A natural yet providential tongue:
Moses Mendelssohn on Hebrew as a language of action

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Abstract: How did Moses Mendelssohn reconcile a naturalistic theory of language, advocating the contingent development of all tongues, with the belief that Hebrew was a divine language that did not change ever since its inception? The seeming contradiction was resolved by employing the contemporary notion of the language of action – a primordial means of communication, where gesture and melody were as significant as words. Mendelssohn's view of Hebrew as the language closest to this idiom was accompanied by his suggestion that the Jewish ceremonial law is a living script which can be properly understood only through oral instruction. He employed both ideas to counter the notions that the Hebrew vowel points were a late invention and that some loci in the Hebrew Bible had been subject to textual corruption. For Mendelssohn, the allegedly supernatural aspects of spoken Hebrew could be naturalised through constant and lively human conversation across the ages. The appropriation of contemporary critiques of the arbitrariness of language allowed Mendelssohn to forge an original synthesis that could simultaneously accommodate naturalism and providentialism.

If this essay starts with Heinrich Heine's well-known comparison between Moses Mendelssohn and Martin Luther, it is only in order to question this nineteenth-century commentary on Mendelssohn. Heine saw the Jewish philosopher and the Christian reformer as the intellectual pioneers of a return to the Bible which involved, respectively, the undermining of rabbinical literature and Catholic scholasticism.

> As Luther overthrew the papacy, so Mendelssohn overthrew the Talmud, and in the exactly same way: by rejecting tradition, declaring the Bible to be the source of religion, and translating its most important part. He thus destroyed Jewish Catholicism as Luther destroyed the Christian version.[1]

A renewed focus on the Hebrew Bible and the study of Hebrew grammar and literature was, indeed, a central tenet of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah). Mendelssohn dedicated much time and effort to the project of translating the Pentateuch into German (and commenting upon it in Hebrew), which may have strengthened the association in Heine's mind between him and Luther. Yet Mendelssohn was no radical reformer. Not only did he personally and philosophically exhibit the opposite qualities to those usually ascribed to religious enthusiasts (*Schwärmer*); he never wished to 'overthrow' or to 'destroy' the Talmud. He was less extreme than Jews of the next generation on various fronts. Unlike Salomon Maimon, he did not believe in the absolute authority of reason; he

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[1] Heinrich Heine, *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings*, ed. Terry Pinkard, trans. Howard Pollack-Milgate (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 69; *Heines Werke in fünf Bänden* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1967), vol. 5, 84. On this passage in relation to Heine's and Mendelssohn's views on religious symbolism see Gideon Freudenthal, 'Moses Mendelssohn: Iconoclast', in *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics*, ed. Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 351-72.

would have also abhorred David Friedländer's suggestion to create a Protestant-Jewish union in Prussia by forsaking some basic Jewish customs.[2] Unlike Luther, he did not regard traditional ceremonies, rituals, and symbols as superfluous elements of Judaism which might be safely swept aside. He took up the serious challenge of reconciling rabbinic literature with biblical Scripture, providing a modern interpretation of both in support of an Enlightened Judaism that remained faithful to its historical traditions. The comprehensiveness of Mendelssohn's stance and the accompanying tensions in his thought may arguably be perceived nowhere better than in his views on the Hebrew language.

I shall first delineate Mendelssohn's general theory of language: its function, origin, and characteristics. On these issues, Mendelssohn's naturalistic framework largely reflected eighteenth-century debates over language and mind. The second part of this essay will concentrate on Mendelssohn's views on Hebrew, especially in the introduction to his German translation of the Torah. There Hebrew enjoys a special status as an unchanging, providentially maintained holy tongue. At the centre of my final discussion will stand the tension between Mendelssohn's general views on language and his particular treatment of Hebrew – reflecting the larger issue of particularism and universalism in his work. However, I shall suggest that Mendelssohn's appropriation of contemporary critiques of the arbitrariness of language allowed him to forge an original synthesis that could accommodate both naturalism and providentialism simultaneously.

Human language: natural and conventional

The intellectual amalgam designated here as eighteenth-century naturalism consisted in the view that human beings constructed their civilisation (materially as well as intellectually) on their own and for themselves. Divine providence may have supervised and maintained these achievements, but God's direct intervention was not necessarily required. This hypothesis was common to Enlightenment authors who tried to explain in human terms the emergence of social norms and customs, interpersonal relations, language, and political institutions. It may initially be surprising to find believing Christians and Jews adhering to this view, for the naturalistic presupposition – human beings forging independently their mental and material culture – seems to run contrary to the biblical narrative. In Genesis, man is created by God and in his image; his faculties are intact or indeed perfect. Adam spoke a supposedly fully-fledged language while possessing substantial wisdom. Moreover, the most renowned ancient source for a wholly naturalistic account of cultural evolution was Lucretius's *De rerum natura*. Despite some early modern attempts to rehabilitate or baptise Epicureanism, Epicurus and Lucretius were still widely considered as dangerously irreligious authors. Human beings, in their account, sprouted accidentally from the earth and forged their entire civilisation on their own. Gods did exist, albeit in

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[2] On the differences between Mendelssohn and Maimon, see Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 65-76. For the suggested union of faiths: David Friedländer, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Wilhelm Abraham Teller, *A Debate on Jewish Emanicipation and Christian Theology in Old Berlin*, ed. and trans. Richard Crouter and Julie Klassen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004).

some liminal space between the worlds; they were largely indifferent to what the creatures of the earth did (or failed do) far below.[3]

The mainstream Enlightenment genre of inquiries into the origin of language largely followed the example of the ancient Epicureans. However, divine providence and the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch could, for many an eighteenth-century author, be reconciled with the emergence of human language and civilisation in naturalistic terms. In Germany Johann David Michaelis, Moses Mendelssohn, and Johann Gottfried Herder joined a wide range of European authors, from Giambattista Vico and William Warburton to Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, who elaborated this naturalistic narrative of the evolution of language and society in works that would later be called conjectural histories of humanity.[4] In order to ponder the countours and limits of Mendelssohn's naturalism, it would be particularly useful to situate his views on Hebrew within the context of this volatile rapprochement between the Epicurean history of civilisation and religious belief.

The young Mendelssohn's first detailed discussion of the evolution of mind and language appeared in a commentary on his German translation of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (1756).[5] Mendelssohn was particularly troubled by Rousseau's problematisation of the naturalistic emergence of language. Earlier authors such as Condillac and Warburton tended to project the emergence of human language over aeons of time, while assuming a very slow yet fairly smooth transition from the natural cries and gestures used by the first human beings to articulate, coventional language. The shift from natural to conventional signification was usually explained by recourse to human imagination, analogy, onomatopoeia, and metaphor in a gradual change of focus from present sensual objects to abstract entities in the past or the future. Rousseau, however, noted that this transition from natural signs to conventional words could not be logically explained, for it involved two incompatible categories. Projection over long dark ages did not solve this problem, according to Rousseau. Eventually, he claimed in the *Discourse on Inequality*, the

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[3] On early modern Epicureanism, see Gianni Paganini und Edoardo Tortarolo (ed.), *Der Garten und die Moderne*. *Epikureiche Moral und Politik vom Humanismus bis zur Aufklärung* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2004); Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Neven Leddy and Avi Lifschitz (ed.), *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009).

[4] On the eighteenth-century background: Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (London: Athlone, 1982); Ulrich Ricken, *Linguistics, Anthropology and Philosophy in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Robert Norton (London: Routledge, 1994), and 'Mendelssohn und die Sprachtheorien der Aufklärung' in *Moses Mendelssohn im Spannungsfeld der Aufklärung*, ed. Michael Albrecht and Eva J. Engel, (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000), 195-241; Avi Lifschitz, *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chs. 1-2, and 'Language', in *The Routledge Companion to Eighteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Aaron Garrett (London: Routledge, 2014), 663-83.

[5] Moses Mendelssohn, 'Sendschreiben an den Herrn Magister Lessing in Leipzig', in *Gesammelte Schriften – Jubiläumsausgabe* (Berlin/Stuttgart Bad-Cannstatt: Akademie Verlag/ Frommann-Holzboog, 1929-), vol. 2, ed. Fritz Bamberger and Leo Strauss, 81-109 (henceforth referred to as *JubA*). This translation originated in the context of the early collaboration between Lessing and Mendelssohn; see Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 36-50; Dominique Bourel, *Moses Mendelssohn: la naissance du judaïsme moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 109-19.

naturalistic quest to explain the emergence of language in 'purely human means' was highly questionable.[6]

In reply, Mendelssohn resorted to Locke's theory of the association of ideas: the identification of a sound or a sign with its natural referent (bleating with a sheep) might have accidentally shifted towards another object (the flowers in the meadow grazed by the sheep). The natural and free association of ideas, Mendelssohn suggested, could account for the gradual shift from natural to conventional signification. Yet while Mendelssohn maintained on the linguistic front a diachronic narrative of the evolution of abstract ideas and their signs, in the ethical realm he refused to acknowledge gradual evolution from bestial capacities to complete humanity. Human beings have always had the same bundle of basic capacities, and the state of nature was merely a particular instance where these capacities were dormant (in a similar manner to individual infancy). In Mendelssohn's eyes, the qualities that made us human could not be discovered in a Rousseauvian thought experiment. Already in this early work we can identify the characteristic tension in Mendelssohn's thought between, on the one hand, the wish to explain various phenomena in human terms as emerging over time, and on the other, a commitment to unchanging capacities or qualities that withstood the test of time and varied very little, if at all, from the creation of the universe to his own day.[7]

The other occasion for an elaborate discussion of human language and its evolution was the second part of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism* (1783). Here we find a sophisticated explanation of the workings of both language and mind, testifying to Mendelssohn's immersion in contemporary debates over the necessity of linguistic signs for a uniquely human self-orientation in the world. Human beings, Mendelssohn argued, could scarcely make sense of their perceptions without forming concepts for them, yet concepts could be fixed and preserved in the mind only by signs. Without such signs, the mind would not have been able to recall its perceptions at will. All languages naturally evolved when human beings focused their attention on a particular aspect of an object or a phenomenon, then attaching a name to it. As Mendelssohn admitted, by the early 1780s this had become a well-received theory, advocated by various authors from Condillac to Herder.

> Wise providence has placed within its [the soul's] immediate reach a means which it can use at all times. It attaches, either by a natural or an arbitrary association of ideas, the abstracted characteristic to a perceptible sign which, as often as its impression is renewed, at once recalls and illuminates this characteristic, pure and unalloyed. In this manner, as is well known, originated the languages of men, which are composed of natural and arbitrary signs, and without which man would be but little distinguished from the

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[6] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 144-49.

[7] On Mendelssohn's commentary on Rousseau, see Ursula Goldenbaum's introduction to her edition of Rousseau, *Abhandlung von dem Ursprung der Ungleichheit unter den Menschen*, trans. Moses Mendelssohn (Weimar: Böhlau, 2000); Lifschitz, 'Language as a Means and an Obstacle to Freedom: The Case of Moses Mendelssohn', in *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), vol. 2, 84-102.

irrational animals; for without the aid of signs, man can scarcely remove himself one step from the sensual.[8]

In another potential attempt to respond to Rousseau's challenge, Mendelssohn linked here the naturalistic scenario of the evolution of language (thanks to human imagination, creativity, needs or passion) to divine providence. Like Herder's prize essay on the origin of language (1771), this was not a narrative where God actively intervened: man was created in such a way as to enable him to invent and develop language naturally, on his own. Herder had argued in 1771 that the divine origin of language was 'entirely irreligious' in that it required God to assist his creation constantly. It was much worthier of God, Herder thought, to let his creation (the human mind) develop language on its own: 'the origin of language hence only becomes divine in a worthy manner insofar as it is human'.[9]

While Herder portrayed language and the attentive power of the mind (*Besonnenheit*) as eternal markers of human beings as such, with no point of departure, Mendelssohn's account in *Jerusalem* did include a developmental narrative. This narrative helped him to distinguish between the initially beneficial qualities of spoken language and the lamentable results of the invention of written script. Yet the maintenanace of a diachronic perspective on language in *Jerusalem* was attenuated by Mendelssohn's emphasis on a latent capacity for reason and arbitrary signification, provided by divine providence and awaiting human activation. The tendency to depict human beings, at least on the ethical front, as possessing timeless qualities was manifest already in the 1756 commentary on Rousseau, yet both there and in the much later *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn felt the need to reconcile divine providence with a naturalistic history of human civilisation. In 1756 he did not yet refer to a providentally implanted capacity for language, and even in the passage cited above from *Jerusalem* the heuristic function of providence may be questioned. In order to better understand how Mendelssohn grappled with the possibility of a purely naturalistic explanantion of language and civilisation, one has to turn to his unpublished notes about language (first edited by Eva Engel in 1981).[10]

In what was possibly a draft submission to the 1771 Berlin contest on the origin of language, Mendelssohn tackled directly one of the basic assumptions of the naturalistic theory. If, from Epicurus onwards, naturalistic authors supposed that human beings invented their language and evolved the accompanying mental capacities, it followed that initially they had been speechless. In 1766 Johan Peter Süßmilch published a treatise where, taking up some of Rousseau's arguments while adding his own, he questioned precisely this naturalistic premise. Human beings without language would have forever remained limited animals; indeed, they could not be properly referred to as human beings

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[8] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, ed. Alexander Altmann (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), 105; *JubA* 8, 171-72.
[9] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 163-64; 'Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache', in *Frühe Schriften 1764-1772*, ed. Ulrich Gaier (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), 809-10.
[10] Mendelssohn, 'Über die Sprache', in *JubA* 6.2, ed. Eva J. Engel and Alexander Altmann, 3-23.

at all.[11] Süßmilch's treatise, sharply and memorably (if inaccurately) criticised by Herder in his prize essay, prompted a reassessement of the very premises of the naturalistic scenario. In his notes on the origin of language, Mendelssohn made it clear that a divine endowment of language should be assumed only if the total impossibility of its natural emergence could be proven, or if a longer time would have been required for the development of language than that available to the first human beings.

For Mendelssohn, the difficulty in assuming a shift from speechlessness to the use of language, or from natural signs to arbitrary ones, would be unsolvable if one claimed – like Rousseau and others – that most of the features distinguishing man from beast were acquired over time ('artificial' or 'adventitious', in eighteenth-century terminology). Mendelssohn took here seriously the challenge mounted by Rousseau and Süßmilch. If natural signs and arbitrary words were two different conceptual categories – and if the capacities, drives, and inclinations of the first humans were not too different from those of animals – the naturalistic history of language was indeed a philosophical puzzle. There must have therefore been a cognitive divergence between man and beast from the outset, especially in regard to human intentionality. As Mendelssohn argued, to be reminded of something by a natural sign required very rudimentary powers of attention and imagination, on the animalistic level; but to represent the same thing actively through arbitrary signs amounted to genuine wisdom. For Mendelssohn, it was the *intention* to convey a certain message by attaching conventional signs to particular aspects of objects that made human language categorically different from bestial conmmunication.

> The miracle-making almighty himself cannot endow man with language, if he does not provide him earlier with the capacity to have resolve for it – that is, to *wish* to denote things by arbitrary signs. [...] But if the almighty himself must equip us with this platform for reason [Vernunftanlage] before he endows us with language, it is much more adequate to consider this platform for reason as *innately given* [anerschaffen] and not just to equate its condition in the state of nature with that of animals. What the almighty can give miraculously to created man, he might as well have designed man to do upon his creation.[12]

Mendelssohn argued in these notes along similar lines to Herder's prize essay. With all due respect to benevolent providence, it would be unncecessarily bold to explain a phenomenon by reference to miraculous divine intervention and without recourse to natural causes. Human beings once used to explain all natural phenomena by reference to divinely mysterious causes, Mendelssohn noted, but eighteenth-century European culture had emerged from this childish relationship with external reality. It was much more respectable for God to act through 'wise means' than through immediate intervention.[13]

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[11] Johann Peter Süßmilch, *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* (Berlin: Buchladen der Realschule, 1766), 31-2; 88-90.

[12] *JubA* 6.2, 7. Original emphases; English translations here and henceforth are mine unless otherwise stated.
[13] Ibid., 6.

Concerning the origin of language, these means could be innate platforms for human reason, intentionality, and arbitrary signification. Such platforms were embedded within the human being by divine providence; they might or might not be activated at a certain point in history, but their realisation was in any case a matter of natural human trial, error, discovery, and self-perfection.

In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn distinguished between eternal truths, which are accessible to all human beings in all times and places either via reason or through the senses, and historical truths that occurred only once. In the case of such truths, we must rely on the credibility and authority of testimonies.[14] It is the first kind of truths – eternal, natural, and universally accessible – which concern Mendelssohn's reflections on the general origin of language, for here he was interested in the cognitive equipment allowing human beings everywhere to perceive external reality. His unpublished discussion of the providential design of a human platform for reason and language may, however, link his ideas of human language in general with his views on the historical truths of revelation, given to a particular people at a certain time and in a specific language.[15]

Hebrew: an affective, providential idiom

While Mendelssohn was reflecting and working on *Jerusalem*, in 1782-83, he also wrote the introduction to one of the most ambitious projects of the Berlin Haskalah: a translation of the Pentateuch into German (in Hebrew letters) on which he collaborated with his children's tutor, Solomon ben Joel Dubno (1738-1813), and others. The project was called 'Sefer Netivot ha-Shalom' (The Book of the Paths of Peace), and its introduction was titled 'Or la-Netivah' (Light for the Path). Turning to Mendelssohn's Hebrew introduction to this German translation of the Pentateuch, one may be struck by the different perspective on language and its evolution so manifest in this text. After a summary of Mendelssohn's account of Hebrew and the transmission of the Torah, I shall discuss the seeming differences between his views on the history of Hebrew and his naturalistic theory of language, suggesting that these varying perspectives were perhaps not as distant from one another as they might initially seem.

According to Mendelssohn's introduction to this translation, the language in which the Torah was written was the same one in which God spoke to Adam, Cain, Noah, Moses, and the prophets, as well as the idiom in which God endowed the Israelites with the decalogue at Sinai. By definition it had to be a superior language to all others - hence it came to be known as 'the holy tongue'. Yet its peculiar qualities were not at all miraculous; they could simply be traced back to the providential maintenance of the natural characteristics of the original human means of communication. Hebrew was, in Mendelssohn's eyes, closer to the symbolic and musical language of action, the first idiom of mankind which penetrated immediately into the heart. Unlike the conventional or arbitrary signification of words in modern languages, in the language of action – and in its

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[14] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 90-93; *JubA* 8, 157-60.
[15] Cf. Grit Schorch, *Moses Mendelssohns Sprachpolitik* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 93-95.

relics still preserved in Hebrew – names reflected to some extent the essence of the things they denoted (e. g. the link between Adam, 'man' and Adamah, 'earth', or that between Chavah (Eve) and Chayim, 'life').[16] Mendelssohn noted that until the confusion of langauges at Babel there was only a single language on earth, which later multiplied into seventy idioms. Some were closer to the original tongue, some farther removed from it. The holy language remained in its purity only with Ever, father of Peleg and his progeny. From this line it reached Abraham and his family, eventually surviving the Egyptian exile to be spoken by the Israelites in Sinai. According to Mendelssohn, over the course of this long history Hebrew did not change at all, as attested by proper names and place names in different books of the Torah.[17]

This was not necessarily a dogmatic defence of the immutablity of Hebrew as opposed to all other natural languages, for Mendelssohn combined it with a remarkable awareness of the pragmatic aspects of language use (paralleling his discussion of language in *Jerusalem*). The main idea was that the original inventors or speakers of human language (in *Jerusalem*) or the ancient and modern users of Hebrew (in *Or la-Netivah*) shared a dynamism that was reminiscent of the vivid origin of language. In order for language to mirror thought in the best manner and for a speaker's words to penetrate the heart of the listener rather than pass her by, language had to be accentuated. The raising and lowering of the voice, the melodious incantation of some phrases, and the pauses and breaks in speech were all meant to leave an indelible impression.[18] Mendelssohn argued that without such means, the ancient phrases would have resembled dry bones lacking any living spirit. Only through musical accentuation could one strikingly express anger and love, willingness and revenge, joy and sadness.[19] For Mendelssohn, it was on this non-semantic level, on the terrain of effecting pragmatic and emotional responses, that Hebrew excelled all other tongues. Its vowel points, accents, and cantillation marks (Ta'amei ha-Mikra) preserved the primordial mode of speech that had all but disappeared in other natural languages. This is the reason, Mendelssohn argued, that the preferred mode of instruction in Judaism was face-to-face teaching or reading aloud. In *Jersualem* he criticised the distant learning enabled by print culture, comparing it unfavourably to earlier

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[16] Cf. Arnold Eisen, 'Divine Legislation as 'Ceremonial Script': Mendelssohn on the Commandments', *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 15 (1990), 239-67; Daniel Krochmalnik, 'Das Zeremoniell als Zeichensprache. Moses Mendelssohns Apologie des Judentums im Rahmen der aufklärerischen Semiotik', in *Fremde Vernunft,* ed. Josef Simon and Werner Stegmaier (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998), 238-85; Carola Hilfrich, *Lebendige Schrift. Repräsentation und Idolatrie in Moses Mendelssohns Philosophie und Exegese des Judentums*, (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2000), 105-35; Andrea Schatz, *Sprache in der Zerstreuung. Die Säkularisierung des Hebräischen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 249-54.

[17] Mendelssohn, 'Or la-Netivah' in *JubA* 14, ed. Haim Borodianski (Bar-Dayan), 213-17; *JubA* 9.1 (ed. Werner Weinberg), 8-11.

[18] Mendelssohn's ideas on Hebrew resemble the medieval theory of Judah Halevi, though their application is not similar. See Halevi, *The Kuzari* (part I, §49-56; part II, §67-81), trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld, ed. Henry Slonimsky (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 50-51 and 124-34; Raphael Jospe, 'The Superiority of Oral over Written Communication: Judah Ha-Levi's *Kuzari* and Modern Jewish Thought', in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs and Nahum M. Sarna (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), vol. 3, 127-56; David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (London: Peter Halban, 1996), 66-67; Adam Shear, *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 230-35.

[19] For Rousseau's similar ideas, see Lifschitz, 'How to Do Things with Signs: Rousseau's Ancient Performative Idiom', in *History of Political Thought*, forthcoming.

modes of personal instruction; in *Or la-Netivah* we find a very similar account of the merits of the ancient means of education. Yet here these advantages are more specifically attributed to Hebrew alone and linked to the transmission of the Torah.

> The son learning from the mouth of his father, or the pupil hearing from the teacher's mouth, listened to the words with all the appropriate order of pronunciation, which the father and the teacher too had heard from their fathers or teachers, for the commandment is to recite the Torah to your son diligently so that the words be sharpened in his mouth. They did not give the holy Scripture to their sons or pupils and left them alone to read it from the written script, for in this way [the Torah] would have become a sealed book. They [fathers and teachers] read it out in front of them [children and pupils], and repeated it aloud with them in melody and singing, thereby transmitting the accents of the Torah, and sweetening the honey of its words, until these words penetrated their heart and remained there as implanted nails and spurs.[20]

Beyond Mendelssohn's initial point concerning the semantic advantages of Hebrew – which, he admitted, were not equally present in all its registers – the heaviest emphasis in *Or la-Netivah* was placed on the reliable and continuous transmission of the original and lively characteristics of the holy tongue. Without an authentic chain of transmission of its vowel points and cantillation marks, Hebrew might have been subject to the vicissitudes inherent in the history of any other language and accompanying the transmission of all historical documents.

Mendelssohn opted here for a very strong version of the antiquity of the Hebrew vowel points (Nikud) and accentuation marks. He did so deliberately, while briefly referring to the long controversy over the origin of the vowel points – a serious bone of contention in Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic scholarship over the preceding two centuries. The initial absence of signs signifying the vowels in the Hebrew script confronted Protestant theologians with an acute problem. Luther's emphasis on the direct impact of the biblical text upon individual readers required a stable and reliable version of the Bible. In the case of the Old Testament, most Lutherans initially accepted as immutable and divinely inspired the sixteenth-century Venetian edition of the Pentateuch (1525), vowel-pointed according to the established Jewish convention, the Masorah.[21] Catholic scholars, on the other hand, tended to reassert the necessity of the Church as an institutional interpreter of Scripture by undermining the authority of the biblical Hebrew

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[20] *JubA* 14, 218; *JubA* 9.1, 16-17. The allusion is to Deuteronomy 6:7: 'And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.' (King James Version)

[21] The vowel points were probably introduced in the last centuries of the first millennium and generally accepted by Jewish communities by the tenth century CE. See Richard A. Muller, 'The Debate over the Vowel Points and the Crisis in Orthodox Hermenutics', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (1980), 53-72; Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 23-28; Noel Malcolm, 'Hobbes, Ezra and the Bible: The History of a Subversive Idea', in *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford, 2002), 383-431.

text. One of the Catholic strategies was to argue that the vowel points were added to the Hebrew consonantal script at a late stage and not fixed by Ezra the Scribe and his Great Synagogue in the fifth century BCE, as accepted by the Jewish tradition. Catholic scholars argued, therefore, for the primacy of the Vulgate Latin translation over the Hebrew original by maintaining that errors had occurred in the process of vocalisation - the relatively late addition of vowel points to the Old Testament.

From the late seventeenth century onwards, with the discovery of variations in ancient biblical manuscripts, Protestant authors realised that their position was no longer tenable and began to to revise it. This revisionist trend in Protestant scholarship could be witnessed in the career of one of the foremost orientalists and biblical scholars of the eighteenth century, Johann David Michaelis, with whom Mendelssohn maintained a long correspondence. In his doctoral dissertation at Halle (1739) and his first book, *Anfangs-Gründe der hebräischen Accentuation* (*Basics of Hebrew Accentuation*, 1741), Michaelis adhered to the traditional Protestant view that the Hebrew vowel points were extremely ancient. Similarly to Mendelssohn's view forty years later, Michaelis argued that the vowel points had already been in use by the time of Moses and have since undergone remarkably little change. By the late 1750s, however, Michaelis had changed his mind and regarded all languages, Hebrew included, as evolving regularly along the lines of the naturalistic thesis. The vowel points, Michaelis admitted, were introduced at a late stage, probably in the early Middle Ages. The occasion for Michaelis's confession concerning his change of mind was the publication of the first instalments of his own translation of the Old Testament into German (1769-1770).[22]

Michaelis's transformation in the 1750s suggests that Mendelssohn opted in the 1780s for an outmoded and conservative stance on the authenticity, antiquity, and reliability of the vowel points in the Masoretic Hebrew Bible. In *Or la-Netivah* he insisted, as we have seen, on an unbroken change of melodious face-to-face transmission of the accents, vowels, and cantillation marks of the Torah. Mendelssohn conceded that some specific diacritical marks were introduced only after the Babylonian exile, when Hebrew was gradually replaced by other languages for profane purposes. Yet the signs introduced by Ezra the Scribe and later by the medieval Masoretes of Tiberias were a genuine representation of the sung, acted, and recited ways in which the correct pronunciation had been handed down from Moses. In this context Mendelssohn attacked Elias Levita (Eliyahu Bachur), a Jewish Renaissance scholar who suggested that the vowel points did not exist at the time of the Talmud and that they were introduced by the Tiberian Masoretes in the early Middle Ages.[23] This critique is telling, for Mendelssohn could have otherwise aligned himself with Levita or other modern Jewish and Protestant scholars, all orthodox believers, who argued for the late introduction of the vowel points and the biblical accents. In a sense, Mendelssohn's conservative attitude on this front distanced him from Protestant thinkers of the German Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) with whom he

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[22] Lifschitz, *Language and Enlightenment*, 96-117; 'An Epicurean democracy in language: the *volte face* in Johann David Michaelis's early career', in *Life forms in the thinking of the long eighteenth century*, ed. Keith Michael Baker and Jenna M. Gibbs (Toronto: Toronto University Press, forthcoming).
[23] *JubA* 14, 224-28; *JubA* 9.1, 27-32.

was associated in other domains, rendering him much closer to traditionally minded and at times anti-Jewish theologians who were usually the enemies of the *Aufklärer*.[24]

The reason for Mendelssohn's adoption of this rather peculiar stance seems to inhere in the *raison d'être* of his entire project for a new translation of the Pentateuch into German. Around 1780 there was no lack of recent German versions, philologically sound and scholarly attuned to changing notions of of poetry, revelation, and legislation (including Michaelis's highly regarded enterprise). These Bibles were usually translated by scholars who applied the latest methods of critical inquiry to the text. On the basis of comparison with other Semitic languages and the collation of all available manuscripts, they suggested ammendments and improvements to the text by translating some Hebrew terms according to related ancient semantic fields – often departing from the rabbinic interpretations of the same words. Mendelssohn, however, could not pursue the same route. He translated the Pentateuch yet again into German, in Hebrew letters, in order to protect acculturated and acculturating Jews precisely from these scholarly trends. In his eyes, Christian biblical scholars did not approach the Pentatuech in the same way that he (or the members of any Jewish community) did. For a contemporary *Aufklärer* such as Michaelis, the Old Testament was mostly an account of ancient legislation, social customs, and natural history – not a valid set of instructions to preserve and fulfil at present.[25]

Much more was at stake for the Jews, as the rituals and practical laws revealed to Moses formed the very basis of their faith. After all, Mendelssohn argued in *Jerusalem* that Judaism knew no revealed theology in the sense of a Christian catechism or the Nicean creed. Theologically, Judaism was simply a natural religion *par excellence*. Its tenets – the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and providential rewards and punishmets – could, like any essential truth, be universally adduced by any human being from the very nature of things. What made Judaism unique, the content of the Sinaitic revelation, was the ceremonial law. In order to preserve and re-enact these ceremonies and rituals, one had to be certain that one's actions corresponded to those revealed at Sinai; any minute modification might change the meaning of these revealed historical truths. Mendelssohn could not see here eye to eye here with Christian authors who were otherwise his partners in the Enlightenment venture. For most of them, regarding a certain biblical term as the result of corrupt copying (and suggesting a substitute) was a matter of pure scholarship. For Mendelssohn and other Maskilim, it was a hubristic presumption. It amounted to changing God's word – opaque as this word was, and even if it required oblique rabbinic interpretations.

In the absence of scholarly consensus on a canonic or authentic version, Mendelssohn viewed contemporary biblical criticism as ruled by arbitrariness and

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[24] For example, Olaf Gerhard Tychsen who attacked in the 1770s the methods of contemporary biblical scholarship; Mendelssohn commended some of his views on Hebrew. See Edward Breuer, *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-Century Study of Scripture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Jewish Studies, 1996), chs. 5-6.

[25] See Michaelis's distinction between the purposes of his own work on Moasic legislation (*Mosaisches Recht*, 1770-75) and Mendelssohn's overview of contemporary Jewish law (*Ritualgesetze der Juden*, 1778) in *Orientalische und Exegetische Bibliothek* 13 (Frankfurt am Mayn: Johann Gottlieb Garbe, 1778), 72-77; Lifschitz, *Language and Enlightenment*, 109-13. More generally on Michaelis's exegesis, see Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

scholarly impertinence. Indeed, he had already experienced at first hand the impact of the Neologist school of criticism. In 1772 Johann Salomo Semler, professor of theology at the University of Halle, dedicated to Mendelssohn a translation of Elias Levita's treatise on the late introduction of the vowel points into the Hebrew Bible. Semler, who elsewhere suggested that concentrated extracts of the Old Testament would suffice to convey its main message, regarded the ethical precepts of the Bible as its most significant core. Since Christianity was, for him, a religion unfolding in changing historical configurations, he distinguished between its external historical forms (among them particular books and articles of faith) and the self-perfection of the 'inner man'.[26] Therefore, Semler praised Levita for what he saw as a radical departure from the traditional Jewish attitude towards the divinely guaranteed transmission of the biblical text. In a gesture of self-congratulation, Semler compared Levita's stance to that of modern Protestant scholars who managed to overcome the 'prejudices' of their predecessors concerning the antiquity and authenticity of the vowel points. His dedication of this work to Mendelssohn – in the hope that 'more serious schoalrs in the two parties would decide to enlighten their contemporaries' – was a cunning attempt to prompt the Jewish philosopher to take a public stance on this issue.[27] Mendelssohn, however, opted for silence. He probably did not wish to publicly criticise progressive Protestant theologians, some of whom supported his pleas for Jewish emancipation, while as a member of a Jewish community he could not disavow the providentially maintained chain of transmission.

Leaving Semler's public appeal unanswered, in private letters Mendelssohn explicitly hurled the charge of arbitrariness at comtemporary biblical scholars.[28] Once one strayed away from the canonised Masoretic text, one could come up with any sort of interpretation on the basis of allegedly sound scholarship; yet who would act as a final arbiter and define conclusively the proper meaning of a supposedly corrupt term? Mendelssohn required scholarly modesty and intellectual humility in this respect. As he solemnly stated at the outset of the introduction to his translation of the Pentateuch, 'we, the whole community of Israel, believe that exactly as our teacher Moses wrote it, so we now have his Torah. Nothing has changed in it ever since, and it was not subject to what profane books undergo'.[29] A similar conviction was voiced by Isaac Euchel, a Königsberg-based Maskil who edited the contemporary Hebrew perdiodical *Hame'asef*. In a 1784

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[26] For Michaelis's own critique of Semler's tendency to downplay the historical and other non-ethical aspects of the Bible see Lifschitz, *Language and Enlightenment*, 112-13. On Semler's theological philosophy of history, see Peter H. Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) 169-72; Gottfried Hornig, *Johann Salomo Semler: Studien zu Leben und Werk des Hallenser Aufklärungstheologe* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1996), esp. 160-209.

[27] *Uebersetzung des Buchs Massoreth Hammassoreth, unter Aufsicht und mit Anmerkungen D. Joh. Salomo Semlers* (Halle: Carl Hermann Hemmerde, 1772), dedication (unpaginated). See also Semler's private letter to Mendelssohn (*JubA* 12.2, ed. Alexander Altmann, 14-18), where he hopes for greater Jewish understanding of the moral perfection embedded in genuine Christianity and its messiah. Mendelssohn thought Semler exhibited 'an enthusiasm for the truth together with a lack of acquaintance with the world and human beings, a spirit of inquiry without philosophy, and critical erudition without knowledge of the beautiful'. (Mendelssohn to Michaelis, 25 June 1772, ibid., 29-30.)

[28] *JubA* 12.2, 33-4; 41-3; see also Avigdor Levi's Hebrew edition and annotation of the letters Mendelssohn sent him: *Igrot meha-Hacham [...] Moshe Dessau* (Vienna: Anton Schmid, 1794), third comment on the third letter (7).

[29] *JubA* 14, 213; *JubA* 9.1, 8.

exchange with a local university professor about the interpretation of a particular biblical passage, Euchel made it clear that practicing Jews did not have the same range of interpretative options available to their Christian peers, 'for we have pledged allegiance to the flag of the Masoretes'. Learned Jews, immersed equally in traditional rabbinic literature and modern biblical criticism, felt alienated and surprised by 'how men take the liberty to regard the text as corrupt and hence choose ways of reading after their liking'.[30]

Euchel's public accusation and Mendelssohn's private complaint both refer to randomness as the major characteristic of modern biblical criticism. They tried to demonstrate that Jews were well aware of the long debates over the authenticity of the Masoretic Hebrew Bible (concerning manuscript variants, the antiquity of the vowel points, comparisons with Samaritan versions, etc.). Yet while the Jews had to abide by the text of the Masoretes, their stance did not involve the renunciation of reason or critical thought. In Mendelssohn's published work it is clear that beyond the essential, universal truths of natural religion – which could and should be accessible to any rational being – the uniqueness of Judaism as an independent faith was rooted in the revealed ceremonial law. Revelation, however, afforded and admitted no logical proof. Like any historical event, it had to be taken on trust by those who did not witness it and thus had access only to historical testimonies.[31] When Jews committed themselves to the faith of their forefathers, they could not pick and choose the ceremonies to be performed, the versions of the Bible to be trusted, or the interpretative strategies to be employed.[32] This firm view was also expressed in Mendelssohn's attitude towards the entire edifice of rabbinic literature. While Christian scholars regarded its sometimes far-fetched and non-contextual interpretations as irrelevant to the understanding of the original biblical text, Mendelssohn tried to vindicate the worth of *derash* (complex interpretation) in parallel to the more straightforward and philological *peshat* explanation.[33] In this respect he went so far as to criticise medieval Jewish scholars who, insisting on rational *peshat* interpretations, condemned Talmudic commentaries on parts of the Old Testament.[34] Mendelssohn's self-identification with the golden age of Andalusian Judaism had its limits when it came to the disavowal of rabbinic interpretations that had been integrated into the historically transmitted Jewish tradition.

Against arbitrariness: reconciling nature and providence

The lack of a consensually agreed point of reference triggered, according to Mendelssohn and Euchel, scholarly arbitrariness, confusion, and anarchy. This point also reflected Mendelssohn's view of modern languages. Language, especially in the later stages of its evolution, lost the suppleness and directness of the original idiom of action which reached so immediately the heart of listeners. For Mendelssohn, the gradual transition from natural

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[30] Euchel in *Erste Zugabe zu der hebräischen Monatsschrift dem Sammler* (המאסף), *hrsg. von einer Gesellschaft hebräischer Litteraturfreunde zu Königsberg* (January 1784), 12, 11.
[31] Cf. Freudenthal, *No Religion*, 80-86.
[32] *Jerusalem*, 133-34; *JubA* 8, 198-99.
[33] See particularly Mendelssohn's introduction to his commentary on Ecclesiastes (1768-70): *JubA* 14, 148-60.
[34] Breuer, *Limits of Enlightenment*, 218-19.

signs via metaphor and analogy to purely conventional words enabled great scientific endevours while at the same time jettisoning the liveliness and unequivocality of the language of action (and risking descent into idolatry).[35] The arbitrariness of modern conventional signs, which lacked any necessary link to the nature of what they stood for, was mirrored by the arbitrariness of biblical scholarship. In both domains there was no guarantee of an authentic connection between sign and signified. Just as the essence of a tree was not necessarily better conveyed by the German word 'Baum' than by the French 'arbre', no one could vouchsafe the degree to which a certain scholarly interpretation (or another) elucidated the original meaning of a biblical term. A similar point was made in the 1760s by Thomas Abbt, Mendelssohn's friend and collaborator in the Berlin Enlightenment circles. Reviewing recent conjectural histories of humanity (especially Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*), Abbt emphasised the lack of methodological criteria that could prioritise specific accounts of human nature and origins. Since the biblical account did not preclude pertinent conjectures, Abbt regarded Genesis as a consensual vantage point which might spare his peers their constant disputes over distant origins.[36]

In eighteenth-century terminology, at the opposite end to arbitrariness usually stood nature. Phenomena evolving naturally and organically, usually within the context of a human community, were contrasted with those subject to chance or to the whim of a single scholar.[37] The belief in a long chain of authentic oral transmission of the Torah provided Mendelssohn with a solution to the related problems of modern linguistic arbitrariness and scholarly presumption among biblical critics. According to Mendelssohn, the tenets of Judaism had been handed down through lively face-to-face exchange, not via rote learning of scripted instructions. The ceremonial law was a 'living script, stirring heart and mind' to be observed and imitated by its students, a set of meaningful *actions* which were the occasion for further reflection and edification.[38] In *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn outlined the detrimental effects of written or printed characters on religious belief and human culture. The general descent into modern linguistic arbitrariness was countered for him by 'living script', the Jewish ceremonial law preserving some vital qualities of the original language of action. Images and hieroglyphs prompted idolatry and superstition, while alphabetical script was too arbitrary and abstract (in a similar manner to Christian creeds and catechisms). Actions, by contrast, were ephemeral, so that there was no risk of their misinterpretation for idolatrous purposes; they also encouraged social interaction and mutual imitation. The principles of Judaism were therefore linked to everyday activities and rituals, each having its value in prompting further reflection.

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[35] *Jerusalem* 107-11; *JubA* 8, 173-77. On the links between written characters and false worship in Mendelssohn's thought, see Freudenthal's detailed discussion in *No Religion*, 105-59.

[36] Thomas Abbt, *Fragment der aeltesten Begebenheiten des menschlichen Geschlechts*, ed. Johann Peter Miller (Halle: Johann Justinus Gebauer, 1767), 36-48; Lifschitz, 'Genesis for Historians: Thomas Abbt on Biblical and Conjectural Accounts of Human Nature', *History of European Ideas*, forthcoming.

[37] Cordula Neis, 'Arbitrarität', in Gerda Haßler and Cordula Neis, *Lexikon sprachtheoretischer Grundbegriffe des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), vol. 1, 206-19; Lifschitz, 'The Arbitrariness of the Linguistic Sign: Variations on an Enlightenment Theme', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73.4 (2012), 537-57.

[38] *Jerusalem*, 102; *JubA* 8, 169.

Joining the contemporary critique of the notion of an arbitrary invention of language, Mendelssohn – like Leibniz, Michaelis, Condillac, and Turgot – emphasised the historical and natural evolution of language by a community of speakers as a bulwark against human chance and randomness.[39] For these authors, nothing emerging from natural causes and historical change within human society could be completely arbitrary, since the range of contingent events was limited by their physical and social contexts. Individuals could try to invent new words or modify accepted meanings, but they could not wilfully change the general sense of terms and actions. Such modifications could only be sanctioned slowly and gradually by the community as a whole.

This critique of arbitrariness applied to all ancient and modern languages. Yet Mendelssohn's accompanying notion of the authentic transmission of Hebrew and the Torah also left sufficient theoretical space for his espousal of indirect providence operating via the conscious action of human beings rather than through miracles and immediate divine intervention. Oral instruction and 'living script' were employed by him to counter the views that the Hebrew vowel points were a late invention and that some loci in the Hebrew Bible were subject to textual corruption. In this way, the seemingly supernatural aspects of spoken Hebrew could be naturalised by constant and lively human conversation across the ages. Their written forms were, to some extent, superfluous aids; the sages would have gone on chanting and accentuating the living script of the Torah even without recourse to written or printed signs. This is what made both the Jewish ceremonial law and its rabbinic commentary indispendable for Mendelssohn.

Heinrich Heine, wrongly assuming that Mendelssohn rejected rabbinic literature, could not understand how this allegedly radical reformer still adhered to the Mosaic ceremonial law. He ended up speculating that for Mendelssohn the ceremonial law functioned as a defence of deism, which was 'his most inner faith'.[40] I would beg to differ: Mendelssohn did *not* overthrow the post-exilic Jewish tradition precisely because it provided the missing links between the present day and a ceremonial law preserving the relics of the language of action. Every single link in this chain of transmission offered an insight into a primordial relationship between word and thing that was both natural and providentially guaranteed.

[39] Lifschitz, 'The Arbitrariness of the Linguistic Sign', 545-54.
[40] Heine, *History of Religion and Philosophy*, 70-71; *Heines Werke*, vol. 5, 85-86.