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Mission and missionaries among the Jews in nineteenth-century Europe: introduction to symposium papers

A symposium on mission and missionaries among the Jews in nineteenth-century Europe was held on 30 March 2015 under the auspices of the Jewish Historical Society of England. This special event celebrated a new initiative to promote the study of what is usually referred to as Anglo-Jewry. From 1 to 31 March, David Ruderman, Professor of Modern Jewish History, was the first scholar in residence of the Society. In two major publications, he has provided new insights into the emergence of Anglo-Jewish thought and the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The first of these books, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry's Construction of Modern Jewish Thought* (2000), examined the ways in which a small group of hitherto neglected Jewish thinkers reformulated their tradition in the light of Enlightenment categories, thus uncovering a vibrant Jewish intellectual life in England during the Enlightenment era. In the second, *Connecting the Covenants: Judaism and the Search for Christian Identity in Eighteenth-Century England* (2007), Ruderman discovered a fascinating episode in the history of European Jewry and Jewish–Christian intellectual relations. A key role is attributed to the Jewish convert Moses Marcus (c. 1660–1735), who was promoted by figures associated with the highest echelons of the Anglican Church as a mediator between Judaism and Christianity. His mediation in 'connecting the covenants' was supposed to shed light upon the extent to which post-biblical writings help Christians better understand the New Testament. But, as Ruderman claims, over the years it appeared that Protestant scholars such as William Whiston, Anthony Collins, William Wotton, and the Dutch scholar William Surenhusius had already, and with considerable success, shown the significance of Mishnah and Talmud for Christian exegesis, thus connecting the covenants.

Recently, David Ruderman has embarked on a new project, the centre of which is the Jewish convert Alexander McCaul (1799–1863), a key figure in nineteenth-century missions to the Jews. At the symposium, topics such as "Women and the Evangelical Mission to the Jews in Victorian

England" presented by Nadia Valman, "After Mission: Alfred Edersheim's Reflections on Jews and Christians" by Joanna Weinberg, and Theodor Dunkelgrün's "Mission and Massorah: Christian David Ginsburg and Victorian Biblical Culture" showed the complexity of the subject and contextualized McCaul's conversionary activity. Four of the contributions to the symposium directly related to AlexanderMcCaul are presented in this issue of *Jewish Historical Studies*.

Ruderman describes McCaul as "a leading figure in the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews ... a key intellectual and political leader of the Society, but also one of its most profound intellectuals, deeply learned in Jewish literature and intimately familiar with contemporary Jews and Judaism." By examining McCaul's attitude to Jews, his love for Hebraica while loathing the rabbis, and inviting the Jews to adopt a purified version of biblical Judaism shaped in the image of evangelical Protestant Christianity, Ruderman uncovers the complexity of missionary motives and activity in nineteenth-century England.

The biblical Judaism McCaul and others advocated in order to bring Jews into the Christian fold was certainly meant to persuade Jews that conversion would not take them away from their Scriptures. But as Michael Ledger-Lomas in his contribution, "Evangelical Protestants, Jews, and the Epistle to the Hebrews in mid-nineteenth-century Britain", explains, it was more than a missionary strategy. The promotion of "Hebrew Christianity" and the acceptance of a "Jewish Jesus" as the Messiah, whose coming was the fulfilment of scriptural prophecy, caused a rift with Protestants who claimed that Jesus had freed the Church from the Old Testament. Opponents of the missionaries argued in different ways that "Jesus was not really the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures and that his claim to veneration lay in his promulgation of a religion of love and humanity which broke with the desiccated legalism of Judaism." Most problematic for the missionaries was the growing attraction among Protestants towards higher critical approaches about the historical reliability of the Old Testament and the moral flaws that undermined its authority.

In his paper, "Christian Restorationism in Ireland in the early nineteenth century", Philip Alexander shows the consequences some missionaries drew from Scripture, in particular from the expected literal fulfillment of prophecy. His study of what he rightly calls the "strange case of Miss Marianne Nevill" gives us a sense of an extreme interpretation of Old Testament messianic prophecy. Having already ensured a Jewish environment for the converts by creating "Hebrew churches" and

providing the Book of Common Prayer in Hebrew, Miss Nevill saw it as her mission to prepare for the return of the (Christian) Jews to their ancient homeland. Inspired by millenarian views that prompted Christians to seek the conversion of the Jews, Miss Nevill considered her plans to realize this restoration as an active contribution to the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy and a preparation of the second coming of Christ.

Christian philosemitism, though by no means unreservedly confessed by the missionaries and explicitly counteracted by merciless attacks on "rabbinism", had unavoidable political repercussions and affected the relationship between evangelicals and Jews in the Victorian decades. In his essay, "Evangelicals, Jews, and anti-Catholicism in Britain, c. 1840–1900", David Feldman discusses the Damascus, Mortara, and Dreyfus affairs, in which evangelical Protestants including Alexander McCaul offered Jews unrestricted support. Since all three affairs placed Jews in conflict with the Papacy, the Evangelicals' support of the Jews became also an attack on the Catholic Church, portrayed as the opposite of Britain as a kingdom whose liberties had been nurtured by Protestantism. However, their common enemy did not invariably lead the "conversionists" to campaign for the Jews' political equality at home.

The contributions to the symposium here presented are unique case studies. Taken together, however, they give us an insight into the complexity of missionary activity in nineteenth-century Europe, and the exegetical and theological disputes that Christian mission brought about, and the political predicaments it generated.

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