jewish law over this competitor. See the sources cited in notes 21 and 62 in Chapter 5.

[39] While a full survey of this literature lies beyond the this conclusion's scope, key texts include Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[40] See Terry F. Godlove, Jr., "Saving Belief: On the New Materialism in Religious Studies," in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Nancy K. Frankenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10-24.

[41] Ibid., 17-18. Godlove cites as an example of this view Bell, "Performance," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 212-216; Godlove also points to *Ritual Theory*, 182-196. It is important to note that this argument is only of the reasons for minimizing belief noted by Goldove: for example, we might worry that belief is too unstable, varied, and difficult to discern to shed light on religious life.

[42] See Godlove, "Saving Belief," 20-24.

[43] While I am borrowing some language from contemporary theory to characterize Mendelssohn's position, it is worth noting that there are striking similarities between the language he employs and the language of scholars such as Bell and Asad. For example, just as Mendelssohn describes Jewish practice as the enactment of a "living script," so too do Bell and Asad use phrases such as "enacting a script" and "script for regulating practice" when discussing religious ritual. See Bell, "Performance," 205-206; Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 57-58.

[44] While a full survey lies beyond the scope of this conclusion, a sense of the reaction to MacIntyre's work—both to his theory of traditions and to other aspects of his thought—emerges from Mark C. Murphy, ed., *Alasdair MacIntyre*, Contemporary Philosophy in Focus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); John Horton and Susan Mendus, eds., *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

[45] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12. See also *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre

Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 204-225; *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

[46] MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," *Monist* 60, no. 4 (1977): 461.

[47] For an example of a work that draws on MacIntyre to illuminate a religious tradition, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3-11.

[48] For an overview of MacIntyre's approach to "tradition," see Jean Porter, "Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre," in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, 38-69.

[49] On MacIntyre and such "crises," see Ibid., 47-50. For Herdt's discussion, see Jennifer A. Herdt, "Alasdair MacIntyre's 'Rationality of Traditions' and Tradition-Transcendental Standards of Justification," *Journal of Religion* 78, no. 4 (1998): 534-546.

[50] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 361-363.

[51] The emerging constellation of "philosophical and theological concepts" that MacIntyre invokes seems to be a group of concepts which were inherited from earlier philosophers such as Plato, but which were then given new meanings in the writings of early Christian thinkers. This point emerges if we attend to the sources on which MacIntyre claims to be drawing—namely, the works of John Henry Newman (Ibid., 353). See, e.g., John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, 3rd ed. (London: E. Lumley, 1871), 137-241.

[52] There is a difference between the concepts invoked by Mendelssohn and MacIntyre: while Mendelssohn is concerned with a new collection of concepts such as Cartesian or Leibnizian philosophy, MacIntyre is concerned with reinterpreted concepts inherited from an existing philosophical system (see my previous note). Nevertheless, both Mendelssohn and MacIntyre are referring to situations in which thinkers turn to a previously unused set of concepts to lend determinate content to core principles—to concepts which are unused either in the sense of constituting a newly emerging philosophical framework, or in the sense of constituting a significantly reimagined version of existing concepts. It seems reasonable, then, to apply Mendelssohn's reasoning to the scenario envisioned by MacIntyre.

[53] In effect, I am providing a Mendelssohnian account of how practice might address the need to reinterpret doctrines such as transubstantiation in the wake of Aristotelianism's decline, as well as of how practice might enable the revision of views on gentile salvation in the wake of a break with Maimonidean moral epistemology. See Chapter 2.

[54] I am thinking, in particular, of work by thinkers such as Stanley Hauerwas, MacIntyre, and Jeffrey Stout. Some examples include Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; *Whose Justice*; Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). For an example of a scholar who appropriates a historical figure to address these conversations, see Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7-10, 232-247, et al.

[55] See Chapter 3.

[56] Molly Farneth has pointed out, in conversation, that Mendelssohn's position generates additional questions in a pluralistic society. If religious practice orients cognition and desire towards the goal of ensuring that the good is promoted by society's activities, what happens when practitioners' conception of the good is not universally shared? What happens when

modern Jews—disposed by their practices to assess society's works and improve social life—discover that their vision of the good which society should promote differs from the vision endorsed by other citizens?

I know of no text in which Mendelssohn explicitly addresses these questions, perhaps because of his moral epistemology. For Mendelssohn, the human vocation of pursuing perfection is rationally recognizable (see Mendelssohn, "On Evidence," 295-301/2:315-322); therefore, all citizens should be able to identify perfection as their proper *telos*, and all citizens should be able to agree that actions which promote the achievement of this condition count as good. Nevertheless, we can outline at least two ways in which we might extend Mendelssohn's vision of engaged citizenship to a diverse society. First, we might argue that Mendelssohn's vision leaves open the possibility that Jews' commitment to assessing and improving society will take the form of attempts at democratic persuasion. That is, seeking to ensure that society's activities promote a particular conception of the good, Jews might try to persuade fellow citizens that this conception merits acceptance and social instantiation. Indeed, given Mendelssohn's insistence that free decision-making is an essential component of self-cultivation (see, e.g., Arkush, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 106-107), his position implies that non-coercive means should, if possible, be employed to encourage the pursuit of perfection. Second, we might point out that many of the concrete ends that this commitment to the good leads individuals to pursue—ends such as absence of economic inequality, a flourishing artistic life, and the presence of civic harmony (see pages 135-137 and 143 above)—are ends that might be recognized as valuable by citizens with diverse conceptions of the good. That is, seeking to ensure that society's activities promote a particular conception of the good, Jews might end up seeking to foster ends which individuals holding diverse views recognize as socially valuable.

[57] For example, we might ask whether the conception of God crucial to Mendelssohn's account is likely to be affirmed—whether twenty-first century individuals are likely to hold the conception of God which, when frequently contemplated, can form a practitioner into an engaged citizen, and thus whether the process of social cultivation Mendelssohn describes is likely to occur. Similarly, we might ask whether there are any historical examples of cases in which practice enabled the resolution of an epistemological crisis—whether we can point to any empirical evidence that a focus on practice *has* encouraged conceptual flexibility, and thus whether we have historical grounds to endorse a Mendelssohnian approach to this issue.

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