

# Mendelssohn and the Protestant Pedants: The Skeptical Rabbis, the Principle of Noncontradiction, and Judaism's Spiritual Dialogue\*

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## ■ Abstract

This study explores the extent to which Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* engages with Protestant sources in its portrayal of rabbinic tradition, which will allow further light to be shed on the pivotal role of rabbinic Judaism and its representations within the emotionally charged polemics surrounding Jewish emancipation in eighteenth-century Prussia. This examination demonstrates that Mendelssohn's idealized perception of rabbinic thought is deeply embedded in anti-rabbinic Protestant works, whose framework aids him in shaping his own unique outlook. By analyzing Mendelssohn's deployment of the notion of contradiction, this article shows how his argumentative strategies in *Jerusalem* efficaciously counter well-known Protestant patterns of critique against rabbinic Judaism. By focusing on his idiosyncratic

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quotations and insinuations, it recovers the Christian works that he draws on and appropriates for his apologetic objectives and establishes that he uses Johann A. Eisenmenger for his depiction of the nature of rabbinic discursive practices while speaking out against “many a pedant” for their assertion that the rabbis disregarded the principle of noncontradiction. This article argues that Mendelssohn is alluding to eighteenth-century Protestant theologians who unreservedly follow Eisenmenger’s anti-rabbinic perspective and elaborates on how Mendelssohn entirely reframes this view as a conceptual strength of Judaism’s dialogical essence, thus rendering it compatible with the Enlightenment-based *Weltanschauung*.

## ■ Keywords

Moses Mendelssohn, Jewish Enlightenment, rabbinic Judaism, the principle of noncontradiction, Johann A. Eisenmenger, Johann D. Michaelis, Christian W. von Dohm, Jewish emancipation, skepticism, religious pluralism

## ■ Introduction

In one of the central sections of his *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783), in which he pinpoints the ancient non-dogmatic “spirit of true Judaism” in its purest historical manifestation by linking it to the dialectical nature of rabbinic discourse,<sup>1</sup> Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) claims to cite a saying of the ancient sages: “In this respect, we have not yet disregarded the important dictum of our sages: ‘*Although this one loosens and the other binds, both teach the words of the living God.*’”<sup>2</sup> In fact, he appears to have conflated two different rabbinic formulations: a famous formulation found in *b. Erub.* 13b and a phrase from *m. Yebam.* 1:4. This article will argue that Mendelssohn was neither directly quoting a rabbinic passage nor consciously conflating these two sayings with one another. Rather, this Hebrew quotation—which is quite rare and an artificial construction predicated on both of these rabbinic formulations—can be traced back to *‘Ammudeha Šiv‘ah*, a work by the seventeenth-century Kabbalist Bezalel ben Solomon of Kobryn.<sup>3</sup> Astonishingly, as will be shown, Mendelssohn actually appears to borrow this composite rabbinic citation from an infamous anti-Jewish Protestant work, which he apparently used as a sourcebook and which he himself repeatedly harshly criticizes for being outright bigoted: Johann A. Eisenmenger’s

<sup>1</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism* (trans. Allan Arkush; commentary by Alexander Altmann; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983) 101–3. For the original German text, see Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum*, in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe* (ed. Fritz Bamberger et al.; 24 vols.; Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: F. Frommann-Holzboog, 1971–2021) 8:99–204, hereafter *JubA*.

<sup>2</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101 (*JubA* 8:168 [emphasis in original]).

<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is worth noting that there are still a few examples of similar composite rabbinic sayings in Jewish literature: Menahem Azariah da Fano, *‘Asarah Ma‘amarot* (Lemberg: D. H. Schrenzel, 1858) 59; Isaac ben Moses Arama, *‘Aqedat Yišṣaq* (Venice: Daniel Bomberg, 1547) 33; Isaiaah Horowitz, *Šene Luḥot Ha-Berit* (2 vols.; Amsterdam: Attias, 1698) 1:17.

(1654–1704) *Entdecktes Judenthum* (1700). Mendelssohn attaches a revealing footnote to this supposedly rabbinic quotation in which he maintains that he has “seen many a pedant quote this saying to prove that the rabbis do not believe in the principle of contradiction.”<sup>4</sup> With this citation in mind, his defense of rabbinic tradition against hostile charges seems to be a deliberate and strategic method of building on oversimplistic representations of ancient rabbinic thought that were quite widespread in Protestant works from the eighteenth-century German-speaking world.

This study will explore Mendelssohn’s peculiar remark by setting out to recover the identity of these “many pedants” who were attacking ancient rabbinic Judaism for its purportedly contradictory nature. The answer to the question of who they were supposed to be—as I shall demonstrate—is crucial to understanding Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* as an apologetic enterprise, and it has far-reaching implications for understanding further important aspects of his thought. This article will show that the concept of contradiction is at the heart of various major arguments that Mendelssohn advances in the second part of his *Jerusalem*. It will closely scrutinize one particular deployment of this concept, in which Mendelssohn lays out his systematic and apologetic response to August Friedrich Crazz’s (1737–1801) 1782 pamphlet “The Search for Light and Right.”<sup>5</sup> My analysis will attempt to uncover significant aspects of his unique dialogical perception of Judaism as a “living, spiritual instruction” transmitted from teacher to pupil by means of practical, paternal demonstration and the substantial and remarkable role played by contradictions in this process.<sup>6</sup>

My analysis will be divided into three sections, each of which will shed light on a distinct aspect of Mendelssohn’s use of the concept of contradiction in *Jerusalem* in order to explain the Jewish faith. First, I will turn to his response to Crazz’s accusation, which argues that Mendelssohn’s progressive views were directly contradicted by his Judaism. I will then examine Mendelssohn’s idealized, skeptical portrayal of ancient rabbinic thought as something that was exempt from the principle of noncontradiction. Using a philological approach, this part of the article will argue that Mendelssohn’s apologetic presentation of the rabbis is based on a hidden engagement with well-known Protestant sources that call into question the whole *raison d’être* of rabbinic literature, the supposedly ultimate distinctive mark of eighteenth-century Judaism. As its point of departure, this part of the article will take an inquiry into the identity of Mendelssohn’s “many a pedant,” whose position, in Mendelssohn’s opinion, was that the ancient rabbis were awash in contradictory nonsense. Subsequently, I will explain the sweeping ramifications of these findings for Mendelssohn’s unconventional perspective on the ancient

<sup>4</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101 n. 1 (*JubA* 8:168 n. 1).

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Mendelssohn was not aware that Crazz was the author of this anonymously published work: see Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1973) 502–6.

<sup>6</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102 (*JubA* 8:168–69).

rabbinic sages. This examination will reveal the key role that Mendelssohn's uncompromising defense of ancient rabbinic literature plays in his overall line of reasoning within the framework of the Jewish *Emanzipationsdebatte*. Drawing on Mendelssohn's commentary on Ecclesiastes, I will conclude by explaining his dialogical understanding of the sacred text as the redeeming feature that enables Judaism to overcome its internal contradictions.

Throughout these three sections, I will develop the idea that Mendelssohn's use of the concept of contradiction to account for the nature of the Jewish religion primarily stems from an apologetic motive: he was attempting to fend off highly polemical and biased assessments of the Jewish faith and tradition, which were common among eighteenth-century Protestant theologians in the German-speaking world. While Mendelssohn predicated his depiction of Judaism on some of these critical accounts, we also see him attempting to reframe their negative assessments and turn them to his theological advantage. The findings of our examination will counter a common, clichéd, and simplistic understanding of Mendelssohn as an apologetic harmonizer who relentlessly attempted to put contradictions to rest and wished to force a reconciliation between conflicting points of view. It will provide a more nuanced image of Mendelssohn as a sophisticated thinker who actually concedes the fact that Judaism, with its pronounced dialogical emphasis—first and foremost in rabbinic texts, but also in Scripture—is partly premised on contradictions, which for him is the very reason why it resonates with progressive Enlightenment values of tolerance and religious diversity.

Notwithstanding the crucial position occupied by Mendelssohn's understanding and defense of ancient rabbinic thought in *Jerusalem*, this theme has barely received the assiduous scholarly attention it warrants. One seminal article's methodical engagement with this subject matter is especially noteworthy: Edward Breuer's "Politics, Tradition, History: Rabbinic Judaism and the Eighteenth-Century Struggle for Civil Equality," which was published in 1992.<sup>7</sup> Through both a broad historical and a precise text-based examination of *Jerusalem* and its context, it provides valuable insights into the fact that "both Mendelssohn and his European counterparts shared the fundamental assumption that contemporary Judaism was to be identified with the rabbinic writings and traditions of late antiquity."<sup>8</sup> Placing special emphasis on Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* (1783) alongside Christian Wilhelm von Dohm's *On the Civil Improvement of the Jews* (1781) and August Crazz's *The Search for Light and Right*,<sup>9</sup> Breuer explores "the nature, authority, and efficacy of rabbinic Judaism."<sup>10</sup> He manages to show clearly that the question of the status of rabbinic Judaism was indeed an essential characteristic of these three treatises, which are in

<sup>7</sup> Edward Breuer, "Politics, Tradition, History: Rabbinic Judaism and the Eighteenth-Century Struggle for Civil Equality," *HTR* 85 (1992) 357–83.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>9</sup> The original German text is printed in *JubA* 8:73–87.

<sup>10</sup> Breuer, "Politics, Tradition, History," 358.

this respect emblematic of the entire “historical moment” surrounding the debates over Jewish emancipation in the late eighteenth-century German-speaking world.<sup>11</sup> Daniel Krochmalnik’s article, “Tradition und Subversion in der Hermeneutik Moses Mendelssohns,” provides another substantial and noteworthy contribution to this theme.<sup>12</sup> This pioneering study draws on a wide array of Mendelssohn’s German and Hebrew writings to offer a comprehensive and astute exploration of key aspects of his positive attitude toward the rabbinic tradition. In so doing, Krochmalnik establishes that rabbinic literature is central for Mendelssohn’s thought. He thereby forcefully counters the clichéd misconception that depicts Mendelssohn as a vehement adversary of traditional Jewish faith. A further illuminating contribution to this subject, whose precise and original historical examination sheds light on Mendelssohn’s perception of the ancient rabbis and their exegetical methods, is Eliyahu Stern’s 2011 article “Genius and Demographics in Modern Jewish History.”<sup>13</sup> In this article, Stern lays out a comparative analysis of Mendelssohn and Elijah ben Solomon and their respective social and intellectual worlds, through which he accounts for their varying modern conceptions of the Jewish tradition.<sup>14</sup> The reassessments of the issue at hand in all three of these pioneering studies have opened new avenues for research on the interreligious discussions surrounding Jewish rights in late eighteenth-century Prussia in general and on Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* in particular. Taking its cue from the results of these three studies, the present examination aims to expand on several thematic points, while also seeking to break fresh ground in how we understand Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* as an apologetic treatise.

## ■ Contradiction between Truth and Truth

August Cranz’s vigorous admonition against Mendelssohn’s plea for civic emancipation for Prussian Jews in “The Search for Light and Right” is already premised on the concept of contradiction, arguing that this rational and tolerant position “contradicts the principles of the [Jewish] church not only as the commentators understand them, but also even as they are explicitly stated in the books of Moses.”<sup>15</sup> In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn specifically takes issue with this allegation, while turning it against Cranz himself:

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Krochmalnik, “Tradition und Subversion in der Hermeneutik Moses Mendelssohns,” *Trumah* 9 (2000) 63–102.

<sup>13</sup> Eliyahu Stern, “Genius and Demographics in Modern Jewish History,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101 (2011) 347–82.

<sup>14</sup> Stern, “Genius,” 347–50.

<sup>15</sup> August F. Cranz, “The Search for Light and Right,” in Moses Mendelssohn, *Writings on Judaism, Christianity and the Bible* (ed. Michah Gottlieb; trans. Elias Sacks, Curtis Bowman, and Allan Arkush; Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought; Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011) 57.

You say that my conclusions undermine the foundation of Judaism, and you offer me the safety of your upper floor; must I not suppose that you mock me? Surely, the Christian who is in earnest about *light and truth* will not challenge the Jew to a fight when there seems to be a contradiction between truth and truth, between Scripture and reason. He will rather join him in an effort to discover the groundlessness of the contradiction. For this is their common concern. Whatever else they have to settle between themselves may be postponed to a later time. For the present, they must join forces to avert the danger, and either discover the paralogism or show that it is only a seeming contradiction that has frightened them.<sup>16</sup>

In the cited passage, Mendelssohn claims that the negative perception of Judaism found in “The Search for Light and Right” itself undermines the Christian faith, which is rooted in the assumption of the rational truth of Hebrew Scripture. Denying this would subvert one of Christianity’s foundational assumptions regarding the canonical status of the sacred Hebrew text. Mendelssohn construes Cranz’s charge—i.e., that his own rational rejection of the notion of ecclesiastical law “directly contradicts the faith of [his] fathers in the narrower sense”<sup>17</sup>—as being ultimately directed against the Hebrew Scripture. For this reason, Mendelssohn asserts that Hebrew Scripture cannot be implicated in any contradiction with reason, but must instead be entirely in accordance with it. By definition, there cannot be, as he puts it, “a contradiction between truth and truth.” He therefore concludes that Christians and Jews have a joint exegetical responsibility to expose seeming contradictions in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>18</sup> From this, one may infer the considerable extent to which Mendelssohn was engaging with critical Christian representations of Judaism as a system of faith standing in stark contradiction to the universal values of the Enlightenment.<sup>19</sup>

In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn’s way of approaching these Christian assessments of Judaism’s irreconcilability with the enlightened modern mindset is twofold: 1) He conceives of “ancient, original Judaism” as a living pedagogical dialogue transcending written language altogether, which, as such, is able to “keep pace with all changes of time and circumstances.”<sup>20</sup> Its main medium in this respect is expressed through the ceremonial deeds and laws “which the adherent of Judaism had to observe incessantly.”<sup>21</sup> 2) Closely related to this characterization

<sup>16</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 87 (*JubA* 8:154 [emphasis in original]). For further examination of Mendelssohn’s response to Cranz, see Breuer, “Politics, Tradition, History,” 359–62, 374–83.

<sup>17</sup> Cranz, “Search,” 57 (*JubA* 8:77). See Breuer, “Politics, Tradition, History,” 369–74; Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 19.

<sup>18</sup> See Batnitzky, *Judaism*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> For a thorough and extensive depiction of this theme, see Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn’s Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012) 192–97.

<sup>20</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102 (*JubA* 8:168).

<sup>21</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102 (*JubA* 8:169).

is Mendelssohn's contention that Judaism "boasts of no *exclusive* revelation of eternal truths."<sup>22</sup> With his conception of Judaism as an undogmatic and practical *modus vivendi*,<sup>23</sup> Mendelssohn intends to develop an ironclad line of defense against philosophical skepticism in general and against charges of inner contradictions in particular.<sup>24</sup> The fact that Mendelssohn's Judaism does not assert any speculative claims, coupled with stringent metaphysical proofs, renders it—as he would have it—a commonsensical position that not only withstands philosophical doubt, but is in fact placed beyond its reach.<sup>25</sup> Per Mendelssohn's stance, the Jewish faith yields no binding theoretical content about which one could express skepticism.

### ■ How the Enlightened Rabbis Overcome the Principle of Noncontradiction

Cranz's negative presentation of the Jewish faith is intertwined with his unfavorable perception of the rabbis as burdensome and of their laws as having been rendered moot by the Christian religion, which prizes liberty.<sup>26</sup> According to Cranz, the rabbis' strict legalistic and scriptural understanding gave rise to Judaism's statutory nature, which condemns its members to arduous observance of the Mosaic Law.<sup>27</sup> Cranz's pronounced preoccupation with the ancient rabbinic worldview is quite characteristic of the *Zeitgeist*. The authoritative rank of rabbinic tradition as the defining feature of the Jewish faith, which substantially distinguishes it from Christianity, was one of the central hallmarks of the debates surrounding the *Emanzipationsfrage* of the German Jews in the late eighteenth-century *Aufklärung*.<sup>28</sup> Seizing on the issue of Cranz's critical attitude towards rabbinic Judaism, which he regarded as a major social impediment for the Prussian Jewish population, Breuer very pointedly encapsulates this point of view: "*Das Forschen* thus pointed toward the shift from biblical to rabbinic Judaism in order to highlight the undeniable process of historical development and the concomitant imperative for change.

<sup>22</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 97 (*JubA* 8:164 [emphasis in original]). See Batnitzky, *Judaism*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> For an illuminating presentation of Mendelssohn's conception of Judaism as a non-dogmatic religion and later debates on this view among 19th-cent. Jewish thinkers, see Michah Gottlieb, "Does Judaism Have Dogma? Moses Mendelssohn and a Pivotal Nineteenth-Century Debate," *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Study* 4 (2019) 219–42; George Y. Kohler, "Die Vernünftigkeit des jüdischen Dogmas: Samuel Holdheims Kritik an Mendelssohns Religionsphilosophie," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 72 (2020) 371–89.

<sup>24</sup> For a more extensive analysis of this issue, see Jeremy Fogel, "Scepticism of Scepticism: On Mendelssohn's Philosophy of Common Sense," *Melilah* 12 (2015) 53–67; Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry*; Michah Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom: Moses Mendelssohn's Theological-Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 45–46.

<sup>25</sup> See Leo Strauss's introduction to *Morning Hours, or, Lectures on the Existence of God in JubA* 3.2:lxvii.

<sup>26</sup> Cranz, "Search," 56 (*JubA* 8:77).

<sup>27</sup> Cranz, "Search," 57–60 (*JubA* 8:77–79).

<sup>28</sup> Breuer, "Politics, Tradition, History," 358–59; Stern, "Genius," 353–55.

Mendelssohn, adroitly portrayed as an uncompromisingly honest and disciplined thinker, was called upon to act accordingly.<sup>29</sup>

In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn turns Crazz's portrayal of the rabbis on its head. To him, not only do the rabbis eagerly oppose any compulsory measures relating to matters of faith, but their entire discourse is premised on enlightened values, which revered tolerance and variance of opinion.<sup>30</sup> Following his critical account of Maimonides's dogmatic and theoretical account of Judaism as a fixed set of articles of faith, Mendelssohn goes on to outline "the spirit of true Judaism," which resists these dogmatic patterns of thinking.<sup>31</sup> He singles out rabbinic thought as exemplifying the non-dogmatic nature of "ancient Judaism." This unique characteristic was carried forward into Judeo-Arabic rationalism, whose intellectual tradition also, as a general rule, refuses to recognize certain articles of faith as absolutely binding.<sup>32</sup>

To underscore this special feature, Mendelssohn adduces a rabbinic saying concerning the ultimate validity of the directly conflicting attitudes of the schools of Hillel and Šammai, which might appear at first glance to be taken from *b. 'Erub. 13b* ("Both these and those are the words of the living God"). A closer examination of this rabbinic saying would, however, suggest otherwise. In his commentary on *Jerusalem*, the noted Mendelssohn biographer Alexander Altmann observed that this is not, strictly speaking, a rabbinic quote at all, but rather an artificial conflation of two sayings, *m. Yebam. 1:4* ("Notwithstanding that these forbid what the others permit") merged with *b. 'Erub. 13b*.<sup>33</sup> However, even this assumption poses major difficulties, since the passage from tractate *Yebamot* uses the plural, while Mendelssohn—who by this time was an extremely well-versed translator of ancient Hebrew texts—opted for the singular.

### ■ Eisenmenger's *Entdecktes Judenthum* as Mendelssohn's *Vorlage*

A clear indication that Mendelssohn did not consciously conflate these two rabbinic sayings, but was instead dependent on a *Vorlage*, is the perplexing footnote that he attached to this sentence. He opens with a rather peculiar remark: "I have seen many a pedant quote this saying to prove that the rabbis do not believe in the principle of contradiction."<sup>34</sup> This gives rise to the puzzling question of who these pedants were. One may safely assume that Mendelssohn is alluding to Christian sources referring to rabbinic hermeneutics and practices for the sake of exposing post-Mosaic

<sup>29</sup> Breuer, "Politics, Tradition, History," 374.

<sup>30</sup> Mendelssohn endorses a similar position in his "Open Letter to Lavater" (*JubA 7:7–17*).

<sup>31</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101–2.

<sup>32</sup> For a more extensive analysis of this theme, see Warren Zev Harvey, "Hasdai Crescas and Moses Mendelssohn on Beliefs and Commandments," in *Moses Mendelssohn: Enlightenment, Religion, Politics, Nationalism* (ed. Michah Gottlieb and Charles H. Manekin; Bethesda, MD: University of Maryland Press, 2015) 79–89.

<sup>33</sup> Altmann in Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 218.

<sup>34</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101 n. 1.



Judaism as an incoherent belief system, which were widespread in German-speaking countries in the eighteenth century. When one considers contemporary anti-Jewish portrayals of rabbinic tradition within the German-speaking world, one name stands out: Johann A. Eisenmenger, whose *Entdecktes Judenthum* provides lengthy and hostile descriptions of rabbinic tenets. As Michah Gottlieb succinctly puts it, “Eisenmenger quoted rabbinic law to show that Jews were immoral people whose laws permitted them to rob, cheat, and even kill Christians and he quoted a number of fantastic Talmudic stories to show that the Jews were a backward, uncultured, and superstitious people.”<sup>35</sup>

Not only did Mendelssohn possess a copy of Eisenmenger’s *Entdecktes Judenthum* in his library, but he also singled it out by describing it as bigoted.<sup>36</sup> In his public dispute with the highly polemical Johann Balthasar Kölbele, Mendelssohn specifically calls into question the fundamental reliability of Eisenmenger’s *Entdecktes Judenthum*, a work on which his rival draws heavily and with which he engages as a trustworthy source of knowledge with respect to rabbinic literature.<sup>37</sup> Kölbele, who exploits Eisenmenger’s *Entdecktes Judenthum* in order to argue vehemently against the emancipatory aspirations of German Jewry, also used it to juxtapose the German Jewish population in the German-speaking world of his time with the Protestant one: while the Jewish community takes the ancient rabbis, whose sayings were recorded in what he calls “worthless old books” (*Schartecken*), as their ultimate authoritative source, the Protestant public rely on modern scholarly works written by prominent Christian researchers in order to understand rabbinic thought as the defining component of the Jewish faith:

Yet the abundant heap of your nation educate themselves according to these old worthless books. . . . And the rabbis refer more to these worthless old books than to the divine books. Our Michaelis, our Semler, our Christoph Wolf, our Buxtorf . . . our Eisenmenger . . . and all the other authors who for brevity I do not mention: all these people describe Judaism from old worthless books.<sup>38</sup>

The response in Mendelssohn’s *Nacherinnerung* is firm. In keeping with his claim that Kölbele has next to no knowledge of the Talmud and rabbinic writings, he goes on to directly attack Kölbele’s authoritative “*Lieblingsautor*,” Eisenmenger. He

<sup>35</sup> Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 22. See also Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700–1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) 13–22, 52–57, 78, 82, 152, 219, 286.

<sup>36</sup> See Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 132 nn. 78–79.

<sup>37</sup> See Shmuel Feiner, *Moses Mendelssohn: Sage of Modernity* (trans. Anthony Berris; Jewish Lives; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 97–99.

<sup>38</sup> Johann B. Kölbele, *Schreiben an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn über die Lavaterische und Kölbelische Angelegenheiten gegen Herrn Mendelssohn* (Frankfurt am Main: Andreäische Schriften, 1770) 24–25 [my translation]. Kölbele refers to this part of Mendelssohn’s response to Lavater: Mendelssohn, “Open Letter to Lavater,” in *Writings on Judaism*, 8. See the elaboration on this passage in Altmann, *A Biographical Study*, 250–51.

specifically takes issue with the way that Kölbele exploits *Entdecktes Judenthum* to argue that Jewish tradition teaches that all Christians will be condemned and that only the Jews will partake in eternal salvation: “Alas! How many persecutions have we had to endure because the writers of the *Talmud* were not prudent enough! *but quite different from what Eisenmenger states*. What an authority! Mr. Kölbele contradicts both the *Talmud* and *Maimonides* through Eisenmenger!”<sup>39</sup> In his second letter to Mendelssohn, Kölbele repeatedly refers to Mendelssohn’s critique of his use of Eisenmenger’s *Entdecktes Judenthum*, a work through which he aspires to uncover the *Rabbinentrödel* (rabbinic rubbish)<sup>40</sup> and which constituted a major bone of contention between the two: “Yet what I myself do not understand in the rabbinics, many others do. . . . You forbid me Eisenmenger, beloved adversary, so I must rely on Buxtorf’s *Wörterbuch* and *Synagoge*, Wagenseil’s *tele ignea*, Pfeiffer’s *theologia Judaica*, Wolfen’s *bibliotheca Hebraica*, Clauswigen’s *Siebenzig Jahrwochen*, and a good many others.”<sup>41</sup> Taking Johann D. Michaelis’s critique in *Göttingische Anzeigen*—which was leveled against his strong dependency on Eisenmenger’s *Entdecktes Judenthum*—as his starting point,<sup>42</sup> Kölbele proceeds to defend the essential reliability of this Protestant source. He unabashedly maintains that Eisenmenger’s hostile depiction of the rabbis and their writings is actually in broad agreement with the majority of the current German Jewish community, even implying that Mendelssohn himself is no exception in this regard.<sup>43</sup> As Jacob Katz maintains in another context, “Eisenmenger served as a welcome source for moral condemnation of Jews.”<sup>44</sup> Kölbele’s subsequent statement directly concerns our present theme: “And that the rabbis deviate from one another in their opinions, this I have likewise [viz. like Eisenmenger] already conceded.”<sup>45</sup>

Returning to our question of who these pedants are, we can now offer a concrete solution. There is a specific section from Eisenmenger’s *Entdecktes Judenthum* that it is extremely likely that Mendelssohn had in mind in this respect, which is titled: “Although the talmudic quarrels directly contradict one another, they are still all to be considered God’s word.”<sup>46</sup> In it, Eisenmenger outlines the dialectic nature of contradicting opinions underlying rabbinic discourse. There, we find a

<sup>39</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jubä* 7:53–54. I draw here, with slight modifications, on Moses Samuel’s English translation: see Samuel, *Memoirs of Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish Philosopher* (London: Longman and Co., 1825) 152 [emphasis in original].

<sup>40</sup> Johann B. Kölbele, *Zweytes Schreiben an Herrn Moses* (Frankfurt am Main: Andreäische Buchhandlung, 1770) 42.

<sup>41</sup> Kölbele, *Zweytes Schreiben*, 47–48 [my translation].

<sup>42</sup> Johann D. Michaelis, *Göttingische Anzeigen von Gelehrten Sachen* 59 (1770) 514–16, at 516.

<sup>43</sup> Kölbele, *Zweytes Schreiben*, 54–55. For an apt description of Eisenmenger’s stance, see Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction*, 20–21.

<sup>44</sup> Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction*, 152.

<sup>45</sup> Kölbele, *Zweytes Schreiben*, 55 [my translation].

<sup>46</sup> Johann A. Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judenthum* (Frankfurt am Main: s.n., 1700) 315 [my translation].

quotation taken from chapter 4 of Bezalel ben Solomon of Kobryn's *'Ammudeha Šiv'ah* (1666),<sup>47</sup> which most likely served as Mendelssohn's *Vorlage*:

So stehet auch in dem Buch *Ammudéha Schifa*, fol. 42. col. I. unter dem Titel *Ammud harevij* also geschrieben: אף על פי שזה אוסר וזה מתיר אלו ואלו דברי אלהים: *das ist/ Wiewohl dieser etwas verbietet/ und jener dasselbe erlaubt/ so ist doch beydes GOTTes Wort/ und kan beydes zur Zeit bekräftiget werden.*<sup>48</sup>

Mendelssohn's dependence on—and deviation from—Eisenmenger's German translation of this conflated rabbinic saying is quite evident:

Mendelssohn	Eisenmenger
Obgleich <i>dieser</i> löset, <i>jener</i> bindet, <i>so</i> lehren sie <i>doch beide</i> Worte des lebendigen Gottes.	Wiewohl <i>dieser</i> etwas verbietet/ und <i>jener</i> dasselbe erlaubt/ <i>so</i> ist <i>doch beydes</i> GOTTes Wort.
[Although this one loosens, the other one binds, and so both of them nevertheless teach the words of the living God] <sup>49</sup>	[Although this one forbids something, and the other one allows it, so both are nevertheless God's word] <sup>50</sup>

If our assumption that Mendelssohn made use of Eisenmenger's rendition of rabbinic disputes is correct, then this would be quite bewildering, as Mendelssohn would thus have drawn on one of the leading eighteenth-century adversaries of rabbinic tradition in order to describe the undogmatic essence of ancient, true Judaism. His deviation is also quite striking in one particular point: he appears to shrewdly insert the verb “teach” (*lehren*) in order to buttress his own dialogical view of Judaism, in which its oral tradition is intrinsically built on a pedagogical, spiritual discourse relating to ceremonial acts. However, this seemingly divergent aspect can also be traced back to Eisenmenger's almost identical formulation, found in the beginning of the section: “[...] so lehren die Rabbinen doch/ daß sie alle GOTTes Wort seyn.”<sup>51</sup> This unexpected insertion is crucial to understanding the conflated rabbinic citation. Inadvertently appropriating part of Eisenmenger's own formulation would thus render his intended rabbinic citation not only mishnaic-talmudic but, equally, also Eisenmengerian.

Although Eisenmenger does not explicitly maintain anywhere in this section, as Mendelssohn claims, that “the rabbis do not believe in the principle of contradiction,” the negative representations of their contradicting views permeate the entire work. Even Eisenmenger's opening remark of this section insinuates that this striking feature of rabbinic discourse is simply nonsensical when claiming, right

<sup>47</sup> For the Hebrew original, see Bezalel ben Solomon of Kobryn, *'Ammudeha Šiv'ah* (Lemberg: H. K. Buchner in Kalusz, 1888), 47 col. b.

<sup>48</sup> Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judenthum*, 315–16.

<sup>49</sup> Mendelssohn, *JubA* 8:168 [my translation; my emphasis].

<sup>50</sup> Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judenthum*, 316 [my translation; my emphasis]. I draw on Altmann's translation with slight changes.

<sup>51</sup> Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judenthum*, 315.

before alleging the saying from *b. 'Erub. 13b*, “that one side must necessarily be in the wrong.”<sup>52</sup> Eisenmenger alludes to this basic characteristic in further significant junctures of his book in order to portray the rabbis as unconscionable, reprehensible individuals. In one instance, he assesses that “it is, however, absolutely nothing new for the foolish rabbis to contradict one another, since the lies cannot endure.”<sup>53</sup> In the final analysis, he seeks to exploit this aspect to expose the theological basis for the numerous deceits of the Jewish community of his time against the Christian population.<sup>54</sup>

## ■ Protestant Representations of the Self-Contradictory Nature of Rabbinic Judaism

At this point, however, it is important to place this phenomenon in its wider historical context. As Giuseppe Veltri reveals in his *Alienated Wisdom*, giving the prominent example of the professor of Biblical Hebrew at Jena, Johann Frischmuth, “whose main task was to point out the dangers of rabbinic interpretation,”<sup>55</sup> a very similar pattern of polemical critique was par for the course in universities in the Lutheran parts of Germany in the seventeenth century, where classical Aristotelian logic still held sway.<sup>56</sup> Several of these Protestant theologians were, as Veltri puts it, concerned with “negating every philosophical characteristic of Jewish philosophy by means of attributing the classification of skepticism to Jewish philosophers.”<sup>57</sup> As early as 1658, Frischmuth, with the help of his student Johannes L. Will, composed a dissertation in order to provide a decisive response to the question of “whether the Jews can claim that the same thing both can and cannot exist at the same time.”<sup>58</sup> Taking the saying in *b. 'Erub. 13b* as a starting point for their argument against precepts of the Jewish belief system, they conclude—with reference to the Latin translation of Johann Buxtorf’s *Synagoga Judaica*<sup>59</sup>—that claiming that each of two contradictory stances taken by rabbinic authorities originated “from Moses, each sentence being the word of the living God,” is nothing short of “a supreme blasphemy.”<sup>60</sup> As Veltri highlights, another of Frischmuth and Will’s significant

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 315 [my translation].

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 [my translation].

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 576–77.

<sup>55</sup> Guido Bartolucci, “Jewish Thought vs. Lutheran Aristotelism: Johann Frischmuth (1619–1687) and Jewish Scepticism,” *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* 2 (2017) 95–106, at 98.

<sup>56</sup> For an extensive analysis of the theme in question, see Bartolucci, “Lutheran,” 95–106.

<sup>57</sup> Giuseppe Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom: Enquiry into Jewish Philosophy and Scepticism* (Studies and Texts in Scepticism 3; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018) 265. Substantial parts of this seminal research were published earlier in idem, “Negotiating the Principle of (Non)-Contradiction: Johann Frischmuth on the Rabbinic Dialectic Discussion,” *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* 2 (2017) 107–19.

<sup>58</sup> See Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom*, 266. The English translation is taken from this work.

<sup>59</sup> Bartolucci, “Lutheran,” 104.

<sup>60</sup> This portrayal is premised on Veltri’s account: see Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom*, 267. For a

Jewish sources was Yom-Tov Lipmann-Muhlhausen's *Sefer Niṣaḥon*, thanks to the fact that it seizes upon the fundamental logical problem that emerges from the rabbinic stance outlined in *b. 'Erub*. 13b: it defies the Aristotelian principle of noncontradiction in favor of the authoritative status accorded to the great rabbinic sages.<sup>61</sup> By drawing support from such sources, Frischmuth could thus expose the fundamental unreliability of rabbinic hermeneutics, which, in the final analysis, "cannot catch the truth," as Guido Bartolucci points out.<sup>62</sup> It is noteworthy that in the wake of Frischmuth's negative account of ancient rabbinic Judaism, we encounter similar assessments in other writings, including Johann Julius Struve's *Rudimenta logicae Ebraeorum*<sup>63</sup> and Georg Ursin's *Bet ha-Yešivah we-ha-Midraš*.<sup>64</sup>

Given this particular pattern of mid-seventeenth-century Protestant critique, one cannot simply hastily pass over Mendelssohn's statement that he has "seen many a pedant quote this saying."<sup>65</sup> Mendelssohn seems to be implying that this quotation was exploited by several Christian authors rather than just one, as part of an effort to paint Judaism as a self-contradictory faith. An examination of other known Christian depictions of rabbinic tradition produced in the German-speaking lands during the eighteenth century is quite illuminating. If we take, for example, the second volume of the Protestant theologian Johann C. G. Bodenschatz's *Der kirchlichen Verfassung*, which was published in 1748, we encounter an illustration which is almost entirely premised on Eisenmenger's account. Bodenschatz expounds on the talmudic quarrels, from which "a contradiction among these great [rabbinic] teachers emerges," while, like Eisenmenger, citing Bezalel ben Solomon of Kobryn's *'Ammudeha Šiv'ah* and borrowing Eisenmenger's German translation *verbatim*.<sup>66</sup>

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thorough depiction of Protestant scholars of the Hebrew Bible in the 17th cent. in connection with Mendelssohn, see Edward Breuer, *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-Century Study of Scripture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 82–107. On the effect of Christian theology on the development of Mendelssohn's thought, see Elias Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script: Philosophy, Practice, History, Judaism* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 2017) 122–70.

<sup>61</sup> Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom*, 267–68; Bartolucci, "Lutheran," 103–4. *Sefer Niṣaḥon* was a polemical treatise with a wide distribution from the early 15th cent., written by Lipmann-Muhlhausen, an influential medieval Ashkenazi rabbi. The author grapples with key Christian precepts and Christological exegesis while seeking to validate the supremacy of rabbinic Judaism's tenets. For further reading on this subject, see Milan Žonca, "Mühlhausen, Yom Tov Lipmann," *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (EBR) Online*, [https://www.degruyter.com/database/EBR/entry/rkey\\_3301960/html](https://www.degruyter.com/database/EBR/entry/rkey_3301960/html). For the role of *b. 'Erub*. 13b in *Sefer Niṣaḥon*, see Hanina Ben-Menahem, "Controversy and Dialogue in the Jewish Tradition: An Interpretive Essay," in *Controversy and Dialogue in the Jewish Tradition: A Reader* (ed. idem, Neil S. Hecht and Shai Wosner; London and New York: Routledge, 2005) 17.

<sup>62</sup> Bartolucci, "Lutheran," 101.

<sup>63</sup> Johann Julius Struve, *Rudimenta logicae Ebraeorum* (Jena: Ehrich, 1697) 31–35.

<sup>64</sup> Georg Ursin, *Bet ha-Yešivah we-Hamidraš. Seu Antiquitates Hebraicae Scholastico-Academicae* (Copenhagen: Joh. Melchiori Lieben, Reg. Acad. Bibl., 1697) 173, 286–88.

<sup>65</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101 n. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Johann C. G. Bodenschatz, *Der kirchlichen Verfassung* (4 vols.; Frankfurt am Main: s.n.,

A second work might be of even greater relevance to our analysis. In an anonymously published book from 1772, *Beleuchtung des bekannten Antwort-Schreibens von Herrn Moses Mendelssohn zu Berlin, an den Herrn Diaconus Lavater zu Zürich*, which purported to provide a clarification of Mendelssohn's response to Johann Caspar Lavater, we find a pejorative account of contradictions within rabbinic discourse.<sup>67</sup> The author, who on the cover page claims to be "a friend of truth," expresses this problematic feature of ancient rabbinic literature in the following terms: "For so many [rabbinic] teachers have emerged who directly contradict one another, and each still purports his [fabricated] instruction to be an oral law from Sinai."<sup>68</sup> Although the author does not explicitly make use of Eisenmenger's quotation of Bezalel ben Solomon of Kobryn, his turns of phrase—and overall deprecatory assessment—strongly suggest that he is taking *Entdecktes Judenthum* as his starting point:

Anonymous author	Eisenmenger
Da so vielerley Lehrer auftreten, die <i>einander</i> oft <i>schmurrstracks widersprechen</i> .	Wiewohl die Talmudische Strittigkeiten <i>schmurrstracks wider einander lauffen</i> .

As with Eisenmenger, the divergence of halakhic opinion between the schools of Šammai and Hillel, as presented in *b. 'Erub. 13b*, constitutes the author's main textual point of reference. Taking his cue from this section of the Talmud, he goes on to put forward the following claim: "Still, both the sayings of the teachers, of a Šammai as well as a Hillel, which nevertheless so strongly contradict one another, should be considered words of the living God, and that they are [actually] so was likewise confirmed to them by Batqol."<sup>69</sup> In contrast to both Eisenmenger and Bodenschatz, he proceeds, on the basis of his presentation, to question the tenets of rabbinic tradition, thus endeavoring to expose fundamental conceptual shortcomings in Mendelssohn's apologetic view of his forefathers' religion:

How can a true philosophical spirit harmonize this with divine attributes? [How can] the yes and no, black and white, just and unjust emerging from one and the same thing be His words . . . ? . . . And how many other nonsensical, profane, superstitious, ludicrous, even sorcerous pieces appear in the

1748–1749) 2:227. See also David Fassmann, "In merckwürdigen Nachrichten vom Talmud und dem Judenthum," in *Der, Auf Ordre und Kosten seines Kayzers, reisende Chineser* (4 vols.; Leipzig: Cörnerischen Erben, 1724) 2:73–80, at 2:75; Elias L. Roblik, *Jüdische Augen-Gläser* (Brünn: Wittib, 1741) 150; Gottlieb Selig, *Der Jude, eine Wochenschrift* 5 (1770) 347–48. For more on Bodenschatz's *Der kirchlichen Verfassung*, see Yaacov Deutsch's *Judaism in Christian Eyes: Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 115, 119–20.

<sup>67</sup> *Beleuchtung des bekannten Antwort-Schreibens von Herrn Moses Mendelssohn zu Berlin, an den Herrn Diaconus Lavater zu Zürich* (Würzburg: Rienner, 1772) 187–92.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 187 [my translation].

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 187–88 [my translation].

Talmud? Is it not full of contradictions and fairy tales? How nonsensical are the frequent arguments of its authors?<sup>70</sup>

The author's destructive portrayal of the Talmud and the contradictory halakhic positions it often advances is meant as a theological argument against Mendelssohn himself. The contemptuous presentation of the Talmud as conveying a misologistic worldview is situated in stark contrast to the idealized image of Mendelssohn as a significant promoter of the progressive values of the European Enlightenment.

After posing this sequence of rhetorical questions, the book's author proceeds along similar lines with the following statement: "For this reason, it is difficult for me to believe that Mendelssohn truly esteems the oral laws on the same level as the written [laws]."<sup>71</sup> The disbelief and perplexity of the author, who wishes to amplify the discrepancy between the great *Aufklärer* and the precepts of rabbinic literature, in fact constitute a pivotal element of his argumentative assault on Mendelssohn's defense. Against this backdrop, it comes as no surprise that these objections are also pursued and raised much earlier in the book:

How can he still be committed to the Jewish religion of the present day, as it is completely different to the one Moses and the prophets describe? But if he himself acknowledged this, and if he also examined the way it is propounded in the Talmud, how could he then be convinced of its Godly origin, as Moses and the prophets pass with absolute silence over everything which is so frequently maintained and emphatically inculcated in such writings? For is it even possible that I should trust that such a great spirit as Mendelssohn should place the written law on the same level as the oral one—which is so beloved and popular among his nation—given that all the [rabbinic] teachers who are introduced there are shown to be engaging in discourse and to contradict one another so often, the one [teacher] contending and purporting this, the other [teacher] that, [both] considering themselves to be infallible and unmistakable, equal to the unmediated illuminated prophets?<sup>72</sup>

These illuminating passages exhibit the centrality of the theme of contradictions within the framework of Protestant critiques of rabbinic tradition in the eighteenth-century German-speaking world, but also, and more importantly, they show how deeply Mendelssohn's apologetics are entwined with this anti-Judaic discourse. This fact reaffirms Eliyahu Stern's insight that "criticism of the rabbinic tradition

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 188–89 [my translation]. The depiction of the Talmud as a work full of fairy tales is quite reminiscent of Eisenmenger's attitude. For further elaboration on this theme in the context of Mendelssohn's defense of the Talmud, see Krochmalnik, "Tradition und Subversion," 66–67. Mendelssohn also seems to affirm this position, albeit to a very limited extent. The figure of the rabbi in his anonymous review of Johann J. Rabe's Mishnah translation argues that approximately five percent of the Talmud ("einen zwanzigsten Theil") ostensibly comprises inconsistent ideas (Mendelssohn *JubA* 5.1:49). See Stern, "Genius," 353; Gideon Freudenthal, "Rabbinische Weisheit oder Rabbinische Philosophie? Salomon Maimons Kritik an Mendelssohn und Weisel," *Mendelssohn-Studien* 14 (2005) 31–64, at 39.

<sup>71</sup> *Beleuchtung*, 189 [my translation].

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 95 [my translation].

was often times connected to the debates surrounding Jewish emancipation.<sup>73</sup> In sum, when referring to these “pedants,” Mendelssohn might primarily be thinking of narrow-minded Protestant evaluations of the rabbinic worldview which utilize Eisenmenger’s *Entdecktes Judenthum* as the primary scholarly basis for their partisan attacks.

When speaking of Jewish emancipation in eighteenth-century Prussian society, there is one author who particularly stands out: Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, whose *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* distinguished him as the leading advocate for granting the Jewish population equal rights in the Kingdom of Prussia. It may therefore be puzzling that his name should be mentioned in this markedly anti-rabbinic context. However—as Breuer has perceptively pointed out—his progressive treatise “clearly invoked the primary historical distinction between Mosaic and post-Mosaic Judaism and its all but explicit rejection of rabbinical Judaism.”<sup>74</sup> His negative attitude towards the postbiblical rabbinic tradition—considered inauthentic due to its distortion of the original intent of the Mosaic constitution—not only draws support from Michaelis’s *Mosaisches Recht*, its primary historical source relating to biblical provisions and laws, but also, perhaps surprisingly, from Eisenmenger.<sup>75</sup> Although he does attempt to counter Michaelis’s and Eisenmenger’s severe judgment of Prussian Jewry based on ancient rabbinic thought, he nevertheless concedes its self-contradictory, nonsensical, and immoral nature, which potentially runs the imminent risk of posing a formidable obstacle to their collective integration in the Christian majority society:

“In the Talmud” (says Mr. Chevalier Michaelis, a man whose verdict must carry weight here), “one finds the opinions of diverse rabbis alleged over one and the same matter; they often contradict and dispute one another. In this context, not all of the things that Eisenmenger adduces from the Talmud directly qualify as beliefs and teachings of the whole Jewish nation, not even of the part that believes in the Talmud . . . , but rather only [as those] of a

<sup>73</sup> Stern, “Genius,” 353. For a more extensive examination of the centrality of the status of rabbinic literature in the debate over civic rights for German Jews, see Breuer, “Politics, Tradition, History,” 357–82; Ismar Schorsch, “Missing in Translation: The Fate of the Talmud in the Struggle for Equality and Integration in Germany,” in *Wissenschaft des Judentums Beyond Tradition: Jewish Scholarship on the Sacred Texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (ed. Dorothea M. Salzer, Chanan Gafni, and Hanan Harif; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019) 167–84, at 167–78. Mendelssohn was not merely aware of the numerous biased portrayals of rabbinic literature but was also actively occupied with rebutting them from an early stage. This fact is aptly demonstrated, as Stern points out (Stern, “Genius,” 353), by Mendelssohn’s anonymous review of Rabe’s 1760 German translation of the Mishnah. In his review, he outlines the biased image of rabbinic literature common among Christians (*JubA* 5.1:48–49).

<sup>74</sup> Breuer, “Politics, Tradition, History,” 367.

<sup>75</sup> It is noteworthy that Johann D. Michaelis also drew support from Eisenmenger’s *Entdecktes Judenthum*. See Christoph Schulte, “‘Diese unglückliche Nation’—Jüdische Reaktionen auf Dohms *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden*,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 54 (2002) 352–65, at 355–58. For Michaelis’s pejorative perception of the ancient rabbinic sages, see Breuer, “Politics, Tradition, History,” 365–66.



few teachers.” And, I would like to add, even if these few teachers were occasionally held in high esteem by their nation, for this reason, it would still not be valid to imply that their opinions are those of the nation, [a nation] that is fortunate enough not to even know of these [teachings].<sup>76</sup>

Although he considers his stance to be more progressive than those of Eisenmenger and Michaelis, Dohm’s negative view of the ancient rabbis and the destructive consequences that their precepts could have for contemporary Prussian Jewry is still in broad keeping with Michaelis’s position, and even in part with Eisenmenger’s.<sup>77</sup> In an earlier part of his treatise, Dohm devotes an entire footnote to impugning Eisenmenger’s emblematic correlation between questionable passages from ancient rabbinic literature and the mindset of seventeenth-century European Jews:

No other author has devoted more effort to collecting these fairy-tales—and no other [author] has done it with more animus and with the objective of sharpening and legitimizing the unchristian and unpolitical spirit of persecution against the Jews—than Eisenmenger in his *Entdecktes Judenthum*. To him, there is no absurdity to which the Jews do not attach credence, no prejudice which is not nurtured by them, no vice into which they do not relapse. . . . The occasionally absurd and immoral assertions of individual Jewish rabbis can hardly serve as proof of the detriment of the whole Jewish doctrine, just as similar teachings by a few Christian theologians are not allowed to be admitted into the holy doctrine of the Gospel.<sup>78</sup>

Despite the fact that Dohm unequivocally condemns Eisenmenger’s inconsequential transition from a wide array of positions present in rabbinic writings—without applying any objective criteria to his choices—to the actual views of contemporary Jews, he does, again, partly point out the negative features of rabbinic Judaism. His critical attitude towards the rabbis culminates in a later part of his treatise, which focuses on the Jewish day of rest and its social implication for Prussian society. While he praises—evoking Michaelis’s *Mosaisches Recht*—the original practical and social intent that the Mosaic constitution attached to the Sabbath, he levels harsh critique against the Prussian Jews of his days, who are utterly corrupting its primary purpose by taking an extreme, slavish, and ludicrous position of complete idleness. Adopting, in fact, a similar perspective to Eisenmenger, he proceeds to cast the blame on the post-Mosaic rabbis, who “with the art of sophistry explicated from the laws of Moses, which are simple and merely pursue the goal of his nation’s delight, something that is entirely contrary to their spirit: fearful and

<sup>76</sup> Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (2nd ed.; 2 vols.; Berlin: Nicolai, 1783) 1:22 [my translation]. For Dohm’s original critique of Eisenmenger’s position, see Dohm, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (Berlin: Nicolai, 1781) 22–23 n. 1.

<sup>77</sup> It is still worth noting that, in the cited passage, Dohm seeks to defend rabbinic Judaism by expressing substantial reservations toward common anti-Judaic misconceptions of his day (Dohm, *Bürgerliche Verbesserung* [2nd ed.], 20–21).

<sup>78</sup> Dohm, *Bürgerliche Verbesserung* (2nd ed.), 1:15–17 n. 1 [my translation and emphasis].

restrictive provisions.<sup>79</sup> For Dohm, the post-Mosaic rabbinic teachings embody the pusillanimous, pedantic *Ceremoniengeist* (ceremonial spirit) that permeates the practices and worldview of contemporary Prussian Jewry, which forestalls its advancement and its ultimate social integration.<sup>80</sup>

### ■ The Enlightened Doubt of Mendelssohn's Rabbinic Sages

Mendelssohn, who was surely reacting to these works,<sup>81</sup> takes an innovative approach to these critical accounts of rabbinic law: he reframes their presentations of the contradictions permeating halakhic disputes, which were singled out as a substantial weak spot of ancient rabbinic Judaism, as actually working in Judaism's favor. Taking Zech 8:19 as his scriptural departure point, Mendelssohn construes the rabbis' exception of the principle of noncontradiction as highly advantageous with respect to Judaism's conceptual framework: "I hope to live to see the day when all the peoples of the earth will admit this exception to the universal principle of contradiction: '*The fast day of the fourth and the fast day of the tenth month shall become days of joy and gladness if you but love peace and truth.*'"<sup>82</sup> He thereby insinuates that the rabbinic worldview, with its capacity for dialectically containing contradictions, yields the following conceptual benefits.

First, making an exception for the principle of noncontradiction indicates a particular strength of Judaism as an undogmatic, vivacious system of faith. In this way, he reinforces the idea that Judaism cannot be invalidated by metaphysical lines of argumentation. Hence, he underscores the argument that Judaism's undeniable core is best discerned by means of commonsensical conviction. Mendelssohn appears to want to align rabbinic tradition with the theological view of the famous Pauline dictum in 2 Cor 3:6 "for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."<sup>83</sup> In so doing, he counters widespread Christian readings thereof—which equate the dead letter with the Jewish faith—by suggesting that rabbinic tradition overcomes

<sup>79</sup> Dohm, *Bürgerliche Verbesserung* (2nd ed.), 1:147–48. Throughout his treatise, Dohm consistently ascribes the characteristic of sophistry to the rabbis: see *ibid.*, 1:29, 33.

<sup>80</sup> The negative concept of "ceremonial spirit" is taken from this section of Dohm's treatise: Dohm, *Bürgerliche Verbesserung* (2nd ed.), 1:143. For further elaboration, see Breuer, "Politics, Tradition, History," 364–65. Alongside this expression, Dohm also uses the corresponding term *Kleinigkeitengeist* (pedantic spirit): see Dohm, *Bürgerliche Verbesserung* (2nd ed.), 1:94. For Gotthold E. Lessing's comparable criticism of rabbinic Judaism, see George Y. Kohler, "The Pattern for Jewish Reformation": The Impact of Lessing on Nineteenth-Century German Jewish Religious Thought," *HTR* 113 (2020) 263–84, at 266–68.

<sup>81</sup> In his monograph on Mendelssohn, Christoph Schulte claims that it would not be an exaggeration to maintain that Mendelssohn was the best Jewish connoisseur of Christian theology and biblical criticism in the second half of the 18th cent.: *Von Moses bis Moses . . . Der jüdische Mendelssohn* (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2020) 106.

<sup>82</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101 (*JubA* 8:168; emphasis in original).

<sup>83</sup> The English translation is taken from the NOAB version.

written language altogether<sup>84</sup> and is to be regarded as a spiritual dialogue willed by God.<sup>85</sup> Mendelssohn views Christianity as highly prone to contradictions, in marked contrast to Judaism, due to its metaphysical dogmatic foundation. This is evident in his letter to Karl W. von Braunschweig. In this letter, he claims that the doctrines of the Trinity, incarnation, substitutionary atonement, and the satisfaction theory of atonement all seem to him to “directly contradict the primary grounds of human reason.”<sup>86</sup>

Second, this characteristic showcases the universally tolerant nature of ancient rabbinic Judaism, which accepts opposing points of view and as a whole even affirms doctrinal controversies with purely pious incentives at their root (“Any controversy that is for God’s sake shall in the end be of lasting worth,” *m. ’Abot* 5:17).<sup>87</sup> Mendelssohn’s description of this approach paints a utopian vision of the world’s people overcoming sectarian conflicts by declining to apply the principle of noncontradiction to different religious beliefs. This depiction implies that rabbinic Judaism aligns well with Enlightenment-based principles in general and with religious diversity in particular. This, too, might be Mendelssohn’s intention in the following paragraph, where he pinpoints Judaism’s “quintessence” by alluding to the affirmative response—“love your fellow as yourself” (Lev 18:19)<sup>88</sup>—of the “great teacher of the nation, Hillel the Elder,” to the heathen’s “unreasonable request” that he learn the entire law while standing on one leg (*b. Šabb.* 31a). Interestingly, it is not the content of Hillel’s answer, the teaching recorded in Lev 18:19, that is the primary source of this Jewish “quintessence,” but rather his concrete conduct, which displays his “imperturbable composure and gentleness” when dealing with a Gentile’s hostile demand.<sup>89</sup> In fact, a closer examination of this passage would suggest that Šammai’s response, dismissing the Gentile’s request as utterly nonsensical, conforms much better to Mendelssohn’s stance, which maintains that Jewish “laws cannot be abridged,” for “[in] them everything is fundamental.”<sup>90</sup> His rather deprecatory portrayal of Šammai does not primarily stem from the theoretical content underlying his response, but from his intolerant

<sup>84</sup> Mendelssohn later explicitly draws on *b. Git.* 60b, which articulates the prohibition of writing down oral tradition (*JubA* 8:169).

<sup>85</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101 [emphasis in original]. For further analysis of Mendelssohn’s use of 2 Cor 3:6, see 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; Zeichen und Interpretationen 4; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998) 238–85, at 275, 278.

<sup>86</sup> Mendelssohn, *JubA* 7:301 [my translation]. For an insightful analysis of this passage, see Schulte, *Von Moses bis Moses*, 69–72; Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 46.

<sup>87</sup> See Stern, “Genius,” 354. For Mendelssohn’s stance on tolerance, see Michah Gottlieb, “Mendelssohn’s Metaphysical Defense of Religious Pluralism,” *The Journal of Religion* 86 (2006) 205–25.

<sup>88</sup> The English translation is taken from the NJPS version.

<sup>89</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102 (*JubA* 8:168).

<sup>90</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 101 (*JubA* 8:168).

behavior towards the Gentile, whom he “dismiss[e]s . . . contemptuously.”<sup>91</sup> With this in mind, one might still point, in the final analysis, to the fact that Mendelssohn identifies the value and legitimacy of both rabbinic perspectives.

Third, Mendelssohn quotes the biblical verse (Zech 8:19) in its narrower rabbinic sense, as a dialectical injunction to mediate between and reconcile truth and peace; i.e., two conflicting positions that give rise to a disagreement, as laid out, for example, in *t. Sanh.* 1:3 (“Surely where there is strict judgement there is no peace and where there is peace there is no strict justice! But what is the kind of justice in which peace abides? Arbitration”) and *t. Yebam.* 1:10 (“the House of Šammai did not refrain from taking wives from among the women of the House of Hillel, and the House of Hillel from the House of Šammai. But they conducted themselves toward one another in truth and peace”).<sup>92</sup> With his employment of this rabbinic motto, “love peace and truth,” which expresses the significance of brokering a compromise between the unrestricted claims of religious truth and the promotion of social cohesion and tranquility,<sup>93</sup> he is also obviously seeking to bring the rabbinic perspective into line with the enlightened *Weltanschauung*. He thus argues that the pursuit of ultimate truth is not the only significant thing, but that striving after tolerant coexistence with peoples of different faiths also matters and that both of these goals need to be dialectically merged, something that necessitates an amount of compromise. For Mendelssohn, the importance of this rabbinic expression seems to extend far beyond this specific context to apply to his overall enlightened Jewish worldview. This assumption is clearly prompted by *Jerusalem’s* closing sentence, which draws, as Altmann suggests,<sup>94</sup> on this biblical saying in its particular rabbinic sense: “Let no one in your states be a searcher of hearts and a judge of thoughts; let no one assume a right that the Omniscient has reserved to himself alone! If we render unto *Caesar* what is *Caesar’s*, then do you yourselves render unto *God* what is *God’s*! *Love truth! Love peace!*”<sup>95</sup> This aspect indicates that for Mendelssohn, as Eliyahu Stern concludes, “defending the rabbis was not just an apologetic act but essential to his philosophy of tolerance.”<sup>96</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102 (*JubA* 8:168).

<sup>92</sup> The English translations of these rabbinic passages are taken, with slight modifications, from Natalie B. Dohrmann, “The Boundaries of the Law and the Problem of Jurisdiction,” in *Rabbinic Law in Its Roman and Near Eastern Context* (ed. Catherine Hezser; Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 97; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 83–103, at 98–100, and Jacob Neusner, *The Social Teaching of Rabbinic Judaism, Volume 2: Between Israelites* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) 84. The scriptural reference to Zech 8:19 in *t. Yebam.* 1:10, the Tosefta corresponding to *m. Yebam.* 1:4, could have induced Mendelssohn to draw on this biblical verse.

<sup>93</sup> For a description of this rabbinic notion, see Peter Haas, “The Rabbi as Arbiter,” in *Rabbinic-Lay Relations in Jewish Law* (ed. Walter Jacob; Pittsburgh: Rodef Sholom Press, 1993) 73–82.

<sup>94</sup> Altmann in Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 219.

<sup>95</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 139 (*JubA* 8:204) [emphasis in original]. Mendelssohn’s merging of the message of Matt 22:21 with this rabbinic saying should not come as much of a surprise if one bears in mind that he considers core Christian notions to be fundamentally derived from rabbinic precepts (*Jerusalem*, 134 [*JubA* 8:199]).

<sup>96</sup> Stern, “Genius,” 354 n. 29.

Fourth, Mendelssohn seems to imply that the rabbis were cognizant of the insurmountable chasm between logical principles and social reality, and also of the risk that imposing such abstract notions on everyday human interaction could have.<sup>97</sup> Ignoring this chasm could result in the emergence of an intolerant social environment in which diverse attitudes will either not be permitted or not even be given voice at all. For this reason, the rabbis comprehended that the principle of noncontradiction not only *cannot* be transferred into the social realm, but also, and more importantly, that it *should not* be. The social and political significance of contradictions is also stressed in Mendelssohn's other writings. For example, in the second section of his *On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences*, he unwaveringly expresses the view that the "spirit of contradiction" (*Geist des Widerspruchs*) is politically necessary for a properly functioning republic, for it precipitates "a wholesome underpinning of freedom and general well-being."<sup>98</sup> Mendelssohn continues with the claim that "freedom wills that everyone speak his opinion, however absurd it may be, so that no one gets it into his head to put forward his own willful prerogatives as wise counsel and impose them on his fellow citizens."<sup>99</sup> This revealing passage also aids us in better discerning when, according to Mendelssohn, the principle of noncontradiction should be applied and when it should be suspended. Indeed, Mendelssohn's portrayal of the rabbinic sages as highly rational thinkers clearly indicates that he believed them to unreservedly affirm, on a theoretical basis, the principle of noncontradiction. In his final systematic work, *Morning Hours, or Lectures on the Existence of God*, Mendelssohn not only unequivocally endorses the principle of noncontradiction but considers it to be the most fundamental metaphysical principle,<sup>100</sup> which ultimately renders human thought and its scientific fields of knowledge possible, attaching to it "the highest degree of evidence."<sup>101</sup> Thus, it would appear that, to Mendelssohn, the principle of noncontradiction should remain entirely valid within the fields of metaphysics, logics, mathematics, the natural sciences, and even scriptural exegesis, while being compromised, to a certain degree, in fields exploring contingent historical phenomena that leave considerable room for interpretation. Mendelssohn's chief point seems to be, however, that the rabbis embrace the spirit of contradiction by their suspension of

<sup>97</sup> For this aspect of Mendelssohn's general thought, see Arnold Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 33–34.

<sup>98</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, "On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences," in idem, *Philosophical Writings* (ed. and trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom; Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 251–306, at 278 (*JubA* 2:296).

<sup>99</sup> Mendelssohn, "Evidence," 278 (*JubA* 2:296). I have slightly modified Dahlstrom's English translation. For a penetrating examination of this passage, see Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 84; Sacks, "Freedom," 97–99.

<sup>100</sup> See Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 88.

<sup>101</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *Morning Hours: Lectures on God's Existence* (ed. and trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom and Corey Dyck; Studies in German Idealism 12; Dordrecht: Springer, 2011) 4 (*JubA* 3.2:12).

the overarching validity of the principle of noncontradiction, in order to promote freedom of thought and religious diversity within practical political realms.

### ■ *Sefer Megillat Qohelet*, the Rabbis, and Contradictions

If we turn to Mendelssohn's commentary on Ecclesiastes, *Sefer Megillat Qohelet*, which was published in 1770, we are confronted with its striking resemblance to the excerpts from *Jerusalem* examined above. Already at the outset of the introduction to this commentary—by way of *pešaṭ*—we read the following remark: “There are four ways to interpret our holy Torah. They are, as is well known, *pešaṭ*, *derush*, *remez*, and *sod*. All of them are *words of the living God, at once correct . . .*, which is neither contrary to the ways of reason and logical thinking, nor strange and astonishing to the human intellect.”<sup>102</sup> Mendelssohn's main exegetical move here is to account for the presence of numerous contradictions in Ecclesiastes, which are highlighted in *b. Šabb. 30b* (“the Sages sought to conceal the book of Ecclesiastes because its statements contradict each other”).<sup>103</sup> Mendelssohn's conflation between *b. 'Erub. 13b* and Ps 19:10 (“the judgments of the Lord are true, righteous altogether”)<sup>104</sup> likely traces back to the closing section (“The Merit of ‘Both are words of the living God,’ ‘the judgments of the Lord are true, righteous altogether’”) of the chapter entitled “Torah 'Or” in Isaiah Horowitz's *Šene Luḥot ha-Berit*: “In it, the verse [‘]the judgments of the Lord are all true[’] is elucidated, and even if there is a disagreement, [both] were correct together, insofar as [‘]both are words of the living God.[’]”<sup>105</sup> This implies that Mendelssohn was not thinking of Jer 23:36 so much as of its rabbinic rendition in *b. 'Erub. 13b*. However, in contrast to Horowitz, he appears to want to elucidate this talmudic saying with the help of the biblical verse and not vice versa.

The strong resemblance that the above-cited excerpt bears to *Jerusalem's* depiction of the ancient rabbis stems from the fact that here, too, Mendelssohn strives to account for ostensible contradictions underlying the Jewish tradition by referring to *b. 'Erub. 13b*. Although his approach is different here, since he seeks to reveal through the understudied depth of the *pešaṭ*—and with the help of the rest of the fourfold *PaRDeS* scheme—that the sacred text is actually free of contradictions and neatly harmonizes with human reason, the similarity is nevertheless profound. This is so because the use he makes of *b. 'Erub. 13b* serves to underpin the diverse meanings of the holy text's *pešaṭ* layer and of the *deraš* reading of rabbinic hermeneutics.<sup>106</sup> This becomes all the more apparent if we

<sup>102</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, “*Megillat Qohelet* (Commentary on Ecclesiastes),” in idem, *Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings* (trans. Edward Breuer; introd. and anon. idem and David Sorkin; Yale Judaica Series 33; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) 123 (*JubA* 14:148 [emphasis in original]).

<sup>103</sup> Mendelssohn, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 131 (*JubA* 14:153).

<sup>104</sup> The English translation is taken from the NJPS version.

<sup>105</sup> Horowitz, *Šene Luḥot Ha-Berit*, 1:199.

<sup>106</sup> The fact that Mendelssohn repeatedly draws on this talmudic formulation to pinpoint the

proceed, in his introduction, to his explicit line of defense with respect to rabbinic scriptural interpretation, which again draws support from the dialectical view laid out in *b. Erub*. 13b:

We thus see clearly that the Sages never eschewed the *peshat* and the primary intended meaning, which forsakes the words and preserves the sense. However, they provided for a second intended meaning that pays precise attention to each and every word, letter, and even tittle, for with regard to the *words of the living God* . . . , no word occurs by chance without intended meaning, just as He did not create anything in His world without its own particular purpose.<sup>107</sup>

If the rabbis' hermeneutical approach were shown to be concretely rooted in the Scripture's spirited words, this would enable Mendelssohn to deal more effectively with seeming contradictions emerging from a straightforward interpretation of Ecclesiastes.<sup>108</sup> The concept of life plays an important role here. God lives, as do his words as recorded in the sacred text, which Mendelssohn identifies with the divine creation of the world and its spirited phenomena.<sup>109</sup> An analogous understanding of Scripture is expounded in *Jerusalem*, insofar as Mendelssohn argues there that it is a book comprising "an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines which are so intimately connected with the laws that they form but one entity."<sup>110</sup> Mendelssohn considers this speculative stance to have been endorsed by the rabbis—probably thinking of *Zohar* 3.152a, as Altmann notes<sup>111</sup>—and merely reaffirms it: "Hence, our rabbis rightly say: the laws and doctrines are related to each other, like body and soul."<sup>112</sup> Through the notion of Holy Scripture as a spirited phenomenon, he can emphasize its dynamic structure and multilayered meanings, which make it more capable of circumventing internal contradictions. A similar account of Hebrew Scripture is also found in Mendelssohn's 1783 introduction to his Pentateuch edition *Netivot ha-Šalom*, entitled '*Or Li-Netivah*, where he again designates Scripture as "words of the living God."<sup>113</sup> In his introduction, he

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antidogmatic feature of the ancient rabbinic sages has already been observed by Krochmalnik: "Tradition und Subversion," 92 n. 113.

<sup>107</sup> Mendelssohn, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 126 (*JubA* 14:150 [emphasis in original]). For further analysis, see Stern, "Genius," 367–71; Michah Gottlieb, "Oral Letter and Written Trace: Samson Raphael Hirsch's Defense of the Bible and Talmud," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 106 (2016) 316–51, at 318–19; David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 39–41, 44–45; Krochmalnik: "Tradition und Subversion," 94–102.

<sup>108</sup> Sacks, *Living Script*, 137–38.

<sup>109</sup> See Sorkin, *Religious Enlightenment*, 39–40.

<sup>110</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 99 (in *JubA* 8:166).

<sup>111</sup> Altmann in Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 216.

<sup>112</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 99 (*JubA* 8:166). For Mendelssohn's attitude towards the Kabbalah, see Elke Morlok, "Isaac Satanow (1732–1804) on Moral and Intellectual Perfection," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 14 (2020) 300–333; Warren Zev Harvey, "Why Philosophers Quote Kabbalah: The Cases of Mendelssohn and Rosenzweig," *Studia Judaica* 16 (2008) 118–25, at 119–22.

<sup>113</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, "*Or Li-Netivah*," in *Moses Mendelssohn's Hebrew Writings*, 291 (*JubA* 15.1:40).

also seeks to demonstrate that Scripture's multiple layers of meaning—primarily *pešaṭ* and *deraš*—cannot be, as a general rule, entangled in inner contradictions but, rather, need to complement one another.<sup>114</sup> Here, too, he draws on a rabbinical hermeneutical premise, “Scripture does not lose its *pešaṭ* [sense]” (*b. Šabb.* 63a), while explicitly referring back to his Ecclesiastes commentary.<sup>115</sup> His unflinching commitment to traditional rabbinic reading as a reliable normative account of the Hebrew Bible is also attested in this work, inasmuch as he claims that it is “incumbent upon us to follow the *deruš*, and to translate Scripture accordingly,” if the *pešaṭ* appears to contradict it.<sup>116</sup>

When reading Mendelssohn's commentary on Ecclesiastes, one may be surprised to see that he does not actually deny the fact that it entails contradictions. Far from it. He asserts that it mostly consists of a self-contradictory structure, where a claim is put forward and then its rebuttal.<sup>117</sup> Drawing on Abraham ibn Ezra, Mendelssohn construes Ecclesiastes as a dialogical text: it describes an inner dialogue of King Solomon, one in which he opines about various unreasonable attitudes held by common people, but also presents counter-arguments.<sup>118</sup> David Sorkin explains this internal discourse as “a form of philosophical dialogue in which the contradictory, skeptical, or heretical opinions were to be attributed to notional interlocutors.”<sup>119</sup> Yet it would seem that not only might the profane opinions themselves be considered amendable through skepticism, but also and *a fortiori* the method by which one might arrive at them. Entertaining thoughts and then proceeding to counter them in order to expose the overall absurdity of worldly viewpoints professing to be knowledge would gel nicely with Mendelssohn's image of Solomon as an undogmatic sage with substantial skeptical proclivities. Given that the perception of Solomon as a skeptic was not without precedent in the early Enlightenment—as Jakob Friedrich Reimann's anonymous 1704 contribution “An Salomo fuerit Scepticus?” demonstrates—this proposed reading has some points in its favor.<sup>120</sup> Solomon's inner dialogue here culminates, according to Mendelssohn, in an anti-theoretical, fideistic stance, as expressed in Eccl 12:13 (“Revere God and observe His commandments!”), which places the practice of reverently observing God's commandments above futile worldly judgments.<sup>121</sup> Taking *m. 'Abot* 1:17 (“and

<sup>114</sup> Mendelssohn, *JubA* 15.1:40–41.

<sup>115</sup> Mendelssohn, “*Or Li-Netivah*,” 293 (*JubA* 15.1:40–41).

<sup>116</sup> For an insightful explanation of this theme, see Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script*, 132–38.

<sup>117</sup> Mendelssohn, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 147 (*JubA* 14:163).

<sup>118</sup> Mendelssohn, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 147 (*JubA* 14:163).

<sup>119</sup> Sorkin, *Religious Enlightenment*, 41.

<sup>120</sup> See Martin Mulrow, “Eclecticism or Skepticism? A Problem of the Early Enlightenment,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997) 465–77; Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom*, 276–79; Guido Bartolucci, “Jewish Scepticism in Christian Eyes: Jacob F. Reimann and the Transformation of Jewish Philosophy,” *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* 3 (2018) 145–63, at 156–63.

<sup>121</sup> Mendelssohn, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 147 (*JubA* 14:163).



not the expounding [of the Law] is the chief thing but the doing [of it]"<sup>122</sup> as his departure point, he also reads Eccl 12:12 ("The making of many books is without limit. And much study is a wearying of the flesh") along similar lines: "Beyond what is written in books, exercise due care, my son, to listen to the words of the wise and to follow in their paths, for the essence is not scholarship, study, and reading, but deeds."<sup>123</sup> One could conceive of Solomon, following Mendelssohn's presentation, as a forerunner to postbiblical rabbinic Judaism.<sup>124</sup> *Megillat Qohelet* would consequently typify the lively dialogical and undogmatic element of rabbinic tradition. This view would be quite surprising in light of the fact the talmudic sages judge Solomon's conduct in Ecclesiastes harshly precisely because he allows himself to become tangled up in various contradictions.

This dialogical dimension is by no means limited to Mendelssohn's commentary on Ecclesiastes, but extends to his understanding of Judaism as a whole. As Michah Gottlieb has aptly observed, "dialogue is a thread running through Mendelssohn's life and thought from his earliest days to his death."<sup>125</sup> At this point, it may be useful to revisit *Jerusalem's* dialogical perception of the Jewish religion, as it reveals salient parallels to Mendelssohn's construal of Ecclesiastes as also being built on an underlying dialogical structure. Mendelssohn comprehends Judaism as an ancestral form of "living, spiritual instruction," which transcends the theoretical medium of written language. This halakhic-dialogical feature helps Judaism to escape contradictions within continually shifting paradigmatic worldviews and to "keep pace with all changes of time and circumstances."<sup>126</sup> Pious deeds, the so-called "ceremonial acts," are likewise given priority over speculative theorems. To this end, the ceremonial law 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."<sup>127</sup> This living script is not only embedded in the debate culture of the ancient rabbinic sages, but is also embodied by the Hebrew Bible's great paragon of wisdom, King Solomon. And at the core of Judaism's living script lie contradictions, which serve didactically to propel it forward.

<sup>122</sup> The translation is taken from *The Mishnah* (trans. Herbert Danby; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

<sup>123</sup> Mendelssohn, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 217 (*JubA* 14:206). For Mendelssohn's "preference for practical over theoretical knowledge," see the lucid description in Sorkin, *Religious Enlightenment*, 36–37. See also Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism*, 33.

<sup>124</sup> For Mendelssohn's perception of King Solomon, see Sorkin, *Religious Enlightenment*, 40–44.

<sup>125</sup> Michah Gottlieb, *The Jewish Reformation: Bible Translation and Middle-Class German Judaism as Spiritual Enterprise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) 78.

<sup>126</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102 (*JubA* 8:168). For further analysis, see Gottlieb, "Pluralism," 210–11.

<sup>127</sup> Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102–3 (*JubA* 8:169). For further examination of this definition of the ceremonial law, see Gottlieb, "Letter," 321–22; Krochmalnik, "Zeremoniell," 238–85; Elias Sacks, "Law, Ethics, and the Needs of History: Mendelssohn, Krochmal, and Moral Philosophy," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44 (2016) 352–77, at 355–62.

## ■ Conclusion

One of the chief aims of Mendelssohn's Jewish apologetic is to demonstrate that Judaism's essence is not vulnerable to inner contradictions or philosophical doubt. However, these apologetics are not confined by logical bounds. This study has shown that there is a sense in which Mendelssohn understands contradictions as something positive: as a highly dynamic component of Jewish religion and culture that enables it to harmonize with highly variable worldly modes of thought. The characteristic of contradiction is intimately linked to Mendelssohn's understanding of Judaism as a form of living dialogue. We have shown that this basic conceptual feature is deeply embedded in his apologetic disputes with and polemics against Protestant representations of traditional rabbinic literature as being full of self-contradictions and, therefore, nonsensical. Yet Mendelssohn was also of the belief that a vigorous defense of the authoritative status of rabbinic hermeneutics could establish a solid argumentative foundation for true religious diversity and tolerance; a forceful line of defense which seems to have served as a blueprint for later apologetic patterns of reasoning in favor of canonical rabbinic texts. He thus endeavored to counter the Protestant theologians' superficial explanatory models by claiming that contradictions are precisely the defining aspect that makes Judaism so worthwhile. Judaism's partial acceptance of and favorable attitude towards inner-religious disputes which provoke contradictions points to its broad agreement with universal Enlightenment values. However, Mendelssohn's way of approaching these highly contentious accounts of the Jewish religion was partially premised on these Protestant sources themselves and also on their particular programmatic manner of presentation.<sup>128</sup>

These findings generate a more nuanced understanding of Mendelssohn's image of the rabbinic sages and will therefore be able to serve as groundwork for future research on the topic. In this context, it might be worth exploring the possibility that there is an underlying link between Mendelssohn's skeptical attitude towards metaphysical investigation, a distinctive feature of his later systematic thought,<sup>129</sup> and his view of rabbinic tradition. His portrayal of the rabbis depicts them as sophisticated thinkers who ultimately withhold judgment on matters of belief. Conceding that the conflicting viewpoints of two rabbinic authorities are to be

<sup>128</sup> It is nevertheless significant to note that the influence of the German Protestant framework and models of religion on Mendelssohn's understanding of his own Jewish faith should not, as Eliyahu Stern's justifiable reservations make clear (Eliyahu Stern, "Catholic Judaism: The Political Theology of the Nineteenth-Century Russian Jewish Enlightenment," *HTR* 109 (2016) 483–511, at 510–11), be overexaggerated, especially if one accounts for the apologetic context of his *Jerusalem* and the specific charges of his Protestant interlocutors with which it robustly grapples.

<sup>129</sup> For a more extensive analysis of Mendelssohn's skeptical position regarding metaphysical investigation, see Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry*, 21–64; Ze'ev Strauss, "The Ground Floor of Judaism: Scepticism and Certainty in Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*," *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies* 3 (2018) 179–206; Fogel, "Scepticism," 53–67; Arnold Eisen, "Divine Legislation as 'Ceremonial Script': Mendelssohn on the Commandments," *AJS Review* 15 (1990) 243–46.

regarded as legitimate implies, *ipso facto*, that neither of the specific positions can make an exclusive claim to absolute truth. If one observes Mendelssohn's perception of the rabbinic sages against this backdrop, one might also partially grasp it as an effort to integrate the rabbinic tradition with his later skeptical proclivities with respect to metaphysical realms of knowledge, which are essentially unconquerable by human reason.<sup>130</sup>

By unearthing these negative, Protestant accounts of rabbinic literature, which take their cues from Eisenmenger's infamous *Entdecktes Judenthum*, through which Mendelssohn fleshed out his own contrary and unique stance, this article has offered new ways of approaching one of his most significant works, *Jerusalem*, thereby also shedding light on his depiction of rabbinic hermeneutics in his earlier Hebrew commentary on Ecclesiastes. Focusing on Mendelssohn's repeated employment of the talmudic formulation in *b. 'Erub. 13b*, which he adduces to pinpoint ancient Judaism's non-dogmatic, dialogical thrust, a thrust that enabled it not to be troubled by inner contradictions, the examination has uncovered a major apologetic motivation underlying his line of reasoning: he aimed to counter the partisan descriptions of Protestant theologians that depicted contemporary Jewish faith as premised on logically inconsistent rabbinic doctrines. Thus, this article has illustrated that Mendelssohn's form of presenting ancient rabbinic Judaism in *Jerusalem* (as resisting dogmatic teachings and transcending logical contradictions) is not a marginal element exclusive to his later thought but, rather, a common thread running through his works.

Yet Mendelssohn's partial appropriation of these highly critical accounts of the rabbinic worldview is precisely how his response managed to strike a blow against these grossly prejudiced portrayals: the highly discursive spirit of true, ancient Judaism does not simply overcome contradictions, but rather *emerges* from them. Friedrich W. J. Schelling famously claimed that "what drives one to action, even compels one to it, is contradiction alone. For without contradiction, there would be no movement, no life, no advancement, but rather an eternal standstill, a lifeless slumber of all energies."<sup>131</sup> This present engagement with Mendelssohn illustrates that one can safely assume that he reached a similar conclusion with regard to his conception of Judaism.

<sup>130</sup> For the skeptical proclivities of early rabbinic tradition, see Moshe Halbertal, *The Birth of Doubt: Confronting Uncertainty in Early Rabbinic Literature* (trans. Elli Fischer; Brown Judaic Studies 366; Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2020).

<sup>131</sup> Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke. 1811–1815* (14 vols. Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta'scher Verlag, 1856–1861) 8.1:219 [my translation].