In Defense of Orthodoxy: Lessing between Spinoza and Maimonides

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Introduction

In the years following his appointment to become head librarian at the Herzog August Library at Wolfenbüttel, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing increasingly devoted his time to the library's large collection of Patristic texts. Gotthold's correspondence with Karl Lessing reveals a profound disagreement between brothers. Early in 1774, Karl declared that he "could not understand how his enlightened brother Gotthold could have gone back to studying theology instead of writing plays."[1] After it became clear to Karl and Gotthold's circle in Berlin that he meant to defend Lutheran Orthodoxy at the expense of enlightened theology, Karl wrote to Gotthold, this time concerned that his brother had altogether abandoned the cause of enlightened Christianity. Responding to Karl on 20 March 1774, Gotthold asks, "And what else is this, our new and *fashionable* theology, compared to orthodoxy but liquid shit next to unclean water?"[2] Lessing goes on to explain his purpose for publically engaging enlightened theologians, such as Johann Salomo Semler, and Lutheran Orthodoxy. He defends orthodoxy because, even if its belief in the mystery of divine revelation is not rational, its worldview is ultimately more tenable than that of enlightened Christianity, which he understands to comprise an incoherent mixture of biblical language and natural theology.

Henry Chadwick traces the origin of Lessing's later writings on theology to an ulterior motive: "Orthodoxy must be supported in order to make its downfall possible."[3] Lessing saw enlightened Christianity as detrimental to real philosophical thought, but theologians like Semler "were deceptively credible"; orthodoxy "was patently absurd and should be upheld in order to

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[1] Henry Chadwick, introduction to *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 12.
[2] Lessing, *Sämmtliche Schriften,* Bd. 12, 409.
[3] Henry Chadwick, introduction to *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 13.

hasten its destruction."[4] However, his theological essays during this period show a progression away from this intention to weaken orthodoxy towards his use of its belief in revelation as suprarational knowledge to radically critique Enlightenment philosophy. Lessing's simultaneous espousal of the Enlightenment's radical critique of scripture and his attempts to secure a place for pre-Enlightenment Christianity make it somewhat difficult to say with any certainty what Lessing himself believed. Moses Mendelssohn's and Friedrich Jacobi's *Pantheismusstreit* in particular sheds light on the discrepancy between Lessing's personal beliefs and his acknowledgement of orthodoxy as a justified world-view. In addressing Jacobi's charge that Lessing had professed a belief in Spinozism, Mendelssohn suggests a problem that Lessing's interpreters must inevitably face. Even if Lessing *did* subscribe to Spinoza's metaphysics and his critique of religion, Mendelssohn warns us that, "throughout his life Lessing preferred to hear an incorrect doctrine defended skillfully rather than hear a truth defended with shallow reasoning."[5] Mendelssohn accepted Lessing's confession of Spinozism as sincere, but responded to Jacobi by saying that Lessing's "refined" Spinozism was less extreme than the master ironist led Jacobi to believe.[6]

However, Mendelssohn's belief that Lessing "remained committed to the moderate [religious] enlightenment" is tenuous at best, especially if we consider some of the theological fragments published by Karl Lessing in 1794.[7] Short essays, such as "On the Origin of Revealed Religion" and "On the Reality of Things outside of God" substantiate Jacobi's claim that, towards the end of his life, "Lessing had moved away from Mendelssohn's moderate

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Gottlieb, *Faith and Freedom*, 79.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 60.

enlightenment and had become a Spinozist."[8] Yet Mendelssohn's discernment of the ironical quality in Lessing's writings (and conversations) asks us to consider how Lessing's analytic style informs our understanding of his philosophical position. I will argue that, upon closer inspection of Lessing's deployment of dialogue in his theological writings, Lessing's defense of Lutheran Orthodoxy as a viable stance speaks to a philosophy of *open-mindedness*, in which the philosopher's disclosure of the limits of rational thought stands on equal footing with his systematic grasp of reality.

Lessing's unique contribution to Spinoza's reception in Germany is not a *defense* of Spinozism against Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy or Protestant theology. Instead, Lessing seeks out the weaknesses in Spinoza's system. "The Christianity of Reason" demonstrates Lessing's ability to subvert theology by articulating "*Deus sive Natura*" in an Athanasian vocabulary, but many of the theological texts that Lessing composed later in life, such as *The Education of the Human Race* (*EHR*) and *A Rejoinder* (*AR*), reflect his evaluation of the most basic assumptions underlying Spinoza's philosophy. As Jonathan Israel argues in his introduction to his and Michael Silverthorne's translation of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (*TTP*), *The Ethics* is a book directed at the philosopher, he who has already predetermined that rational thought rests on the rejection of scripture's authority. On the other hand, *TTP* "mostly avoids employing philosophical arguments"; it is a "rare and interesting example of what we might call 'practical' philosophy."[9] Spinoza directs his anonymously published treatise to both the would-be philosopher and the pious, but tolerant individual. The would-be philosopher doubts, but has not yet passed judgment on scripture; the pious man may reject Spinoza's critique of the Bible, but nevertheless appreciates his plea for religious tolerance. While *The Ethics* represents Spinoza's

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[8] Ibid., 61.
[9] Jonathan Israel, introduction to *Theological-Political Treatise* by Benedict de Spinoza, vii-ix.

systematic philosophy, his metaphysical edifice hinges on the critique of revealed religion that we see in *TTP*. Lessing's later theological writings, then, should be read as a rigorous cross-examination of Spinoza's repudiation of the Bible's authority. Lessing must provide stronger arguments *in favor of* scripture and religious tradition in order fully assess Spinozism's capacity to explain the world and man's place in it.

What Lessing scholars such as Chadwick and Toshimasa Yasukata have neglected is the influence of Moses Maimonides on Lessing's approach to religion. Though there are only scattered sources indicating that Lessing read Maimonides, there are many stylistic and thematic similarities between Lessing's work and that of Maimonides, such as dissimulation by the inclusion many voices into their texts and interest in the possibility of strictly rational exegesis. Maimonides is likewise of great interest to Lessing's critique of Spinoza because, in *TTP*, Spinoza references Maimonides more than any other individual philosopher. Maimonides' presence at the most important moments of *TTP* suggests that Spinoza himself understood his critique of the Bible to stand or fall on his ability to refute Maimonides. However, in order for Lessing to once again raise the partition that separates theology from philosophy, he must Judaize his Lutheran context. *EHR* and *Nathan the Wise* exemplify Lessing's inversion of Christianity, his elevation of moral law above dogma. By transposing Judaism's stress on outward conduct onto the Lutheran Church's dogmatic disputes Lessing points us toward the realization of a predominantly Christian community that respects freedom of thought and tolerates those who do not accept the majority religion. Yet I will argue that Maimonides' influence on Lessing allows him to go beyond Spinoza. Instead of simply endorsing a private continuance of revealed religion for practical ends, as Spinoza does, Lessing urges us to remain open to the *possibility* of revelation which speaks to truths beyond the reach of human reason.

In *AR*, Lessing dissuades "the free and open-minded reader" (*der freye öffene Leser*) from an all-too-hasty dismissal of the historical validity of scripture.[10] He believes this "free and open-minded person" (*freye öffene Kopf*) will recognize the inconclusiveness of most arguments against revealed religion on historical grounds because he understands "human limitations" that many critics of revelation assume away to bolster their argument.[11] While many early readers of Lessing's theological essays, such as Mendelssohn and Hegel, understand Lessing as a historicist, Kierkegaard and Hermann Cohen initiated a trend among 19th and 20th century commentators who interpret Lessing as morally opposed to dogmatism and skeptical of historical progress. Though Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* presents revealed religion in much the same way that Lessing does in *EHR*, Kierkegaard detects irony and sarcasm in Lessing's style, which remains wholly foreign to Hegel's systematic exposition of humanity's path to Absolute Knowing.

Students and admirers of Kierkegaard and Cohen, such as Ernst Cassirer, Karl Barth, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Leo Strauss, further developed this reading of Lessing as, above all, a free and open mind. Cassirer concludes *The Philosophy of Enlightenment* with a brief description of the qualities that make Lessing stand out among the many noteworthy 18th century German and Swiss aestheticians. "The decisive aspect of Lessing's achievement does not lie in the matter of his concepts themselves," for these, says Cassirer, he mostly borrowed from his predecessors.[12] Rather, "[i]nstead of remaining mere end products," these concepts "again become original creative forces and directly moving impulses."[13] Just as Goethe remarked that Herder surpassed other historians in his capacity to "transform the rubbish of history into a living

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[10] Lessing, 100?
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*, 358.
[13] Ibid.

plant," Lessing utilizes older aesthetic concepts in order to remove his inquiries from the "region of servile observation to the open spaces of thought."[14] Lessing may have lacked conceptual ingenuity, but his spirited style of critique allows the greatest possible room for his subject to manifest itself as it truly is, whether we look to his discourse on classical ideas of artistic representation in *Laocoön* or to his later investigation of biblical religion**.**

1777 *Beyträge zur Litteratur und Geschichte* and Maimonides in Early Modern Europe

The Education of the Human Race (*EHR*) and *A Rejoinder* (*AR*), besides containing several of the exact same statements, also have a common progenitor in the 1777 *Beyträge zur Litteratur und Geschicte*. Part of a series of texts Lessing published from the ducal library in Wolfenbüttel, the volume released in 1777 not only contained an early edition of *EHR*, but also Lessing's selections from Hermann Samuel Reimarus' unpublished works, *Fragments of an Unnamed Author*. Lessing originally included the first fifty-three theses of *EHR* within his rebuttal of Reimarus in the 1777 *Beyträge*. Quick on the heels of the 1777 *Fragments*, the Lutheran theologian, Johann Heinrich Reß, released an anonymous response to Reimarus' critique of the Bible entitled *Die Auferstehehungsgeschichte Jesu Christi*, with a subtitle that directly implicated Lessing.[15] Because he and Reß used the same publisher, Lessing "quickly discovered the author's identity," and, in turn, composed *AR*.[16]

And although Lessing claimed authorship of the *Counter-Propositions* published alongside the *Fragments*, he appended *EHR* to his fourth counter-proposition, attributing it to

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[14] Ibid, 360.
[15] "…defended against some new objections in the fourth *Contributions to Literature and History* from the ducal library at Wolfenbüttel."
[16] Hugh Barr Nisbet, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing,* 550.

another anonymous author who is likewise critical of Reimarus. In both cases, Lessing folds fictional elements into his theological polemics. Reimarus, the "Unnamed," and Lessing are confronted with the presence of the imaginary Author of *EHR*. In *AR*, Lessing distills the arguments presented in the works of Reimarus and Reß into *dramatis personae*: the Fragmentist and the Neighbor. In my analysis, I wish to respect Lessing's choice to structure the 1777 *Beyträge*, *AR*, and the 1780 edition of *EHR* as fictional dialogues that derive their characters from Lessing's reading of theological polemics, without asserting that their interlocutors are identical to the men who inspired them. Therefore, I will refer to speaker in *EHR* as the Author in order to distinguish between Lessing's voice in the counter propositions and the ideas expressed in *EHR*. Approaching Lessing's theological writings in this manner will help us to separate Lessing's personal beliefs from the array of voices he introduces into his inquiry.

While I believe the affinities between Maimonides' and Lessing's prudential attitudes towards revealed religion give substance to the claim that Lessing was familiar with Maimonides' work, there is scant but compelling textual evidence of Lessing's exposure to Maimonidean philosophy. The only direct reference to Maimonides in all of Lessing's works appears in the *Young Scholar*, where the titular character identifies *Mishneh Torah* as "ben Maimon's *Yad Hazaqah*."[17] However, the philosophers who exerted the most influence on Lessing—Spinoza, Leibniz, and Reimarus—each cite Maimonides in their major works. Spinoza quotes a long section from *Guide* II.25 in *TTP* in Hebrew and provides his own Latin translation.[18] Lessing's defense of Christian orthodoxy in *AR* appears to be completely appropriated from this passage, in which Maimonides explains his reasons for favoring Judaism over Aristotelianism. In *Theodicy*, a book that Lessing held in high esteem, Leibniz quotes

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[17] Lessing, *Sämmtliche Schriften*, 282.
[18] Maimonides, in *TTP* by Spinoza, 113.

Maimonides' discussion of good and evil in relation to God and humankind.[19] . Reimarus also cites *Mishneh Torah* multiple times in his essay, "On the Toleration of Deists," the first of *The Fragments of an Unnamed Author* that Lessing published in 1774.[20] Though I will compare Lessing's work with relevant passages from the *Guide* and *Mishneh Torah*, I will confine most of my analysis to Spinoza's citations of Maimonides in *TTP*, the excerpts from the *Guide* of which we can be certain that Lessing read.

The 1777 Edition of *The Education of the Human Race* (§§1-53)

In both the 1777 and 1780 edition of *EHR*, the Author recognizes the coming together Israelite religious science and Persian philosophy to be the first "reciprocal influence" of revelation and reason.[21] The idea that revelation and reason can work in tandem with one another seems to go against Spinoza's belief that "Scripture leaves reason absolutely free and has nothing at all in common with philosophy, but that each of them stands on its own separate footing."[22] In his personal correspondence with his brother Karl, Lessing likewise expresses that philosophy and theology should remain separate by dint of the fact that each science proceeds from antithetical starting points. "One could cope," writes Lessing, "with orthodoxy, thank God; a dividing wall had been erected between orthodoxy and philosophy, behind which each [discipline] could go its own way without hindering the other."[23] Lessing understands the conflict between the enlightened Neologists and Lutheran Orthodoxy to have arisen from certain thinkers having travelled underneath the partition that separates philosophy and theology "under the pretext of making us rational Christians"; instead, such disregard for the dividing wall merely

[19] G. W. von Leibniz, *Die Hauptwerke*, 275-76.
[20] Reimarus, "Von Duldung der Deisten" in *Fragmente des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungennante*, 191.
[21] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 89.
[22] Spinoza, *TTP* IX (Praef. 10) in *Opera v. 3*.
[23] Lessing, 2 February 1774 (to Karl Lessing) in *Briefe*.

"makes us highly irrational philosophers."[24] Here, Lessing suggests that there is an ineradicable difference between philosophy and theology: the disparity between self-sufficient, *human* reason and obedience to God's word.

Yet upon introducing this reciprocal influence of reason and revelation, the Author adds a vague disclaimer. The reciprocal influence that the Israelite scholars and the Persian philosophers exerted upon one another is "so far…from being unbecoming to the author of them both, that without it either of them would have been useless."[25] The Author's belief that theology and philosophy must take heed of each other is reflected in Lessing's metaphor of the dividing wall. Rather than portraying philosophy and theology as totally independent bodies of knowledge, Lessing describes the two as residing in the same room with a diving wall standing in the middle. Although a wall separates theology and philosophy, Lessing's placement of both in a shared space that is bisected by a partition instead of a complete wall indicates that he sees the reciprocal influence of reason and revelation as *necessary*, despite the ineradicable differences between the two.

Certain trends in 18th century German theology, especially Semler's Neology, confirmed for Lessing Spinoza's fear that rational interpretations of scripture that do not take seriously the literal meaning of the text and transpose outside ideas onto it will allow religious authorities "to perpetrate and justify every absurd or malicious thing that human perversity can dream up, without impugning on the authority of Scripture."[26] Lessing voices the same unease to Karl when he decries Neology's attempts to rationalize Christianity as "a patchwork of bunglers and half-philosophers" who exert "much more influence on reason and philosophy" than had Lutheran

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[24] Ibid.
[25] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 89.
[26] Spinoza, *TTP*, 35.

Orthodoxy.[27] Because the Neologists often speak of Christian doctrine as if it is just as self-evident to the rational man as any logical proof, Lessing sees in Neology the potential for intolerance, perhaps more so than in Lutheran Orthodoxy. In his 20 March 1777 letter to his brother, Lessing again explains his preference for orthodoxy over Christian rationalism:

> And do you still hold it against me that I would rather devote my time to theology?—And if at the end of the day theology pays me just as much as theater—so be it! And I would not complain about it anymore since, at bottom, it is certainly true that my theological—as *you* wish to call it—gossip-mongering or troublemaking has more to do with sound human understanding than with theology; and I only prefer the old orthodoxy (at bottom, tolerant) to the new (at bottom, intolerant) because the old is openly in conflict with human understanding, while the new would rather dupe you.[28]

Lessing's correspondence with Karl conveys the two concerns that stand at the heart of Lessing's philosophical project. With regards to the traditionalist-rationalist disputes in German Protestantism, Lessing defends revealed religion insofar as it is practicable and tolerant, as opposed to the potential for the intolerance of non-believers among the rationalist. However, the 20 March letter likewise offers a *theoretical* basis for Lessing's defense of revealed religion. Lessing admires the candidness of the old orthodoxy, its outright embrace of supernaturalism, the idea that certain details stand beyond the reach of human reason. For Lessing, supernaturalism remains a significant challenge to philosophy's emphasis on self-sufficient reason that we cannot assume away. In fact, Lessing admits to Karl that he knows "of nothing else in the world on which human sagacity has more often manifested and practiced itself than on orthodoxy."[29] His probing of Christian theology stems not only from practical concerns, but also from his curiosity surrounding the choice on the part of many great authors to devote themselves to the Christian faith.

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[27] Lessing, 2 February 1774 (to Karl Lessing) in *Sämmtliche Schriften Bd. 14: Briefe von Lessing*, 215.
[28] Lessing, 20 March 1777 (to Karl Lessing) in *Sämmtliche Schriften Bd. 14: Briefe von Lessing*, 482.
[29] Lessing, 2 Feb. 1774 (to Karl Lessing) in *Briefe von Lessing*, 215.

While, on the surface, *EHR* responds to specific threads in the Reimarus fragments, the text could be read as a reaction to Spinoza's much more radical critique of revealed religion. In particular, the Author's belief that "revelation gives nothing to the human race which human reason could not arrive at on its own."[30] This idea is similar to Spinoza's treatment of revelation in that it rejects the notion that scripture taps into a source of knowledge that reason cannot access. Although the Author eschews the supernaturalist approach to revelation, we can also interpret his statement as a challenge to Spinoza. Spinoza's prophetology borrows many of its terms from Maimonides' study of prophecy in the *Guide*. But whereas Maimonides argues that the imagination assists the rational faculty by allowing the prophet to communicate rational truths to a varied audience with beauty and precision, Spinoza determines that prophetic writing suffers from an excess of imagination. In *TTP*, Spinoza concludes that, while the imaginative faculties of the biblical prophets allow them to describe a moral feeling, scripture has no merit as body of scientific proof, even in questions of ethics.

The assessment of Spinoza that Lessing's conducts in *EHR* follows an interesting path: in each case that the Author presents a view that runs counter to Spinoza's critique of religion, the Author almost invariably resuscitates these arguments from Spinoza's direct citations of Maimonides. Spinoza always appears to emerge the victor whenever he addresses Maimonides' methods of scriptural interpretation, but since he refers to Maimonides by name more than any other philosopher, it is clear that Spinoza understands the *TTP* to depend on his ability to refute his predecessor. *EHR* questions Spinoza's preliminary remark that a literal reading of the prophetic books demonstrates that Maimonides' prophetology, from which "it follows that the word 'prophecy' could be applied to natural knowledge," is false. Rather, because Spinoza's

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[30] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 83.

literal approach to the prophets shows that "they are always eager to discover uncommon things, things that are strange and alien to their own nature," when the prophets "speak of prophetic knowledge, they mean to exclude natural knowledge."[31] Here, Spinoza correctly identifies the supernaturalist understanding of prophecy that inheres within revealed religion, against Maimonides' understanding of prophecy as the transmission of rational truths via imaginative language. Spinoza thus appears to confront revealed religion on its own terms. Yet Spinoza dismisses revelation, not only as scientifically inconclusive, but also as *impossible* precisely because it pretends to the supernatural, to the miraculous.

In his critique of miracles, Spinoza states that we cannot "know God and his existence and providence from miracles, the former being much better inferred from the fixed and unalterable order of nature." If we understand a miracle to be "a phenomenon which surpasses, or is thought to surpass, human understanding," it then follows that, because a miracle "is conceived to destroy or interrupt the order of nature," such an event cannot give us knowledge of God and "would take away the knowledge that we naturally have" of God by presenting us with an exception from natural law.[32] Spinoza's critique of miracles may speak to the unscientific aspect of the Bible, namely that it is difficult or impossible to construct an exhaustive account of reality if one must reconcile a fixed order with extraordinary events, but he provides no conclusive proof that the natural order necessarily excludes miracles. And though prophecy differs from creation *ex nihilo* or the parting of Red Sea, that there exists knowledge that we cannot glean from careful observation of a pre-set order and that a personal God who stands apart from such an order *reveals* this knowledge to human beings shows us that revelation is itself miraculous. Therefore, if Spinoza denies the possibility of miracles in the physical sense,

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[31] Spinoza, *TTP*, 13
[32] Ibid., 86

he must likewise discount the miracle of prophecy, portraying it instead as a psychical aberration that we can explain from the standpoint of a fixed order.

At first, Lessing's Author suggests that prophecy, though it gives to humankind nothing that it could not attain through reason, is still miraculous. Revelation does not give us knowledge outside the scope of reason, but rather gives us this knowledge more quickly, bypassing the process of reasoning through a problem ourselves. Nevertheless, later passages in *EHR* insinuate that miracles are not possible and that divine revelation is a political myth meant to underwrite prophetic statements. In this way, the Author characterizes revelation as inherently political. Because God "neither could, nor would, reveal himself any more to *each* individual man, he selected an individual people for his special education."[33] The Author imagines that, in Egypt, the ruling class not only prevented the enslaved Hebrews from worshiping the Egyptian gods, but also sought to weaken the Hebrews' awareness of themselves as a nation by forbidding them from worshiping the "God of their fathers."[34] In order for the Hebrews to reclaim their monotheistic religion, the tenets of which doubled as a political constitution, Moses needed to speak of the one God as personally invested in the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses' authority as a prophet relied on this perceived intimacy between God and the enslaved Israel.

In his treatment of the Exodus, the Author treats miracles as if they are possible. Moreover, such miracles constitute a necessary sanction of the Mosaic Covenant. Thus, the miracle of the Pentateuch is, politically speaking, bound up with the parting of the Red Sea and manna. The Author argues that these physical miracles were necessary precursors to true monotheism. Without these miracles by which God led the Hebrews out of Egypt and settled

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[33] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 83 (§8)
[34] Ibid.

them in Canaan, this people could not have come to the conclusion that its God was mightier than all other gods. The use of miracles to establish the one God's preeminence among foreign deities precedes the idea that there is but one God who possesses all the powers previously attributed to many.

The Author's account of Israelite scholarship during the Babylonian captivity begins to suggest that miracles played a greater role in solidifying Israel's perceived relationship to the one God than they did in demonstrating Moses' prophetic authority to his contemporaries. According to the Author, "miracles and prophecies had hitherto made so weak and fleeting an impression" upon the Israelites because they lacked a firm concept of the one God; even if God had performed miracles on their behalf, the belief in many gods still prevalent among the Israelites enabled them to attribute these miracles to a variety of divine forces. Miracles, then, had a lesser impact on the early Israelites' education in monotheism because the idea that there were many gods apart from *their* God impeded their learning that "to do miracles and predict the future belonged only to God."[35] Conversely, the Israelites who absorbed radical, *philosophical* monotheism in Babylon could prove God's loyalty to Israel by attributing traditional accounts of miracles (which they themselves had not witnessed directly) to the one God, who was necessarily the only being capable of such actions. In this sense, the history of miraculous events—even if these accounts have no basis in fact—played a greater role in the evolution of monotheism, and the self-awareness of the Jewish people after the Babylonian captivity than they did in uniting the Hebrews during the Exodus. On the other hand, even if scriptural testaments to miracles are noble lies, a rational belief that there is but one God, coupled with the

[35] Ibid.

notion that the sole being capable of performing miracles did so on behalf of this specific people, sent a strong political-theological message.

In arguing that miracles have a greater impact on adherents of radical monotheism, Lessing's Author tacitly implies that the miracles recorded in the Old Testament—including the supernatural revelation of the Pentateuch—are fictions created in order to give the impression that the one God ordained both Israel and its Law. In the 1777 edition of *EHR*, §§36-41 represent a turning point in the Author's views on miracles. Although he does not, like Spinoza, explicitly reject the possibility of miracles, his assertion that the biblical descriptions of miracles could only have made an impression on the Israelites after they had absorbed extra-biblical ideas of monotheism calls the historicity of scripture into question. Yet the Author of *EHR* disagrees with Spinoza as to the scripture's rational content. Spinoza's suggestion that we interpret the Bible literally puts scripture at odds with the knowledge gained through observation of the natural world. Miracles and the claim of divine authorship serve only to authorize the Bible's ethical content by appealing to the imagination, rather than to reason. And while Lessing's Author does not go so far as to suggest that we read the Bible on traditional terms, he claims that scripture bears witness to scholarly tradition that is both imaginative *and* rational. In this way, the Author seeks to defend the Bible in the eyes of those who reject the possibility of miracles.

EHR portrays biblical literature as attempting to balance rational speculation and the scholar's responsibility to the community that supports him. Such a scholar not only thinks and writes within the frame of his community's language and religious texts, but also demonstrates his awareness of the social structure that affords him the leisure to study. This view of scripture is consistent with Maimonides' account of prophecy in the *Guide*, as well as in *Mishneh Torah* (*Yesodei ha-Torah*). Moreover, both the Author and Maimonides characterize God's revelation

to Moses and the miracles that accompanied it as distinct from all other prophecy, closed to scrutiny.[36] Maimonides' rational prophetology and the Author's implication that scriptural records of miracles are necessary fictions suggest that scripture comprises a combination of rational laws and the national myths that underwrite these laws. I believe that the Author's comparison of the Bible to a primer alludes to Maimonides' portrayal of revelation (and relevant commentary) as a source of moral and intellectual edification. Contrary to Spinoza's opinion that our inability to accept those principles of revealed religion that contradict human reason extricates us from that tradition altogether, Lessing's Author follows Maimonides' lead by interpreting the Bible as a repository of rational knowledge cloaked in allegory and symbolism.

EHR expresses a view of prophecy and its transmission that is remarkably similar to that of Maimonides. The philosopher's division of the Jewish prophets into two distinct classes obscures the parallels between Maimonides' and Lessing's approach toward revealed religion. Although Maimonides puts forward many ways to measure the quality of a given prophecy, we should note the most significant caveat to his prophetology: just as we may only ascribe a certain quality to God by way of analogy, we cannot describe Moses with the same terms that we use to speak of all other prophets, unless we use these terms analogously.[37] In the *Guide*, Maimonides constantly reminds us that while the majority of prophets remains open to critique, the miraculous revelation of the Torah to Moses is fundamentally different. Maimonides affirms that the Torah is both qualitatively and practically different from other prophetic sources. All prophecy is "an emanation sent forth by the Divine Being through the medium of the Active Intellect, in the first instance to man's rational faculty, and then to his imaginative faculty"; but

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[36] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 86.
[37] Maimonides, *Guide*, 224.

Moses remains the sole prophet that "the Lord knew face to face."[38] All prophets after Moses performed "the function of warning the people and exhorting them to keep the Law of Moses"; but Maimonides holds that "there has never been, nor will there ever be, any other divine Law but that of Moses."[39]

Yet despite the monolithic stature that Maimonides ascribes to the Law of Moses, there are some subtle indications in the *Guide* that, as Lessing's Author argues in *EHR*, Israelite theology added to the Torah over time. Maimonides accomplishes this by aligning the prophets with philosophical speculation as much as possible. In the *Guide*, Maimonides distinguishes between three theories of the prophetic calling. The first is the most common and is present in many religious traditions: prophecy is God's gift and hence requires no moral or intellectual preparation on the part of the prophet. Although Maimonides admits that those of his coreligionists who subscribe to this theory still maintain that a prophet must be "morally good" in order for God to inspire him, he rejects this theory because it assumes that it makes "no difference" to God whether the prophet "be wise or stupid, old or young."[40] Maimonides worries that, by ignoring the intellectual capacity of the prophets, we might limit scripture's influence to ethical matters. In so doing, we would overlook the Bible's rational propositions concerning God's being and idolatry.

EHR reflects Lessing's concerns regarding Spinoza's critique of the Bible in *TTP*. His 1777 commentary on the Reimarus *Fragments* and *EHR* indicate his resistance to Spinoza's moral-imaginative prophetology, which closely resembles the vulgar understanding of prophecy that Maimonides discusses in the *Guide*. Spinoza's project of dissociating theology from

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[38] Ibid.; KJV Deut. 34:10.
[39] Ibid., 231.
[40] Maimonides, *Guide*, 219.

philosophy depends on his ability to show that prophetic statements draw exclusively upon the imagination and moral sentiments. He favors this vulgar prophetology, in which God inspires an individual who is morally good while remaining indifferent to this person's intellectual capacity, because it disqualifies prophecy as admissible insight with regards to philosophical and scientific inquiry.[41]

Maimonides and Lessing's Author wish to avoid the ascription of prophecy entirely to the supernatural. The prophets may speculate about ethics and metaphysics under assumptions attained through supernatural revelation, rather than the unaided reason, but this difference in prior knowledge does not entail that prophecy *qua* prophecy excludes rational argument. Nevertheless, Maimonides and Lessing likewise wish to preserve the supernatural aspect of prophecy, however minimal. Maimonides attributes the total equation of reason and prophecy to the philosophers. For them, "prophecy is a certain faculty of man in a state of perfection, which can only be obtained by study."[42] The prophet does not need to receive divine inspiration; barring a "defective constitution" or "some other external cause," anyone can become a prophet provided that he perfects his moral, rational, and imaginative faculties.[43]

Although Maimonides and Lessing's Author share a fairly naturalistic view of prophecy, they persist in maintaining a sense of the uniqueness of Israel's prophetic vocation. Despite his ambivalence toward miracles, Lessing's Author betrays this attention to Israel's historical calling by using *biblical* history as the structure of *EHR*. Humanity turns away from its Adamic relationship to God (§§6-7), Abraham guides the Hebrews away from idolatry (§9), Moses liberates the Hebrews from bondage and revives their prophetic vocation (§§11-14), the exilic

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[41] Spinoza, *TTP*, 42: "This discussion of prophets and prophecy is highly relevant to the purpose which I have in view, namely to separate philosophy from theology."
[42] Maimonides, *Guide*, 219.
[43] Ibid.

prophets call Israel back to the Law of Moses, ushering in an age of enlightenment (§§35-37), and this enlightened Judaism becomes legalistic, warranting a prophetic renewal in Jesus of Nazareth (§§51-53). The 1777 edition of *EHR* ends on a Christocentric note, but the structure of the essay asks us to look at prophecy as a national vocation specific to Israel. The Author concedes that "the other nations of the earth had gone on by the light of reason," a possible allusion to the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and the Greeks. But though these nations "seemed to be ahead of the chosen people even in the knowledge of God," their advances "prove nothing against revelation."[44] The Author assures us that, even if Israel "is late in overtaking many a more happily placed child of nature," its knowledge will surpass that of all other nations and "thenceforth can never be overtaken again."[45]

The Author's insistence that true prophecy remains specific to Israel makes sense when read alongside the prophetology that Maimonides associates with the Jewish tradition. In the *Guide*, Maimonides rejects outright the common understanding of prophecy whereby God inspires moral individuals without considering their intellectual abilities. Instead, Maimonides argues that Judaism's view of prophecy (except in the case of Moses) lies closer to that of the philosophers. While morality, reason, and imagination remain necessary for someone to prophesy, God may ultimately prevent an individual from receiving true revelation, though he has prepared himself in other respects. At first, God's negative intervention appears to be a strange addendum to Maimonides' otherwise rationalist prophetology. However, that God inhibits this otherwise *natural* capacity in man allows Maimonides to assert the Jewish people as the sole custodian of prophetic insight. God's limitation of prophecy to the people shaped by the

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[44] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 85.
[45] Ibid.

Law of Moses shows that the possession of and search for truth derive from good laws, good education.

The prophets' responsibility to their community comes across in Maimonides' and the Author's characterization of the Mosaic Law as the unquestionable foundation of Judaism. Lessing attached the 1777 edition of *EHR* to his response to the "Fourth Proposition" in *Fragments of an Unnamed Author*. Entitled "That the books of the O. T. were not written in order to reveal a religion," the Fragmentist argues against the validity of the Pentateuch from a Christian soteriological perspective. Because the Fragmentist narrowly defines "religion" as "a beatific religion,"[46] the Pentateuch and much of the Hebrew Bible are disqualified due to the lack of a clear doctrine regarding the immortality of the soul.[47] The Fragmentist thus pronounces the Mosaic Law "bad and wicked," which "can hardly hold its own as the semblance of a religion."[48] While *EHR* also addresses Spinoza's more radical critique of the Bible, the flow of the argument engages the Fragmentist's analysis of specific biblical passages that support his thesis that portrays the Law of Moses as both rationally deficient and not divinely inspired. Lessing's Author counters the Fragmentist by offering an account of the Mosaic Law that allows us to understand its content as divine *and* rational, even if it is not explicitly beatific. The Fragmentist disparages the Mosaic Law by demonstrating the lack of scriptural evidence supporting the existence of a doctrine of immortality before the advent of Christianity. His definition of religion, which excludes all but the beatific, appears to praise Christianity. However, because Christian orthodoxy understood its existence to be continuous with the Mosaic Law and the prophets, the Fragmentist's use of Christian soteriological terms against the Mosaic Law

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[46] Reimarus, *Fragmente des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannte*, 433: "*eine seligmachende Religion*."
[47] Reimarus, *Fragmente des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten*, 315.
[48] Ibid.

likewise puts Christianity on bad footing. In the eyes of the Fragmentist, Christianity, insofar as it contains a doctrine of the immortality of the soul, fulfills the minimal requirements of a "religion." However, because Christianity portrays itself as *the* successor to the Mosaic Law, it must ultimately uphold the Pentateuch as divinely revealed, even if it contains no trace of the beatific.

The path of the Fragmentist's argument suggests that neither Moses nor the person of Christ renders the Christian religion beatific, but rather that philosophical speculation on the part of post-exilic Jews and early Christians gave way to a Judaism with a strong doctrine of immortality. Thus, those sources that are traditionally understood to be divine revelation, rather than help post-exilic Judaism from attaining a belief in the immortality of the soul, actually hinder it from doing so. Moreover, the prevalence of doctrines of immortality in the belief systems of various ancient peoples, such as the Persians, Chaldeans, and Greeks, prompts the Fragmentist to dub the Mosaic covenant "bad and wicked"[49]; the Pentateuch caused ancient Israel to struggle in order to arrive at knowledge which was already so commonplace to its contemporaries.

Only after we unearth the dialogic elements of the 1777 *Beyträge* can we begin to understand the thrust of *EHR*. The first fifty-three theses of *EHR* must be read in the context of Lessing's presentation and criticism of the fourth fragment. The Author counters the Fragmentist's argument that the Pentateuch is neither beatific nor rational by portraying revelation as educational, capable of preparing the Israelites to arrive at an explicit doctrine of the immortality of the soul at a later time. The Author's metaphor, which characterizes revelation as the progressive education of a single people that will yield learned men for the purpose of

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[49] Ibid.

instructing the remainder of the human race, allows him to defend the Pentateuch's beatific inclination without doing violence to scripture. Coupled with his belief that "revelation gives nothing to the human race which human reason could not arrive at on its own," the Author counters by suggesting that the Fragmentist has undervalued the Pentateuch's *political* qualities.[50] The Fragmentist holds that both religious and secular law require a doctrine of punishment and reward in the hereafter in order to bestow a sense of rational self-interest upon those who are subject to the law. However, the Author argues that to introduce immortality to the Israelites too early in their education would have undermined the ethical attitude which Moses sought establish through the Law.

In education, it is "not a matter of indifference in what order the powers of a man are developed…so also God had to maintain a certain order and a certain measure in his revelation."[51] The Author thus insists that we cannot separate doctrines, such as that of immortality, or specific qualities of revealed religion, such as the beatific, from their moral aim. Although the Author outwardly agrees with the Fragmentist that rational speculation leads to knowledge of the soul's immortality, the human race must prepare itself both ethically and politically to grasp this knowledge and understand its consequences in this world and the next. For the Author, belief in the soul's immortality is useless if it hinders the ethical development of those who share this belief. God wished to give to the Israelites "no other law than one through obedience to which they might hope to be happy, or through disobedience to which they must fear to be unhappy.[52] To disclose immortality to the Israelites before they had cultivated a proper sense of obedience to God's Law would have produced "the same fault in the divine rule as is

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[50] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 83.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid., 84.

committed by the vain schoolmaster who chooses to hurry his pupil too rapidly and boast of his progress."[53] The Author sees the goal of the Mosaic Law as publication of the Law's authority as *the Law of God*.

The Author uses an argument similar to Warburton's, though rephrasing it in terms of education. That Moses' Law "extended only to this life," and that he adapted the divine rule to "the knowledge, capacities, [and] inclinations of the *then* existing Israelitish people," do not discredit Moses as a prophet if we understand revelation as progressive education, "education which has come, and is still coming."[54] The Author identifies a key flaw in Warburton's account: in his ambition to prove the divinity of the Mosaic covenant, he puts forward a theological explanation that goes beyond the text of the Pentateuch. Rather than cast doubt on the Deist claim that the Pentateuch's lack of a doctrine of immortality discredits the divinity of Moses' mission, Warburton suggests that the utter absence of such a doctrine in the Pentateuch, conversely, *proves* its divinity, as this dearth distinguishes the Israelite religion from its pagan contemporaries. Warburton compensates for this missing doctrine of immortality, "without which no state can subsist," by propounding a "miraculous system continued in an unbroken line from Moses to Christ, according to which God had made every individual Jew just as happy or unhappy as his obedience or disobedience to the law deserved."[55]

The Author rejects Warburton's hypothesis, not on the grounds of its unlikelihood (though he expresses his doubts about this), but rather in terms of the efficacy of this "miraculous system" in improving the ethical character of the Israelites. In order to show the

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[53] Ibid., 85.
[54] Ibid., 83 & 86.
[55] Ibid., 86.

deficiency of Warburton's theory, the Author employs a metaphor in which he compares the Pentateuch to a primer:

> A primer for children may fairly pass over in silence this or that important piece of the science or art which it expounds, when the teacher considers that it is not yet suitable for the capabilities of the children for whom he is writing. But it must contain absolutely nothing which bars the way to knowledge which is held back, or which misleads the child away from it.[56]

This miraculous system, the Author contends, would have led the Israelites astray, preventing them from thinking of a potential life beyond this one. If God had employed this miraculous disbursement of reward and punishment based on each individual Israelite's commitment to the Law, the Israelites would have had no reason to imagine an afterlife in which the obedient are rewarded, and the sinful punished. Moreover, miraculous justice for every Israelite would have inhibited Israel's moral education by actively removing the student's curiosity about immortality—that which the Author believes to be the Pentateuch's doctrinal goal—but also would have prevented Israel from recognizing its humanity.

In place of Warburton's "continuous miracle" of perfect distributive justice for all Jews, Lessing's Author puts forward the edification of Israelites as a possible reason for the lack of a doctrine of immortality in the Pentateuch. The Author agrees with the Fragmentist that a doctrine of immortality is wanting, but he argues that belief in personal immortality characterized by one's actions in this world ultimately leads to an instrumental adherence to the Law. If Moses had presented a doctrine of immortality to the Israelites alongside the Law, the Author believes that many would only observe the Law out of self-interest. For the Author, the goal of the Law of Moses is the cultivation of "heroic obedience":

> Let us acknowledge that it is a heroic obedience to obey the laws of God simply because they are God's laws, and not because he has promised to reward those

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[56] Ibid., 87.

> who obey them now and hereafter; to obey them even though there be an entire despair of future recompense, and uncertainty respecting a temporal one.[57]

The education of the human race begins, not with an extensive understanding of God or his creation, but rather with this heroic obedience, to heed the Law out of deference to the wisdom of God and his prophets. The Author understands that biblical education consists of the surrender of the self to what is just and prudent simply because it is just or prudent. Only a people that has lived in heroic obedience to God's Law begins to consider questions of future recompense in an equitable way. "Let the soldier, who pays blind obedience to his leader, also become convinced of his leader's wisdom, and then say what that leader may not venture to do with his aid."[58]

The Author's notion of heroic obedience resembles Maimonides' separation of the Mosaic Law from all other prophetic writings. However, the Author's understanding of the motivation behind the ancient Israelites' adherence to the Law does not so much reflect Maimonides' rationalist prophetology in the *Guide* as it does his supernaturalist depiction of Moses in *Mishneh Torah. Mishneh Torah* clarifies the heuristic purpose of Maimonides' elevation of Moses above all other prophets. The uniqueness of the Mosaic Law provides a fixed boundary within which commentators may consider Jewish laws and doctrines as new questions about them arise over time. Maimonides begins his discourse on Moses by asking the most radical questions with regards to the formation of the Jewish people: What prompted the Israelites to accept and live by the Torah? Maimonides asserts that "Israel did not believe in Moses…on account of the tokens (*otot*) he showed."[59] For if we call someone a prophet because of the miracles he performs, "a lurking doubt always remains in the mind that those tokens may

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[57] Ibid., 88.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Maimonides, *MT*, 43b.

have been performed with the aid of occult arts and witchcraft."[60] Rather, any miracle that Moses performed served an immediate purpose and was never intended to prove the divinity of his mission: "Thus, when it was necessary that the Egyptians should be drowned, he divided the Red Sea and drowned them in its depths. We needed material sustenance; he brought down the Manna for us."[61]

The Author of *EHR* echoes this in his treatment of the miracles he performed during the Exodus. The miracles that Moses utilized to secure the Hebrews' passage from Egypt certainly helped to establish YHVH "as a God mightier than any other god."[62] But the Author's later claim that such miracles held more sway with the Israelites in Babylon than with those in Moses' indicates that Moses' authority did not rest on God's intervention in the natural world. Before Jewish scholars in Babylon had developed "a transcendental conception of the One," miracles "had hitherto made so weak and fleeting impression" upon the Israelites.[63] Because he believes that the Hebrews who followed Moses into the desert were *not* monotheists, but henotheists, the Author argues that, if they believed a god besides YHVH could have worked miracles on Moses' behalf, then miracles alone could not have demonstrated the divinity of the Mosaic Law. The Author never directly reveals exactly *what* convinced the Hebrews that the Pentateuch was truly *God's* Law, it is clear that he rejects the idea that miracles could have inspired their heroic obedience.

In both the *Guide* and *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides likewise frames the revelation of the Torah in terms of heroic or *absolute* obedience. He explains Israel's acknowledgement of Moses' prophetic authority as the result of a unique event, different from the practical miracles that

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 84.
[63] Ibid., 84 & 90.

helped the Israelites survive their sojourn in the desert. Rather, Maimonides suggests that we interpret God's revelation of the Torah to Israel through Moses as a miracle in itself:

> The Revelation on Sinai which we saw with our own eyes, and heard with our own ears, not having to depend on the testimony of others, we ourselves witnessing the fire, the thunder, the lightning, Moses entering the thick darkness after which the Divine Voice (*ha-qol*) spoke to him, while we hear the call, "Moses, Moses, go, tell them thus and thus."[64]

For Maimonides, God's public validation of Moses was sufficient to persuade many to accept the Law. Moses did not need "to show them any other sign," nor should we attribute Israel's profound trust in Moses to any miracle that he performed before or after Sinai.[65] The Israelites "were themselves witnesses to the truth of his [Moses'] prophecy"; God's announcement of the Decalogue so convinced the Israelites that they asked Moses to accept the remaining laws on their behalf: "Now therefore why should we die? for this great fire will consume us: if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die."[66]

The absolute nature of God's revelation to Moses—prophecy that is itself its own confirming miracle—has significant implications for Maimonides' prophetology. In order for the Israelites to know whether or not an individual who claims to be a prophet is truly inspired, they must comprehend the degree to which this individual remains faithful to the Mosaic Law. As in the case of Moses himself, Maimonides cautions his reader against accepting miracles as evidence of an individual's prophetic calling: "for we do not know if the sign (*ha-ot*) he shows is genuine or has been performed with the aid of sorcery."[67] The Israelites should consider only those who express their obedience to the Law of Moses to be true prophets. "Hence," says Maimonides, "if a prophet were to arise and perform signs and wonders (*otot u-moftim*), and

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[64] Maimonides, *MT*, 43b.
[65] Ibid, 44a.
[66] KJV, Deut. 5:25.
[67] Maimonides, *MT*, 44a.

seek to deny the prophetic character of Moses…we would not have to listen to him and would clearly be certain that those signs were wrought by secret arts and witchcraft."[68] Not only is the Torah underwritten by God's public revelation of the Decalogue in his own voice, but each succeeding prophet becomes credible only by alluding to the Hebrews' unquestionable experience of God at Mt. Sinai. As Maimonides understands it, Judaism's prophetic tradition is not founded on miraculous recompense in this world, but rather on absolute obedience to the Law as it was revealed to Moses, whose prophetic authority God corroborated in his own voice.

While the Author's education metaphor allows *EHR* to progress beyond mere heroic obedience, Maimonides' estimation of the Mosaic Law seems to rule out the possibility of *new* knowledge after the death of Moses. However, the equal weight that Maimonides and Lessing's Author give to the literary form of the Bible points to Maimonides' subversion of the Torah. Maimonides and Lessing are most similar when it comes to stylistic matters, such as allusion and hints. Although Lessing's Author never explicitly claims that later prophets added new doctrines to the Pentateuch by showing that Moses had alluded to them all along, his ironical voice in §§43-53 suggests that his comparison of scripture to a primer serves to support this reading of the Bible. By comparing the discussions of literary devices in the *Guide* and *EHR*, I wish to show how the Author's presentation of Jewish tradition as the advancement of knowledge, disguised as conservatism, allows us to reinterpret Maimonides' prophetology. Instead of seeing post-Mosaic prophecy merely exegetical, Maimonides' rationalist account of prophecy shows that, as Lessing's Author insinuates, many prophets added novel doctrines to the Law.

Lessing's Author suggests that literary devices allowed later prophets and exegetes to expand the Mosaic Law to include obtained through human reason without any clear precedent

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[68] Ibid.

in the Pentateuch. Although the Author states that the post-exilic scholars merely illuminated what the Pentateuch had subtly expressed all along, his claim that Hebrew Bible is a primer that can be "outgrown" and "exhausted" makes his intention clear.[69] Literary devices, such as allusions and hints, grant scripture a certain degree of pliability. The Author understands allusion as the prophet's contrivance of new doctrines by making reference to the work of his predecessors. The prophet or the exegete may interpret an imaginative passage in such a way that he can posit new doctrines while simultaneously insisting that there is nothing new about them. The Author cites "the divine threat of punishing the misdeeds of the father upon his children unto the third and fourth generation," as the "previous exercising" of the doctrine of immortality.[70] The later prophet may allude to this "divine threat" as evidence of his predecessors' attempts to describe the immortality of the soul.

If a prophet can allude to an extant passage for the purpose of making a new doctrine appear old, he can hint at a doctrine that he has developed independently of tradition by using symbolic language. Later prophets and exegetes will further develop this prophet's independent teachings by analyzing his allegorical statements. The Author refers to such statements as "hints."[71] He cites "the inference of Christ from God's title 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,'" as an example of a hint. Chadwick notes that the Author's use of Matt. 22:32 to explain his concept of a hint refers to the conclusion of the fourth fragment.[72] In his attempt to demonstrate that the Mosaic Law is neither beatific nor teaches the immortality of the soul, the Fragmentist appropriates Matt. 22:32 to show that the Sadducees—the *literalist* faction—rejected Christ because his doctrines were novel additions to scripture. In order to articulate his

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[69] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 91.
[70] Ibid., 90.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., 91.

doctrine of immortality in biblical terms, Christ says, "Have ye not heard that which was spoken unto you by God, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."[73] The Fragmentist glosses this passage as: "If God protected Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob long ago because they were still alive, then they still live, and will live for eternity."[74] However, Fragmentist interprets Matthew's description of the Sadducees' astonishment at Christ's doctrine in the following verse as evidence of its novelty:

> It is then obvious enough that Jesus cannot take the literal meaning of Scripture as his basis against the Sadducee, and that, accordingly, the doctrine of the immortality and the salvation of the soul is not really contained in the Old Testament.[75]

Furthermore, because the New Testament never tells of a Sadducee who "turned to Christ or his doctrine," the Fragmentist sees this as additional proof of the novelty of Christ's message.[76] Since the Sadducees "did not want to assume anything beyond what the evident meaning of the Old Testament gave [them]," the Fragmentist concludes that Christ *could not* have convinced anyone who embraced the Pentateuch in its strictly literal sense.

However, the Fragmentist's attempt to expose this discontinuity between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament rests upon his assumption that we must read the Bible literally. The Fragmentist, like Spinoza, advocates a literal reading of the Bible in order to prevent religious authorities from forcing new doctrines onto the text, especially if these interpretations serve only to perpetuate oppressive political institutions. Yet, by taking a literalist stance in order to avoid doing violence to scripture, we nevertheless do violence to scripture. To read the Bible in this exclusively literal manner, we must be certain that not even *one* verse signifies something

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[73] KJV Matt. 22:32.
[74] Reimarus, *Fragmenten des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten*, 359 [my translation].
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

beyond its literal meaning. Lessing's Author defends allegorical exegesis because it enables scripture to respond to the changing needs and questions of the community that guards it. Allusions and hints allow prophets and exegetes to convey their theological ideas and questions without appearing to add or subtract doctrines from the Law. Although the Author portrays this relationship between the scholar and the layperson as symbiotic, Spinoza and the Fragmentist assert that religious authorities, more often than not, use exegesis in order to exploit the layperson. But Lessing's Author does not ignore these concerns. The 1777 edition of *EHR* ends on a critical note. Whereas allusions and hints in moderation indicate a healthy theology, the Author concedes that commentators can "insert into it [scripture] more than there really is in it, and extract more than it contain."[77] This makes the "child," the recipients of God's revelation, "full of mysteries, superstitious, full of contempt for all that is comprehensible and easy."[78] While not suggesting that we adopt such an extreme position as literalism, Lessing's Author indicates that "a better instructor must come and tear the exhausted primer from the child's hands."[79] A school of thought must arise that can moderate allegorical exegesis and push theologian and layman alike to embrace what is most fundamental to scripture and the moral institution it represents.

I believe that the Author's call for exegetical moderation in the face of Reimarus' and Spinoza's criticism has its roots in Spinoza's quarrel with Maimonides in *TTP*. Maimonides likewise insists that the prophets, including Moses, used what Lessing's Author calls allusions (or "previous exercising"[80]) and hints to communicate ideas that, while foundational to Judaism, have the potential to undermine the Law if misunderstood. In the *Guide*, Maimonides argues that

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[77] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 91.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid., 90.

the exegete's most important task is to discern "what is said allegorically, figuratively, or hyperbolically, and what is meant literally, exactly according to the original meaning of the words."[81] However, Maimonides does not believe this skill to derive from divine inspiration or tradition. Rather, his sole advice to the exegete who wishes to separate the figurative meaning of scripture from the literal is, "Employ your reason."[82] Here, Maimonides' treatment of figurative language introduces the possibility that the prophets used literary devices to their readers into believing that novel doctrines had precedents in the Torah, or to conduct metaphysical inquiries that could undermine the Law.

But even if the Author and Maimonides are not justified in believing that the Bible mostly presents us with truths derived from reason cloaked in symbolism, the exegete can nevertheless interpret certain passages allegorically in order to lay out a cohesive intellectual history in which the prophets come across as rational. Thus both Maimonides and Lessing's Author leave room in their approach to revelation for an exegetical practice that suspends the question of what a specific prophet intended to say and instead asks: What does the exegete's situation demand of the prophets? Which portrayal of scripture forwards the interpreter's rhetorical goals?

Spinoza fears that the Maimonidean method of interpreting scripture is not only appealing to religious institutions, but perhaps even justified from the point of view of those who accept the Bible as the word of God. When Maimonides encourages the exegete to employ his reason to determine which biblical passages we are meant to read literally, and which we should read in a figurative way, it is not quite clear what he is asking. We can construe Maimonides injunction, "Employ your reason," as: 1.) determine the meaning of a certain passage by

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[81] Maimonides, *Guide*, 248.
[82] Ibid.

considering authorial intent; 2.) differentiate between literal and figurative with regards to what reason tells us is possible; 3.) interpret the passage according to the rational self-interest of the exegete or his community in the present.

The first approach is closest to Spinoza's "natural light" method of textual criticism. However, both Maimonides and Spinoza acknowledge the limitations of exegesis based exclusively on authorial intent. If a given text does not provide adequate information about the author's goal in writing it, then one must look for indications of his intentions outside of the text. For Maimonides, *tradition* often fulfills this role; for Spinoza, tradition invents records of authorial intent to match the interpretation that it desires. An example of this can be found in Spinoza's remarks on the canonization of the Bible. In *TTP* X, Spinoza concludes that "no canon of sacred books ever existed before the time of the Maccabees," and "the Second Temple Pharisees" determined that the Hebrew Bible we now possess.[83] Instead of deferring to its canonical status, Spinoza asserts that the exegete who wishes "to demonstrate the authority of Holy Scripture must prove the authority of each individual book."[84] Spinoza's annotation of the passage cites Maimonides and Abraham ben David as proponents of the "ridiculous fiction" that "Ezra, Daniel, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah," and so on, "presided over the Great Synagogue that determined the Jewish liturgy and canon.[85] Spinoza points out that exegetes like Maimonides use this fiction to argue that the current prayers, Bible, and legal practices "were accepted by the prophets, and so on right back to Moses, who received them from God himself."[86] He concludes

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[83] Spinoza, *TTP*, 153.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., 269.
[86] Ibid., 270.

from this and other examples from Jewish sources that this "is why such a tradition," or *any* religious community that uses lore or biased deponents, "should be altogether suspect to us."[87]

Yet Spinoza's method, "based on the principle that knowledge of the Bible is to be sought from Scripture alone," is likewise disappointing. Spinoza sees the antiquity of the Hebrew language as the first major obstacle to understanding the Bible. Because no one alive speaks *Biblical* Hebrew, and because we have "no dictionary, no grammar, no book of rhetoric" compiled by a contemporary of the prophets, we depend on later commentators for much of our knowledge of Hebrew.[88] Our current grasp of Hebrew, argues Spinoza, ultimately derives from rabbinical Judaism; and while, in this tradition of biblical commentary, "it could never have been useful for someone to alter the meaning of a word," Spinoza concludes that "it might quite often have been useful for someone to alter the meaning of a passage."[89] He surmises that alterations of the meaning of passages by many individual exegetes over time have greatly distorted our understanding of Hebrew as the prophets might have spoken it.

But even if we possessed a decent knowledge of Hebrew, Spinoza concedes that his plan to bypass the ulterior motives of the commentators that stand between the prophets and us still "requites a history of the vicissitudes of all the biblical books," most of which "is unknown to us."[90] Following this line of reasoning, "if we do not know of its [a text's] author or when and under what circumstances he wrote it, our efforts to get at its true sense will be fruitless."[91] The only alternative, then, is to grant each individual the right to interpret the Bible for himself,

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[87] Ibid., 105.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid., 109.
[91] Ibid.

whereby scripture is "adapted to the natural and common intelligence and capacity of [all] human beings."[92]

Spinoza ostensibly recommends that we abandon his ideal method of reading the Bible literally and with an eye to philological and historical data because of the difficulty that confronts anyone who wishes to separate the Hebrew language and "the history of the vicissitudes of all the biblical books" from religious lore. However, we should note that his more practical alternative resembles the third possible interpretation of Maimonides' command, "Employ your reason"—that which bids the exegete to interpret a passage for his own benefit. In this case, Spinoza advises the individual to interpret the Bible for the same purpose an oppressive religious authority might do so: rational self-interest. Moreover, Spinoza cites self-interested exegesis as the most important reason for why he disagrees with Maimonides. The only difference between Maimonides and Spinoza is that the former sees an exegetical elite as a necessary part of a well-governed society, whereas the latter sees the individual's right to interpret scripture as politically liberating.

Maimonides uses the third meaning of "Employ your reason" when confronted with political questions. However, when speaking of theology or metaphysics, he invariably advises the second: interpret the prophetic writings, except those of Moses, in light of what we can know or conceive as possible through rational speculation. This view best resembles the rationalist hermeneutic that the Author introduces in *EHR* §4: "revelation gives nothing to the human race which human reason could not arrive at on its own."[93] Spinoza criticizes Maimonides' rationalist hermeneutic for the same reason he rejects tradition as a viable way of establishing authorial intent. Even though Maimonides' rationalism may at first seem preferable to Spinoza, he

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[92] Ibid., 117.
[93] *Lessing's Theological Writing*, 83.

nevertheless asserts that anything beyond the individual's common sense reading of the Bible pretends to authority. Concentrating the power to pass judgment on scripture in the hands of an educated few—even if they are not ecclesiastical authorities, but philosophers—strips the masses of the right to interpret scripture on their own, the method which best guards against dogmatism and its worldly repercussions. What is more, Spinoza's common sense method also protects both heterodox thinkers, such as secular philosophers, from the threat of religious authorities.

In *TTP* VII, Spinoza calls attention to Maimonides' famous defense of creation over and against the Aristotelians' belief that the world is eternal (*Guide* II.25). Spinoza highlights the importance of this passage to his refutation of Maimonides by quoting extensive portions from this chapter in Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of the *Guide*:

> 'Know that we do not refrain from saying that the world existed from eternity on account of texts in Scripture about the creation of the world. For the passages teaching that the world was created are no more numerous than those which teach that God is corporeal. None of the ways by which we might explain the texts on the creation of the world are barred to us or even obstructed; indeed, we could have used the same method to interpret these as we used to reject the corporeality of God. It might even have been much easier. We might have been able to explain these texts more naturally and find more support [in Scripture] for the eternity of the world than we found for the view that the blessed God is corporeal, which on our interpretation, Scripture excludes.'[94]

Here Maimonides lays out the problem of using scripture alone to confirm the meaning of scripture, as Spinoza recommends. Because the passages that refer to God as having a body are equally as prevalent as those that suggest that God is incorporeal, or that corporeality tends toward idolatry, Maimonides argues that *reason* must arbitrate:

> 'But two reasons persuade me not to do this and not to believe this' (namely, that the world is eternal). 'Firstly, because there is clear proof that God is not corporeal, and it is necessary to explain all the passages whose literal sense is in conflict with this proof, for it is certain that they will have an explanation' (other than the literal one). 'But there is no proof of the eternity of the world and

[94] Maimonides, in *TTP* by Spinoza, 113.

> therefore it is not necessary, in quest of such a conception, to do violence to Scripture for the sake of an apparent opinion since we would accept its contrary if we found a convincing argument for it. The second reason is that to believe God is incorporeal is not in conflict with the fundamentals of the Law, etc. But to believe in the eternity of the world in the manner in which Aristotle held destroys the Law from its foundations, etc.'[95]

Spinoza distrusts Maimonides' rationalist hermeneutic on the grounds that it assumes that every prophet intended to express only rationally demonstrable truths. If Maimonides locates a passage whose "literal sense is found to be in conflict with reason, no matter how evident that may seem to be in itself, he insists that it should be construed differently."[96] Therefore, even though Maimonides' first reason for not accepting the eternity of the world stems from his belief that Aristotle's arguments are deficient, Spinoza understands his second reason for believing in creation as a tacit declaration that he would bend scripture to express the eternity of the world if Aristotle's position were more evident. Because Maimonides sees creation as one of the foundations of Jewish Law, to accept Aristotle's view at all puts one in conflict with Judaism. For this reason, Spinoza believes Maimonides would rather do violence to scripture than abandon Judaism.

Spinoza views Maimonides's rationalism as both presumptuous and dangerous. His hermeneutic is presumptuous because his immediate recourse to "preconceived opinions" not obtained from the Bible itself demonstrates that he either does not understand scripture or stands to benefit from rejecting the literal meaning of the text.[97] Spinoza admits that his method is likewise imperfect, but nevertheless contends that, by reading the Bible literally and interpreting

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Spinoza, *TTP*, 113.
[97] Ibid., 115.

each passage with regards to the text alone, "we can explain many such [indemonstrable] things and discuss them with assurance," whereas "the method [of Maimonides] is plainly useless."[98]

Yet, by Spinoza's own admission, both his common sense method and Maimonides' rationalist hermeneutic fall short of the historical-critical ideal he first introduces in *TTP*. Why, then, does Spinoza's method better enable us to explain the Bible if neither he nor Maimonides possess adequate material to establish authorial intent? I believe that Spinoza has two ulterior motives in assailing Maimonides' method of interpreting scripture by the light of rational speculation. If we can only expound upon scripture by way of philosophic proofs, "the common people, who for the most part do not understand or do not have time to examine them, will only be able to reach any conclusion at all about scripture on the sole authority and testimony of philosophers."[99] Whether we allow "Roman Popes," "Pharisees," or even philosophers to have the final word, the result is the same: these authorities will bend the literal meaning of scripture to solidify their power.[100] Spinoza's common sense method may fall just as short as that of Maimonides in establishing what each biblical author intended to say, but, if both are equally wrong, Spinoza errs on the side of the laity.

Despite this, Spinoza's confidence regarding the usefulness of his method in comparison with Maimonides' rationalist hermeneutic points to a second motive. In *TTP* VII, before addressing Maimonides, he hints at the true purpose behind his advocacy of a common sense, literal reading of the Bible:

> I remember once reading in a certain book that a man whose name was Orlando Furioso was wont to drive a winged monster through the air and fly over any

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[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 114.
[100] Ibid.

> regions he wished… I have read a similar story in Ovid about Perseus, and another in the books of Judges and Kings, about Samson…and Elijah…[101]

Spinoza argues that we treat these stories differently because we "persuade ourselves that the first writer intended to write only fables, the second poetical themes[102] and the third sacred matters."[103] Not only does Spinoza's comparison of Elijah to Ovid and Ariosto suggest that the Bible is not unique, but also shows that, if we do not have ample information about the author from scripture or a contemporary source, the literal meaning will often present us with a story that is just as fabulous as *Orlando Furioso* or *Metamorphoses*. Thus we may conclude that, by reading the Bible in a uniformly literal manner and never looking to tradition or reason, "even when it [scripture] speaks about things known by the natural light of reason," Spinoza wishes the Bible to appear as fictional and incredible as possible.[104]

Here, we see that Spinoza's method of reading the Bible seeks not only to depose religious authorities, but the Bible itself. Spinoza concerns himself with the Bible in *TTP* because he realizes this text is still important to many. And as long as the masses continue to value the Bible as revelation, Spinoza will support the layperson's right to interpret the Bible without interference from ecclesiastical authorities. Yet *TTP* likewise shows that Spinoza wishes to put the Bible in the hands of the masses, who he assumes will read it in a literal way, in order to chisel away at its historicity. The identification of Spinoza's ulterior motives in *TTP* is significant to our understanding of Lessing's theological writings because, as Chadwick notes, Lessing employs a similar tactic. Just as Spinoza sought to give interpretive authority to the masses only to expose how ridiculous the Bible seems without the interference of clever

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[101] Ibid., 109-10.
[102] Israel and Silverthorne render "*res poeticas*" as "poetical themes," though they note that earlier editions of *TTP* read "*res politicas*"; cf. Spinoza, *Opera Omnia Tomus Secundus*, 183.
[103] Spinoza, *TTP*, 110.
[104] Ibid., 115.

exegetes, Lessing began to critique enlightened theologians in order to create an either/or between pure rationalism and the fideism of Lutheran Orthodoxy. He wanted to make the latter look ridiculous and destroy every viable path back to enlightened theism.

However, the works spawned from the 1777 *Beyträge zur Litteratur und Geschichte* show Lessing's shift from Spinozistic tactics to an open-minded approach to the Bible and religious tradition. I believe that his change of heart stems from his careful consideration of Spinoza's arguments against Maimonides in *TTP* VII. Spinoza's analysis of the *Guide* II.25 assumes too much about Maimonides' intentions. That is to say, he distrusts Maimonides' position regarding the ineradicable differences between Judaism and Aristotle instead of taking him at his word. Maimonides does not openly accept the eternity of the world because Aristotle's arguments are inconclusive *and* because creation is an underlying principle of Jewish Law. Spinoza insinuates that Maimonides finds fault with Aristotle, not because he lacks definitive proof that the world is eternal, but because Aristotle simply unsettles the Law's validity. Yet, if we read Maimonides literally, we must conclude that, if he earnestly believed that Aristotle to be correct, he would subsequently reject Judaism because one of its core tenets would stand in open opposition to reason. For Maimonides, since reason cannot conclusively determine whether God created the world or if it has existed from eternity, he opts for the cosmology that supports Jewish Law. In the absence of rational proof, Maimonides suggests that we defer to tradition.

Maimonides' preference for the cosmological view that best undergirds the Law speaks to his esteem for tradition and its potential to prevent that which is bad, and orient its recipients towards the good. This reawakening of respect for the Law as an edifying force in the face of exegetical disputes also appears in the Author's conclusion to the 1777 edition of *EHR*. For Lessing's Author, Christ came to guide the Jews back to a simpler understanding of the Law and

its fundamental purpose for the community. The feuds between the Sadducees and the Pharisees risked imparting a superficial, "hairsplitting" understanding of scripture and the way of life that it entails "to the spirit of their people."[105] *Guide* II.25 and *EHR* both demonstrate the dangers faced by the Law on account of irresponsible exegesis. If an exegetical practice obscures or threatens the authority of the Law—the source of heroic obedience—it must be checked. Lessing's Author suggests that, in order to accomplish this, a religious leader must come who can shift the focus away from biblical cosmology and metaphysics and emphasize the benefits living faithfully under the Law.

Lessing's *Counter-Propositions* and *A Rejoinder*

Lessing's *Counter-Propositions* in the 1777 *Beyträge* indicate his agreement with and distance from the views expressed by the Author of *EHR*. Lessing relates his sympathy to the Author's main thesis, that "revelation give nothing to the human race which human reason could not arrive at on its own; only it has given, and still gives to it, the most important of these things sooner."[106] Lessing's commentary on the fourth fragment, which directly precedes *EHR* §§1-53, suggests that "the most important of these things" has more to do with political organization in this world than with the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Lessing not only believes that the Pentateuch's lack of a soteriology proves nothing against its divinity, he also contends that, even if Moses himself lacked a firm understanding of God's transcendence, we could consider the Pentateuch to be divine. Lessing echoes the Author in arguing that God did not announce himself to Moses "as the infinite God, but only as one of the particular gods with whom superstition had

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[105] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 91.
[106] Ibid., 83.

associated with different countries and peoples. God was the god of the Hebrews."[107] Lessing attributes this lack of a soteriology and henotheism to God's accommodation of the Hebrews and their situation at the time of his revelation of the Law: "For why should a religion not adapt itself to the limits of his [a man's] longing and desires? Why should a religion necessarily have to enlarge their sphere?"[108] Lessing, like the Author, concludes that God withheld the doctrine of immortality so that the Hebrews would develop heroic obedience to God's Law instead of the conditional obedience that inheres in soteriology.

Lessing nevertheless creates some distance between his views and those of the Author. The most significant point of contention between Lessing and the Author is the question of the primacy of the Hebrew Bible over all other religious texts. *EHR* maps onto biblical history until Christ's time. Though the Author gives us a glimpse of the "other nations of the earth" that "had gone on by the light of reason," these cultures only come into the narrative through their relationship with the Hebrews/Israelites.[109] Lessing, on the other hand, resists the Author's desire to depict God's revelation to the Israelites as somehow privileged. Lessing compares his experience in reading the Bible to his reaction upon reading "samples" of Hindu texts in translation, declaring that "the sacred books of the Brahmans must a be a match for the books of the Old Testament."[110] Lessing suggests that Hindus call their books divine for much the same reason that Christians and Jews declare the Bible to be inspired. The truths which seem so evident to us in the modern age "must once have seemed highly in comprehensible, hence directly inspired by the deity, and…there have nevertheless been privileged souls at all times and

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[107] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 77.
[108] Ibid., 78.
[109] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 85.
[110] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 77.

in all countries whose thoughts, by their own efforts, transcended the sphere of their contemporaries."[111]

Lessing's claim that humankind often attributes the outworking of human reason to the divine resonates with both *EHR* and Maimonides. But Lessing's democratic approach to the question of scriptural primacy stands at odds with the Author's obvious preference for Israel. This discrepancy between Lessing and the Author begs the questions as to whether understanding revelation as nothing else but rational knowledge acquired faster helps us understand, let alone defend revealed religion. Perhaps Lessing did not care which religion was correct, but the *Counter-Propositions* and *AR* attest to his concern over how his theological contemporaries approached this question.

Among the three voices in the 1777 *Beyträge*, the Author is the only interlocutor who expresses, even superficially, that he believes education of the human race requires God to raise a specific nation that will eventually impart its wisdom to the rest. The second fragment explicitly criticizes the notion that one people's religion can adequately offer guidance to the whole world. Lessing takes a middle path, preferring not to identify any specific religion as more deserving of God's attention. However, though Lessing puts the biblical religion on equal footing with Hinduism, he otherwise intimates that, for the believer, the question of primacy is not altogether insignificant. Nor can we merely ascribe all attempts to ascertain the true religion to intolerance.

The *Counter-Propositions* and *AR* demonstrate Lessing's growing interest in the historicity of the New Testament. The Fragmentist indicates a number of inconsistencies between the Gospel narratives and much of the criticism that Lessing received from theologians

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[111] Ibid., 77-78.

like Johann Reß and Johann Melchior Goeze stemmed from their belief that no such contradictions existed. Lessing's introduction to the *Counter-Propositions* explains that he intended to publish Reimarus' manuscript in order to raise the question of whether or not orthodoxy needed to hold the Bible to modern historical standards. For, in order to meet these criteria, orthodoxy would need to satisfactorily resolve every contradiction in the gospels, something which Lessing doubted was possible or even necessary.

The kernel of *AR* derives from Lessing's introduction to the *Counter-Propositions*, arguing that "the letter is not the spirit, and the Bible is not religion. Consequently, objections to the letter, and to the Bible, need not also be objections to the spirit and to religion."[112] Lessing reassures his pious readers that the *Fragments* need not alarm them too much since the Bible's historicity, or even its value as a scientific document, is not central to the Christian faith. Because "the Bible obviously contains more than what pertains to religion," we should not argue that the Christian religion stands or falls on the "equal infallibility" of certain passages in the Bible if we deem these passages to be peripheral to the text's core message. Hence minor discrepancies in the gospel narratives or cosmological statements that contradict modern astronomy do not need to be defended in the same way that we defend the truth of the crucifixion. Lessing supports this idea by appealing to Christian tradition. "Christianity existed before the evangelists and apostles wrote about it…and a very considerable time elapsed before the whole canon was established."[113] Since several generations of Christians practiced their religion without possessing these texts at all, "it is impossible for the whole truth of religion to be based on them."[114] Lessing again uses this argument in his public debate with Goeze in 1777.

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[112] Ibid., 63.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.

Responding to Goeze's claim that the Bible's minutiae are just as valuable to faith as its broader message, Lessing points out that Christian history itself disproves this. Lessing cites the *regula fide* that antedate much of the New Testament, arguing that overemphasizing role of the exact text of the Bible that we now have in salvation suggests that early Christians were incapable of attaining it.

Both editions of *EHR* understand the particular forms that Judaism and Christianity take in history as necessary steps along the path towards the true religion. Even if both religions are ultimately instrumental and subject to supersession, the Author does not expressly indicate that God could substitute another religion for Judaism and Christianity at the same moments in history. But already in the *Counter-Propositions*, Lessing attempts to distance himself from this particularist account, in which these specific religious forms appear to be universally necessary for the *entire* human race. Lessing challenges Christianity's catholicity by suggesting that it is unreasonable to believe that all civilizations that are temporally or geographically separate from Christianity to have no means of attaining salvation. He asks, "if the Christian religion could only appear at a certain time and in a certain area, did all the previous ages and all other areas therefore necessarily have no religion of salvation at all?"[115] Lessing answers his own question by imploring the "theologians" to consider whether "God might well wish to save the good people of all religions *in the same respect* and *for the same reasons*, without therefore having imparted to all of them the *same revelation* in that respect and for those reasons."[116] Though Lessing introduces his idea of universalism in a conjectural tone, we must consider its implications for interpreting *EHR*. Lessing leaves the possibility on the table that Judaism and Christianity possess the revelation that best represents *the* truth. Yet despite this concession, we

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[115] Ibid., 78.
[116] Ibid.

must wonder what it means to say that Christianity's possession of the truest revelation affords Christians no advantages over other religions with regards to salvation.

Lessing's doubts concerning the primacy of the Christian faith do not, however, bar him from defending the possibility of such a primacy in the face of the Fragmentist's critique. Towards the beginning of the *Counter-Propositions*, Lessing addresses his Christian readers in a very pious tone. When Lessing describes the Christian faith as a "*certain* subjugation of reason," he comes across as if he too suppresses his reason in service to revelation's inscrutable truth.[117] As Lessing goes on, he portrays this subjugation as a struggle, not against reason, but against a specific style of reasoning. We subjugate our reason "to the discipline of faith," he says, not because of we read any combination of passages from the Bible, but rather because we comprehend "the essential definition of revelation."[118] At this moment, Lessing describes the relationship of reason to revelation in a way that resembles Maimonides' defense of creation against Aristotelianism in *Guide* II.25: "whether there can and must be a revelation, and which of so many self-proclaimed revelations is likely to be true, is something which only reason can decide."[119] This statement leads into Lessing's clearest admonition to enlightened Christian theologians, especially the Neologists. Once we make the conscious and rational decision that there *can* and *must* be a revelation, and "once the true revelation has been identified, reason must regard it rather as an additional proof of its truth than as an objection to it if it finds in it things which are beyond its comprehension."[120] This passage is rendered problematic by Lessing's assertion that reason determines whether or not revelation is possible and, if so, whether this revelation is necessary. In the *Counter-Propositions*, Lessing repeatedly confirms the possibility

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[117] Ibid., 66.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.

of revelation, but, as we see in the fourth counter-proposition, he expresses with certainty that revelation is *not* necessary, at least with regards to salvation.

I believe that Lessing's qualifying remark serves two rhetorical goals. The first pertains to his critique of enlightened Christianity's dubious synthesis of reason and revelation. If a theologian determines that revelation is both possible and necessary, then ascertains which of many revealed religions is true, he cannot subsequently reject anything within it that appears to go against the same reason that prompted him to accept it as divinely inspired. Anyone "who polishes such things out of his religion might as well as have no religion at all. For what is a revelation that reveals nothing? And is it only the unbelievers that discard both?"[121] In this formulation, any congruence of reason and revelation counts as an additional proof of reason's validity. On the other hand, any dissimilarity between reason and revelation does not constitute an objection to reason, but rather that, with regards to the question at stake, revelation proffers an answer that is beyond the scope of human reason, a response that we cannot rationally comprehend.

Lessing's second audience is made up of both the rational unbeliever and the believer whose reason defers to revelation. At first, the unbeliever may have no doubts about the necessity of revelation, especially if he denies its possibility. But Lessing's grouping of "can" and "must" with regards to revelation solicits the unbeliever to suspend his certainty and reconsider his grounds for dismissing revelation. Lessing's agnostic stance on miracles in the *Counter-Propositions* elucidates the reason behind such a request. In the third counter-proposition, Lessing pushes back against the Fragmentist's arguments against believing in the parting of the Red Sea. Lessing recommends that the orthodox Christian say that the entire

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[121] Ibid.

crossing of the Red Sea, which includes both the physical parting of the waters and the speed in which the Hebrews crossed, was a miracle and to leave it at that. For Lessing, delving into the natural mechanisms by which God achieved this miracle leaves the believer open to ridicule and distracts us from approaching the theological and ethical significance of the miracle. Lessing concludes that it is rationally acceptable for one to believe in miracles such as the parting of the Red Sea. But it is an entirely different matter if the believer professes his conviction concerning the miracle and then goes on to tout that he can prove how this miracle took place by appealing to the natural sciences. Lessing not only asserts that this attitude is unwise for the believer to adopt, but that squeezing the natural sciences to explain a miracle—that which is by definition inexplicable—weakens his faith as much as his reason. Even if we have the scientific testimony that suggests that the miracle is not impossible, Lessing contends that we should not utilize scientific knowledge to go beyond the question of a miracle's possibility. The desire to prove a miracle by drawing recourse to science not only shows a hesitant faith, but also a lack of understanding with regards to the goal of a faith that bears witness to miracles. Lessing determines that it is not so important for the Christian to explain *how* God performed these miracles, as it is to believe *that* they happened and to what end.

The Fragmentist draws on the image of the orthodox Lutheran pastor to portray *all* manifestations of revealed religion as uniformly hostile to rational thought. In turn, Lessing argues that we must not let certain trends in 17th and 18th century Lutheranism silence the many voices throughout Christian history that have expressed a more temperate understanding of human reason in relation to divine revelation. Commenting on the first fragment, entitled "On the Denunciation of Reason from the Pulpits," Lessing turns our attention to a Patristic approach to reason, overlooked by orthodoxy and its critics alike. Though there are examples of Lutheran

pastors condemning reason, when, as the Fragmentist says, it is rather "the duty of the preachers…to recommend sound reason and its employment to their congregations as infallible criterion of divine knowledge and pious living," Lessing suggests that the Fragmentist's characterization of reason as "infallible" is similarly flawed.[122] The Fragmentist cites the biblical narrative of the Fall as Lutheran Orthodoxy's grounds for dismissing reason. The Fragmentist instead argues that "our ancestors fell from grace precisely because they failed to make use of it [reason]."[123]

Opposed to both Lutheran Orthodoxy's and Reimarus' simplistic understanding of reason's role in Christian life, Lessing offers a more nuanced reading of Genesis 2-3. He contends that "the power of our sensuous desires, of our obscure representations [*Vorstellungen*] over even our clearest knowledge, caused our first ancestors to sin."[124] And whether we treat Genesis 2-3 as history or as allegory, "it shows that the source of all transgressions was this power alone."[125] We should then read the Fall as a meditation upon humanity's potential to do evil as well as good: "if we are not exclusively sinners…we have it in us to reduce that power and can use it as readily for good as for evil actions."[126]

Lessing adopts this "edifying interpretation: of the "so frequently ridiculed 'fairytale' of Moses" in order to show that Christianity does not reject reason wholesale, but rather questions reason's ascendancy as a means to the truth.[127] He determines that the Christian theological tradition advocates a type of introspection, a process by which the individual separates reason

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[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid., 67.
[127] Ibid.

from "the power of sensuous desires."[128] Lessing's interpretation of Genesis 2-3 in the *Counter-Propositions* parallels the Author's description of the first man in *EHR* §§6-7. Polytheism and idolatry arose because "the first man" used his reason to break up "the one immeasurable [God] into many measureables," idols and the gods of natural religion.[129] Although the first man "was furnished at once with a conception of the One God," (i.e. God *revealed* himself to the first man), his rational approach to the empirical world prompted him to doubt the veracity of God's initial disclosure of his unity.[130] From Lessing's reading of Genesis 2-3 in the *Counter-Propositions*, we see that our first ancestors sinned, neither by lack nor the mere use of reason, but rather because they deferred to reason in an uncritical way. Lessing understands the narrative of the Fall as describing the transgression of God's commandment on the part of two individuals who believed, like the Fragmentist, that reason is infallible. Lessing therefore portrays Christianity as a tradition that is indeed rational, but which also recognizes reason's limits and shortcomings.

Lessing redubs the Christian's subjugation of his reason to the discipline of faith a "surrender," for subjugation "suggests violence on one side and resistance on the other"; instead, "reason *surrenders* itself and its surrender is merely an acknowledgement of its limits as soon as it is assured that the revelation is a genuine one."[131] "This, then," says Lessing, "is the outpost in which we must firmly stand our ground; and it betrays either woeful vanity if we let mischievous mockers *ridicule* us out of it, or despair over the proofs for the reality of revelation if we *withdraw* from it in the belief that we need no longer take such proofs very seriously."[132] Lessing identifies ridicule as the preferred weapon of religion's detractors, and vanity as the chink in

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[128] Ibid., 66.
[129] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 83.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 67.
[132] Ibid.

orthodoxy's armor. But this ridicule of faith does not meet the detractors' normal standards for a well-reasoned argument. For Lessing, critics and defenders of religion conduct their polemics around a fallacy, such as scriptural harmony, that fails to address revealed religion on its own terms. The "transition from purely rational truths" to revealed truths "is extremely difficult to accomplish if one has first enjoyed the luxury of the precise and comprehensible proofs of the former."[133] Lessing asserts that it is wrong to apply a method of rational approbation to revelation with the assumption that "anything not proved *in the same way* will not be proved *at all*."[134] Rather, revelation is "based on evidence and on empirical propositions"; to argue against revealed religion from *a priori* truths without considering revelation as an experience outside of the norm merely assumes these "empirical propositions" away.[135]

Here, Lessing includes himself among those who believe in and defend the revealed character of the Christian faith. But what of the unbeliever in Lessing's audience, not to mention Lessing, the Spinozist? Returning to his conception of Christianity as the surrender of reason to what reason itself determines to be genuine revelation, what do the *Counter-Propositions* ask of those whose reason has not located the genuine revelation? I believe that Lessing recommends to the unbeliever the on-going critique of reason that he gleans from Genesis 2-3. Though Lessing condemned the hackneyed explanation of herterodox thinking as motivated by hedonism in his early play, *The Freethinker*, we must consider how the "obscure representations (*Vorstellungen*)" that accompany our material existence limit the scope of human reason. In rationally examining the fixed dogma of revealed religion, we must resist the temptation to conduct this examination by the light of a rational system that is equally as dogmatic. In this way, Lessing's critique of

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[133] Ibid., 68.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid., 69.

belief in revealed religion, as well as of the disbelief on the part of its detractors, is simultaneously a critique of belief in general. Lessing's open-mindedness manifests itself as a dynamic process that goes beyond the idea of belief as the active examination of what we experience in the world.

Lessing's disavowal of the fallacy by which reason unfairly asks revealed religion to account for itself on reason's dogmatic terms manifests itself in the *Counter-Propositions* through his assertion, "the Bible obviously contains more than what pertains to religion."[136] Critics, like Spinoza and Reimarus, dismiss much of revealed religion on the assumption that the Bible alone determines the form which religion should take in the world, a view which Lessing says does not reflect Christianity's understanding of itself. In *AR*, Lessing further develops this open-minded approach to biblical criticism. *AR* not only shows the evolution of Lessing's thought with regard to the historicity of miracles and certain fallacies in contemporary theological polemics, but also shows how his open-minded approach translates into action regarding the politics of belief and unbelief alike.

Lessing composed *AR* in response to Reß's criticisms, not merely of Reimarus' analysis of the gospel accounts of the resurrection, but also of Lessing for publishing the *Fragments*. In fact, *AR* reveals Lessing's wish to defend himself against charges that he penned Reimarus' *Fragments*, attributing them to an anonymous author to avoid suspicion. He explicitly states that he does not "presume to act as *arbiter* of this combat," for the "arbiter of combats was a member of the judiciary; and I judge no one, so no one may pass judgment on me."[137] Moreover, Lessing's juxtaposition of Reimarus and Reß shows his profound disagreement with the way in

[136] Ibid., 63.
[137] Ibid., 95.

which this combat is framed around modern standards of historical evidence, rather than around the historical criteria of the evangelists and early Christians.

Lessing's goal in presenting Reimarus' study on contradictions in the Bible stems from his desire to reorient orthodoxy toward a conception of scriptural history that serves the orthodox believer in his free objection of the Enlightenment's style of historical criticism. Through a careful reading of *AR*, I wish to demonstrate the affinity of Lessing's defense of Lutheran Orthodoxy against historical criticism to Maimonides' defense of Jewish Law and creation *ex nihilo* against the Aristotelian notion of an eternal universe. Like Maimonides before him, Lessing evaluates Reimarus and Reß on two levels. The first is that of theory, whereby Lessing demonstrates that historical criticism may only attest to the accuracy of individual details in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection; but, he explains, such analysis merely tells us of the historian's merit and the plausibility of what he describes, though *not* of its possibility. Secondly, Lessing makes an appeal to Christianity's relative success as a moral community and its expression in the gospels in order to defend its overall claims concerning Christ's resurrection.

His choice of epigraph from Dictys' *Diary of the Trojan War* informs us that Lessing's purpose in *AR* is not to bring new material into the Reimarus-Reß debate, but rather to shed light on the disconnect between each interlocutor's premise and conclusion: "Rather to establish the point at issue than to put anything forward through the discourse." Instead of presenting a new theory concerning gospel harmony, Lessing's position conveys his rejection of the terms of Reimarus' critique, which Reß blindly accepts. He lays out the three positions as follows:

> My anonymous author [Reimarus] maintains that the resurrection of Christ is incredible *also because* reports of the evangelists are mutually contradictory.
>
> I [Lessing] reply that the resurrection may well be perfectly true *even if* the reports of the evangelists are mutually contradictory.

> Now a third party [Reß/orthodoxy] comes along and says that the resurrection is entirely credible *since* the reports of the evangelists are not mutually contradictory.
>
> Take careful note of this *also because*, this *even if*, and this *since*. It will be found that nearly everything depends on these particles.[138]

Lessing draws our attention to these particles because they betray the ineradicable differences of the presuppositions that each interlocutor carries with him to the dialogue. What is more, Lessing's distillation of each line of reasoning to these theses will help us to determine whether or not Reimarus and Reß are justified in making confessional judgments only on the basis of the historical-critical evidence in question.

The Neighbor, Reß's proxy in *AR*, responds to the Fragmentist in a manner that suggests that his argument in the *Fragments* runs: we should not believe in Christ's resurrection because—and only because—the gospels contradict one another. Lessing's use of "*also because*" to paraphrase the Fragmentist's argument indicates that the Neighbor has misunderstood his opponent's position. Even if orthodoxy can successfully respond to the contradictions to which he draws our attention, the Fragmentist would still have many non-scriptural grounds to reject Christ's resurrection. Thus Lessing understands the author of the *Fragments* to be predisposed to deny the validity of the Bible, whether or not the Neighbor establishes a coherent theory of gospel harmony.

The "third party" follows his incorrect understanding of the Fragmentist's argument and simply defends the opposite position: we should believe the gospels with regard to Christ's resurrection since each account of this event is in harmony with all the others. Yet Lessing's addition of "*also because*" to the Fragmentist's position shows us that, if the Neighbor believes that proof of gospel harmony can convince the Fragmentist of the truth of the resurrection, the

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[138] Ibid., 96.

Neighbor cannot win the debate, nor can the Fragmentist lose. Though the Neighbor may amass good evidence in favor of gospel harmony, the Fragmentist can cite other reasons for his unbelief; if the Neighbor presents a poor or laughable refutation of these contradictions, by his own reasoning, he too should consider Christ's resurrection to be incredible.

While Lessing's initial comment, "it is always touching when even the weak and decrepit Nestor is ready to accept Hector's challenge," smacks of sarcasm, his observation that the Fragmentist attempts to cheat the Neighbor shows his willingness to improve orthodoxy's ability to defend itself against its critics. Lessing freely admits that the resurrection could be true *even if* the historical records are inconsistent, leaving him as the only one of the three who does not accept historical reliability as a sufficient means of establishing the possibility of an event like the resurrection. The Fragmentist is justified in arguing that such contradictions demonstrate the implausibility of the resurrection, but Lessing avers that implausibility does not constitute impossibility. Therefore, the Neighbor need not subject himself to public ridicule because no thorough exposition of scriptural contradictions can prove or disprove the possibility of Christ's miraculous resurrection. "Is it not true," asks Lessing, "that an infinite number of events were true and incontestable even if history has left us too little and too insignificant evidence for us seriously to believe in them?"[139] Why should we hold the gospels to a different standard?

However, though Lessing rules out the impossibility of the resurrection as a viable conclusion from historical evidence, the Neighbor may still express interest in gospel harmony for the sake of establishing the historical plausibility of the resurrection. Lessing devotes the majority of *AR* to dissuading the Neighbor from employing gospel harmony as a means of securing the plausibility of the miracles traditionally ascribed to Christ. He urges his Neighbor to

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[139] Ibid., 105.

abandon gospel harmony for two reasons: 1.) there *are* contradictions in the gospel narratives, the erasure of which only serves to render orthodoxy incredible; 2.) Christians have reasons to keep their faith beyond the historicity of scripture, which, unlike gospel harmony, are not so easy to ridicule.

Lessing explains that the inadequacy of "all gospel harmonies," along with the fact that "nothing better or more thorough had yet been written" on the gospel contradictions than Reimarus' fragments, prompted him to publish the fragments.[140] Yet his intention was not to uphold the Fragmentist's arguments, but to show how both his and orthodoxy's conclusions rested on their conflation of probability and possibility. "If Livy and Polybius and Dionysius and Tacitus each report the same event—for example the same battle or the same siege—with circumstances so different that those described by one completely give the lie to those described by the others, has anyone ever denied the event itself on which they all agree?"[141] If so, Lessing wonders why adherents and critics alike expect more uniformity among the evangelists than classical historians. He suggests that, while "the credibility of the resurrection…might suffer if contradictions were irresolvable," orthodox theologians are more concerned "with their own dogmatics" and gravitate towards gospel harmony in order to prop up "the crudest notions of divine inspiration."[142] Lessing very frankly expresses his frustration with softer theories of gospel harmony, in which:

> …the orthodoxist will in fact say himself that it is not out of keeping with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to allow *apparent* contradictions to enter into the narratives of the evangelists, so that any suspicion of collusion, which an all too obvious unanimity might arouse, would be less likely to fall on them.[143]

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[140] Ibid., 99.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid., 101.
[143] Ibid.

In response, Lessing asserts that this softer wording of gospel harmony is equally as wrong because "*apparent* contradictions" are simply "contradictions that can ultimately be reduced to perfect agreement," and are therefore not contradictions at all.[144] Lessing pushes for orthodoxy's recognition of *real* contradictions in the gospels, reaffirming the human aspect of the New Testament—divine revelation requires a human witness to the Holy Spirit who in turn transmits this knowledge to his community. Even though he accepts the possibility of divine inspiration, Lessing wants to draw attention to the vehicle of revelation, which is ultimately defined by the limitations of the witness and his audience.

> Should it not first have been asked whether, in the whole wide range of history, a single example can be found of an event related by several people who have neither drawn on a common source nor followed one another's versions…without the most obvious and irresolvable contradictions? …But if such an example has never been found, and never will or can be found…why should we expect the evangelists in particular to have furnished this example? … Because poor mortals are, of course, subject to error, but not the Holy Spirit?[145]

Looking ahead to the "Editor's Preface" to the 1780 edition of *EHR*, in which he asks if God is "to have part in everything except our mistakes," Lessing defends the utility, not only of gospel contradictions, but of all variations in the gospels by arguing that, "if they [the evangelists] did not learn anything *more* through the Holy Spirit's influence, they did not learn anything *better*."[146] In this way, the Holy Spirit, coupled with the freedom of each individual evangelist, produces four unique gospels that attempt to offer a better understanding of the events recounted in all four.

The doubt which Lessing sows as to the soundness of the Fragmentist's and the Neighbor's reasoning not only allows the Christian a more conscientious defense of his faith, but

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[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid., 102.
[146] Ibid.

also provides him with a vision of an open-minded church, whose truth is confirmed by its ethical attitude. Lessing likewise shows that forcing the gospels, whether in attack or defense, to comply with modern standards of "historical exegetics" does more damage to the New Testament message than any "scholastic dogmatics ever did."[147] He contends that, in order to properly understand the evangelists' purpose in writing the gospels, we must first recognize that:

> The new religion [Christianity] was, however, based on the belief *of that time* in the resurrection of Christ, and this belief had in turn to be based on the credibility and unanimity of the eyewitness. But we who are alive today no longer have those eyewitnesses' statements, and only the general conclusion drawn from these statements could be authentically preserved by these historians.[148]

If we judge a text "*of that time*" by modern criteria, we will inevitably misconstrue its argument, since only a good grasp of the conventions of historical reliability held at that time empower us to understand the text as its author and original readers understood it. Thus Lessing asserts that "our present belief in the resurrection of Christ" does not require "complete agreement between the historians' reports" if the general conclusion that Christ rose from the dead is common to all of the evangelists.[149] Because the evangelists, their original audiences, and later compilers recognized this general unanimity among the gospels despite the *real* contradictions between eyewitness statements, the modern Christian need not harmonize the gospels. For Lessing, attempts at harmony arise from the exegete's need to satisfy historical standards imposed on scripture from outside traditions. If we consider how the New Testament understands itself as a historical record with a kerygmatic goal, then these contradictions among details become less of an impediment to faith.

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[147] Ibid., 105.
[148] Ibid., 103.
[149] Ibid.

Lessing concludes his remarks on the New Testament's historicity in exactly the same way that Maimonides upholds the doctrine of creation in *Guide* II.25. His preliminary remarks on the inadequacy of historical reports in determining the possibility of miracles reflect Maimonides' doubt concerning Aristotle's theory of an eternal universe. Because of his "great love of truth," Maimonides adopts the most stringent criteria with regards to establishing the origin of the universe by rational proofs.[150] On the level of theory, Maimonides does not reject the eternity of the universe "because certain passages in Scripture confirm the creation."[151] Rather, that Plato and Moses can offer equally valid cosmologies shows that Aristotle's argument is merely one passable theory among many alternatives.

In *AR*, Christ's resurrection serves to underwrite the Christian religion, just as Maimonides understands the doctrine of creation to be a fundamental principle of Jewish Law. Using the "Temple of Diana at Ephesus" as a "simile," Lessing uncovers the harm in unnecessarily exposing the gospel accounts of the resurrection to historical-critical scrutiny.[152] From "ancient reports," we know this temple rested on a foundation of "brittle and friable charcoal."[153] However, the historians who write of this foundation cannot agree on the type of charcoal: "Pliny, for example, spoke of olive-wood charcoal, Pausanias of alder, and Vitruvius of oak."[154] Despite this lack of consensus among historians as to the specific wood in which this charcoal foundation consists, Lessing dismisses such details as irrelevant:

> Oh, what idiots would consider this contradiction, such as it is, an adequate reason for excavating the foundations at twenty different places, only to discover a piece of charcoal in whose fire-ravaged texture one could equally well detect olive-wood, oak, or alder! Oh, what arch-idiots would rather quarrel over the

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[150] Maimonides, *Guide*, 198.
[151] Ibid., 199.
[152] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 103.
[153] Ibid., 104.
[154] Ibid.

> inconclusive texture of charcoal than admire the grand proportions of the temple![155]

In this way, Lessing's open-mindedness goes somewhat further than Maimonides' "great love of truth." Lessing eschews all investigations into the principles of Christianity, praising only that which is above the earth, and not what lies hidden beneath it."[156] Though Maimonides rejects the validity of Aristotle's argument, he claims to do so for only as long as we lack proper evidence. "If, on the other hand, Aristotle had proof for his theory, the whole teaching of Scripture would be rejected, and we should be forced to other opinions."[157]

Lessing goes beyond Maimonides' high standards, claiming that the limitations of human reason and experience necessarily exclude the type of conclusive proof that Maimonides demands of Aristotle, or that Reimarus asks of orthodoxy. While, we cannot absolutely rule out the possibility of miracles, Lessing finds that the converse is likewise true. Just as Reimarus or Spinoza cannot with complete certainty reject miracles, orthodoxy cannot prove that a miracle occurred. Since historical accounts do not offer an answer to the question of miracles, Lessing prefers to judge the miracle of the resurrection, not in itself, but from what came of it.

> Forgive me, dear architect, if all I wish to know of the latter is that it must be good and sound. For it bears its load, and has done so for so long a time. If no wall, no column, no door or window has shifted from its correct angle, this correct angle certainly offers tangible proof that the foundation is stable—but it does not therefore constitute the beauty of the whole. It is on this that I wish to feast my eyes…[158]

Lessing appropriates Maimonides' appeal to the practical benefits of Jewish Law that Spinoza cites in *TTP* in order to offer orthodoxy a reasonable defense of its dogmatic beliefs. Maimonides defends Judaism against Aristotle, not only by showing that "a mere argument in favor of a

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[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Maimonides, *Guide*, 200.
[158] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 104.

certain theory is not sufficient for rejecting the literal meaning of a Biblical text," but also by shifting our focus away from the Bible as dogma or wisdom literature towards the text's legal content.[159] Maimonides knows that a Greek philosopher or a Muslim might disagree with the Bible's cosmology and descriptions of God, yet "no intelligent person" doubts the "correctness" of Jewish Law, whether or not this person is Jewish.[160] Thus, when Maimonides portrays the acceptance of Aristotle's unproved theory of an eternal universe as doing unnecessary violence to scripture, he means to highlight the error in bending or rejecting Jewish Law, the virtue of which no intelligent person denies, in favor of a cosmology that remains to be proved.

In like fashion, Lessing appeals to "the enduring miracle of the [Christian] religion itself," in order to "render probable the miracles which are said to have occurred when it was first founded."[161] The triumph of Christianity's ethical content "over the pagan and Jewish religions through the message of the risen Christ" is sufficient confirmation (though not absolute *proof*) of the miracle of the resurrection.[162]

The 1780 Edition of *The Education of the Human Race*

The 1780 edition of *EHR* presents us with a markedly different narrative, despite maintaining the original fifty-three theses. The 1777 edition has a narrower rhetorical goal: to defend the Mosaic religion against the Fragmentist's claim that the Old Testament gives rise to a religion that is neither beatific nor rational. Although Lessing's Author seems to accomplish a vindication of Judaism, the "Christ came!" that punctuates the 1777 edition looks ahead to his elaboration of the Three Ages of the World. §§54-100 go beyond the Author's initial response to

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[159] Maimonides, *Guide*, 199.
[160] Ibid., 200.
[161] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 105.
[162] Ibid.

Reimarus' fourth fragment by not only falling in line with the traditional Christian belief in supersession, but also by suggesting that Christianity, too, might be superseded. The Author's new project concerns the possibility of this third age, in which the truths of human reason replace both the metaphysical and moral claims made public through revelation.

The complete system advanced by Lessing's Author offers a new set of challenges, in that Judaism and Christianity are here valuable only in their efficacy as stepping-stones towards the collective realization of rational thought and conduct in human history. And although many have read Lessing's *EHR* as Lessing's attempt to salvage revealed religion by demonstrating its contributions to the historical advancement of human reason, I wish to argue against this historicist interpretation of Lessing. When read alongside his works and correspondence from his tenure at Wolfenbüttel, *EHR* begins to look less like a coherent outline of human reason's path through history than it does an ironical distillation of certain shortcomings in the Enlightenment's approach to religion.

Kierkegaard is perhaps the earliest critic of the historicist reading of Lessing's philosophy. For him, there remains a small but significant difference between Hegel's outline of history and that propounded by Lessing's Author. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard upholds Lessing's open-minded, dialectical style in opposition to Hegel's dogmatic "System," and his "breathless haste" to close this system through its completion.[163] Robert Bretall identifies Kierkegaard's qualms with Hegel as stemming from his distrust of the systematician's unwillingness to disclose the hypothetical nature of his philosophy.

> In one place he makes the shrewd remark that if Hegel had constructed his whole systematic edifice, just as he did, and then at the end appended a footnote saying

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[163] Kierkegaard*, A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 197.

> that the whole thing, after all, was only a 'thought experiment,' he would have been the greatest thinker who ever lived; as it is "merely comic."[164]

In contrast, Kierkegaard praises Lessing's open mind, best embodied by an oft-quoted passage from *AR*:

> If God held all truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left hand the persistent striving for the truth, and while warning me against eternal error should say: Choose! I should humbly bow before his left hand and say: "Father, give thy gifts the pure truth is for thee alone."[165]

Kierkegaard understands the difference between Lessing and Hegel as their degree of honesty in approaching the same cognitive phenomenon. A Hegel claims to have conquered this "persistent striving" by being "clever or dishonest enough" to call it a system; only a Lessing is "stupid or honest enough" to see this persistent striving for what it is.[166] "[T]he uncertainty of our conclusions is more than made up for by the freedom which this affords for limitless speculation, and it is this activity, rather than any results it may yield, which exercises and develops our mental capacities."[167]

In order to arrive at a better understanding of Lessing's intentions in writing *EHR*—especially insofar as he distances himself from its Author—we must follow Kierkegaard's approach to Lessing's thought, in which any system is always a comic disguise of his persistent striving after the truth and always bears a footnote admitting its hypothetical character. The significance of *EHR* does not therefore derive from its success as a comprehensive exposition of the path of human reason in history, but rather its comic errors, its precise *inability* to close the system.

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[164] Bretall, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 191.
[165] Kierkegaard, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 195.
[166] Ibid., 196.
[167] Nisbet, introduction to *Lessing's Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 14.

In his biography of Lessing, Nisbet remarks that "the position defined in §4 is essentially that of the neologists, and that in §77 essentially that of Lutheran orthodoxy, and as already noted, the two are incompatible."[168] In his later writings, Lessing prefers "not to come down firmly on one side or the other and leaves the two conflicting positions in unresolved tension, each relativizing the other as equally one sided."[169] Thus, "reason nor revelation alone is the exclusive source of religious truth, which is a product of their interaction."[170] Yet if this interaction, the "reciprocal influence of reason and revelation," is necessary to achieve religious truth, we must question the Author's attempt to describe Judaism and Christianity as superseded by reason. By intentionally leaving §4 and §77 in contradiction, Yasukata argues that Lessing "deliberately set forth these diametrically opposed propositions in order to suggest that the relationship between revelation and reason should be considered not in a static unilateral way, but in a more dynamic and multilateral manner."[171] For without revelation's suspicion of reason, there cannot be any "reciprocal influence"—human inquiry would become one-sided, closed.

How are we to reconcile the Author's preliminary assertion that revelation gives to the human race nothing which it could not obtain on its own with the rhetorical question he puts forward in §77? "And why should not we too, by means of a religion whose historical truth, if you will, looks dubious, be lead in a similar way to closer and better conceptions of the divine Being, of our own nature, of our relation to God, which human reason would never have reached on its own?"[172] This question suggests that, even if reason supersedes Christianity in history, this supersession rests not on knowledge at which humanity may have arrived on its own, but rather

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[168] Nisbet, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, 575.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Toshimasa Yasukata, "Lessing's Basic Thought in *The Education of the Human Race*" in *Lessing's Philosophy of Religion and the German Enlightenment*, 26.
[172] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 95.

on revelation furnished to it by God that springs from a source outside of the bounds of human cognition. Such an admission would not only entail that both Christianity and post-Christian reason begin from similar premises, but also that these premises lie beyond the scope of human reason. Reason would not begin from knowledge naturally accessible to human cognition, but from the *supernatural*. In the event that we can show that human reasoning depends on God's miraculous disclosure of knowledge, Christianity—in all its particularity—would not only have a case against the Author's postulation of a third age, but could also assert its primacy over self-sufficient human reason.

Although Mendelssohn, as well as later critics of *EHR* such as Leo Baeck understand the Author's supersessionism as a slight against Judaism's viability as a religious practice, the tension between the Neological/historicist position (§4) and that of Lutheran orthodoxy (§77) leaves Christianity in a more precarious place than Judaism or secular reason. Because the 1780 edition of *EHR* replaces the original progression from Judaism to Christ's rational ethic, Christianity comes across as a mixture of revelation and reason that is more of stepping-stone than a coherent practice. In contrast, Judaism's heroic obedience to the Mosaic covenant and the third age's unfettered reason come across as unique positions, practicable in themselves.

The Author's figuration of Christianity as the midpoint between Judaism and the third age introduces two significant questions: 1.) to what extent can revelation and reason comingle? 2.) and, if revelation and reason demonstrate ineradicable differences, does *EHR* see the disappearance of one or the other as a victory or a loss? The 1777 edition of the text hones in on many instances where attempts to synthesize reason with revelation actually lead human beings away from the truth. The first human beings moved away from intuitive monotheism through the rational analysis of their limited experience of the empirical world (§§6-7). And though the

Israelite's exposure to "pure Persian doctrine" was initially beneficial to their apprehension of monotheism as portrayed in the Pentateuch, their continued attempts to fuse reason and revelation ended in frustration, a "hairsplitting understanding" of the Mosaic covenant (§§34-52).[173] The Author's more detailed account of the Christian faith is subject to the same difficulties.

In §§72-75, he gives examples of the rational truths contained in Christian doctrine, even if in these teachings are taught, "for a time, as truths of immediate revelation," rather than truths attained by reason alone.[174] The Author discusses the doctrine of the Trinity (§73) as an expression of apophatic theology, much in the same way Maimonides approaches the divine attributes through negation. For the Author (as well as for Lessing in "The Christianity of Reason"), the Trinity prompts human beings to recognize that "God cannot possibly be One in the sense in which finite things are one, that even his unity must be a transcendental unity which does not exclude a sort of plurality."[175] His reason for introducing the notion of a divine unity that does not exclude plurality stems from his wish to introduce the possibility that God's conception of himself is so perfect as to constitute the duplication of God. Lessing's Author employs the analogy of seeing one's reflection in a mirror. Our reflections in the mirror are nothing more than "empty representations of our bodies, tantamount to an imperfect conception of ourselves."[176] On the other hand, God's perfect self-conception is equivalent to seeing our image in the mirror and finding that this image contained "everything without exception" that constitutes our physical body, a "true double."[177] The Author believes that he can think of no "more apt and comprehensible" way of describing this doubling of the One God through his

[173] Ibid., 89.
[174] Ibid., 94.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid.

perfect understanding of his being "than by giving the name of a Son whom God begets from eternity."[178]

Shifting his focus from metaphysics to ethics, Lessing's Author likewise extracts a rational precept from the doctrine of original sin (§74) and the doctrine of the Son's satisfaction (§75). He asserts that original sin is an image-based means of conveying the rational truth that man, "standing on the first and lowest step of his humanity, is by no means so much the master of his actions that he is *able* to obey moral laws."[179] To this ability to obey moral laws, the Author adds that the Son's satisfaction shows that, despite humanity's "original incapacity," God "chose rather to give him moral laws, and forgive him all transgressions in consideration of his Son, i.e. in consideration of the living embodiment of all his own perfections, compared with which, all imperfections of the individual disappear, than *not* to give him those laws, and thus to exclude him from all moral bliss, which cannot be conceived without moral laws."[180] In this way, the individual has these laws, as well as the ability to obey them; but, if the individual falls short of the moral ideal, his folly may be pardoned.

However, the Author performs this act of translation while simultaneously couching his statements in hypothetical language and question marks: "How if this doctrine should in the end…?"; "How if everything finally compelled us to assume…?"; "How if finally everything were to convince us…?"[181] Lessing's Author implores us not to conclude that "speculations of this nature upon the mysteries of religion are forbidden."[182] Though "mystery" was applied to the unknown "in the first age of Christianity," the Author claims that "the development of revealed truths of reason, is absolutely necessary"; revealed truths may not have originally been rational

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[178] Ibid., 95.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid.

truths, "but they were revealed in order to become such."[183] In §76, the Author's analogy of a mathematics teacher, who first presents an unfamiliar principle to his student, then asks them to analyze this mysterious theorem until it makes sense, alludes to the rationalist approach to revelation in §4. This model assumes there is nothing mysterious in itself and that everything is knowable. Humanity's feeling of mystery merely reflects a lack of actual knowledge, rather than the *incapacity* to know.

§77, on the other hand, pushes back against the claims the Author makes in §4, and reaffirms in §76. Here the Author reintroduces the possibility that revelation, as orthodoxy conceives of it, may give us knowledge that "human reason would never have reached on its own."[184] If this is the case, the Christian scriptures retain a certain primacy above all other examples of revelation with regards to the cultivation of reason in human history. Even if Christian theology's dogmatic claims possess an imagistic quality through its deployment of pictorial language (*Vorstellungen*), from which humans are meant to extract rational truths, §77 implies that revealed knowledge, while not above human understanding entirely, lies outside of humanity's purview and must therefore be introduced to it by other means. Such knowledge is not miraculous in itself, but §77 holds on to the possibility that humanity relies on God in order to obtain knowledge of certain things. Even if §76 is correct and Christian mysteries must become rational truths, §77 baldly contradicts §4 in saying that some necessary knowledge is not accessible to humanity without revelation.

From §77 we see that the Author's original wish to assimilate revelation to reason may not be possible to fulfill, especially if we conceive of revelation in an orthodox manner. Following the Author's textual clues, we can interpret "revelation" in two ways. Revelation is

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[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.

either a noble lie or myth meant to elicit the community's acceptance of a rational truth without understanding it; or, revelation constitutes God's word, his conveyance of suprarational knowledge to mankind. Even if we interpret §77 to foretell the advent of the Christianity *of reason*, its doctrine stripped of its outer, particular imagery, the Author expresses doubt as to whether humanity can best cultivate rational cognition without the assistance of Christian revelation. That is, Lessing's Author admits of the possibility that Christianity affords the human race suprarational knowledge that is necessary for the perfection of its reason.

The contradiction of §4 and §77 poses a challenge to the assimilation of Christianity into a historical progression. What if human reason alone cannot obtain knowledge of first principles—the metaphysical foundation of rational thought—without God's miraculous intervention? This substantive approach to revelation, as opposed to the modern understanding of revealed religion as a political instrument, does not correspond to what Lessing deems the most plausible situation. However, §77 dovetails with Lessing's thoughts on biblical religion in his *Counter-Propositions* and *AR*.

AR informs our reading of the historicist progression in *EHR* by calling into question the Author's Neological assimilation of revealed religion into his outline of human history. Because critics of orthodoxy, such as Spinoza and Reimarus, approach the Bible as if it is fully determinative of religion and assess its propositions in the same way they judge a philosophical argument, they have already failed to grasp the object of their critique. The Author's hypothetical statements, his couching of many theses in question marks, and the internal contradictions of his system reflect Lessing's open-mindedness. Any critique of orthodoxy, of which the Bible is only a *part* (albeit an important one), that does not remain open to the possibility that the entire complex of Christianity's theological claims might represent *the* truth, cannot rightfully be said

to confront orthodoxy as it understands itself. Rather, such critiques descend into a simplistic refutation of a poor facsimile of Christianity.

The deliberate failure of the Author's account of the interaction of reason and revelation not only pushes us to stringently question reason's ability to account for orthodoxy's claims, or those of any other revealed religion. However, Lessing's open-mindedness is a two-way street. As much as the Author's inconsistent system allows us to see how Enlightenment critiques of scripture fall short of a fair and comprehensive refutation of revealed religion, Lessing explicitly warns orthodoxy against using similarly closed-minded tactics. Though the extraction of rational truths "in individual circumstances may be found wanting," the Author argues such abstractions from the images that revelation presents are "unquestionably the most fitting exercises of the human reason that exist, just as long as the human heart, as such, is capable to the highest degree of loving virtue for its eternal blessed consequences."[185] For the Author, the Christian religion sublimated Judaism's concern for temporal security, pushing the individual's moral dependence recompense into an indefinite future. The ultimate goal of humanity's education under Judaism, Christianity, and reason consists of assuaging the human race's desire for recompense altogether. Christianity accustoms human beings to moral conduct without reward by offering the pious the mere prospect of salvation in the hereafter. Those educated in this way slowly develop an unconditional love of virtue—the knowledge that correct action constitutes its own reward, one which satisfies the individual more than creature comforts, or the notion of eternal life. "The flattering prospects which are open to the youth," whether temporal or eternal, "what are they

[185] Ibid., 96.

more than means of educating him to become a man, who, when these prospects of honour and well-being have vanished, shall be able to do his *duty*?"[186]

"Or," the Author wonders, "is the human species never to arrive at this highest step of illumination and purity?—Never?"[187] He nevertheless relents; but in his insistence he divulges what he fears might never come:

> No! It will come! it will assuredly come! the time of the perfecting, when man, the more convinced his understanding feels about an ever better future, will nevertheless not need to borrow motives for his actions from the future; for he will do right because it *is* right, not because arbitrary rewards are set upon it, which formerly were intended simply to fix and strengthen his unsteady gaze in recognizing the inner, better, rewards of well-doing.[188]

The third age will be characterized, not only by the moral maturity of the individual, but also by the ethical fulfillment of the human race as a whole. Lessing's Author connects humanity's maturation as an ethical body to the flourishing of reason in order to suggest that reason will show us what is morally correct to the extent that such a demonstration will be more gratifying in itself than the rewards related in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

The Author's chiliasm of reason[189], his "new eternal gospel" (borrowed from the medieval apocalyptic theologian Joachim of Fiore) remains a questionable prophecy by the Author's own admission. Looking at the Joachimite movement's failure to bring about the third age in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which Joachim believed would eliminate humanity's need of secular and ecclesiastical institutions, the Author explains the blame for this delay lies not with the chiliasts, but with their contemporaries, "who had scarcely outgrown their

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[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Immanuel Kant, *Idee zur allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, §8: "Man sieht: die Philosophie könne auch ihren Chiliasmus haben…"

childhood."[190] How could they have anticipated a mass movement toward this third age when humankind, in general, lacked the necessary education? The Author's sabotage of his historicist system reaches its climax at §90 where he asserts that the chiliasts' impatience is that "which made them enthusiasts (*Schwärmer*)" in the first place.[191] "The enthusiast often casts true glances into the future, but for this future he cannot wait… A thing over which nature takes thousands of years is come to maturity just at the moment of his experience… It is strange that this enthusiasm is not more the fashion, if it were only among enthusiasts."[192] That Lessing's Author remains one of a small group of rational enthusiasts at the close of the eighteenth century points to the inadequacy of *EHR* as a systematic description of progress in human history. His observation that he is in a position similar to that of the medieval chiliasts paradoxically resists his linear model of history. If the third age is the fantasy of only a few enthusiasts, he can merely say that the majority of humankind has not readied itself. Especially considering his self-reflective remark that his situation has precedents in prior historical epochs—that all enthusiasm is always contained to small portion of the human race—the proof of the third age's advent would rest in the *lack* of such enthusiasm. The majority of human beings would accept this age of rational autonomy as a matter of fact, rather than identify it as the chimera of a marginal group.

This disappearance of enthusiasm into mass enlightenment would then signal the *closing* of the system, and the closing of individual minds along with it. Though Lessing's choice to describe this political vanguard as "*Schwärmer*" perhaps betrays his doubt as to the seriousness of its claims; the loss of enthusiasm entails complacency. Even if moral speculation leads to folly, the human race would suffer if the individuals that comprise it ceased to concern

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[190] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 97.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.

themselves with the most important questions: How do I understand myself and my circumstances? How do these observations inform my conduct? Following Kierkegaard's reading of Lessing, the closing of the human mind through general apathy towards our persistent striving after the truth would not only destroy dialectical thought as Lessing understands it, but would simply prevent us from being moral at all.

The threat which the Author's system poses to individual freedom expresses Lessing's most unremitting concern in his theological writings—the relationship between unlimited speculation to the moral capacity of all human beings. In a letter to Moses Mendelssohn on 9 January 1771, Lessing voices his contempt for Adam Ferguson's *On the History of Civil Society*. For Lessing, historically-minded authors who seek to fit human life into a dogmatic system constrain rational thought: "It is incredibly difficult to know when and where one should remain, and for every one there are thousands, the goal of whose contemplation is the place where they become tired of contemplation."[193] Though he may arrive at dubious conclusions, the enthusiast, the man who continues to probe his ethical conduct, can rightfully be called moral. The complacent man, who has grown tired of thinking, surrenders his capacity to be moral. *EHR* neither presents a coherent picture of history nor makes a clear judgment in favor of reason or revelation. Yet Lessing's attention to the individual's ability to resist dogmatism reveals his belief that open-minded contemplation is the source of moral conduct.

The Author responds to this concern by allowing for the integration of the individual's independent examination of moral questions into his idea of the education of the human race. "And what if it were as good as proved that the great, slow wheel, which brings mankind nearer to its perfection, is only set in motion by smaller faster wheels, each of which contributes its own

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[193] Lessing in *Sämmtliche Werke* by Moses Mendelssohn, 880; cf. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 22.

individual part to the whole?"[194] The advancement of the human race would then depend on the individual having "travelled along the very same path by which the race reaches its perfection."[195] The Author likewise wonders whether one could pass through all three stages in one lifetime: "Can he have been in one and the selfsame life, a sensual Jew and a spiritual Christian? Can he in the selfsame life have overtaken both?"[196] He straightaway dismisses the possibility that one can pass through Judaism and Christianity to self-sufficient reason in a single lifetime, instead holding out metempsychosis as a possible solution: "Surely not that! But why should not every individual man have been present more than once in this world?"[197] With this remark the Author tacitly expresses his belief that, whether or not an individual reincarnates, he cannot personally experience the desired results of humanity's education if he is alive at only one moment in the middle of this process. This caveat also suggests that the individual must live his life within the bounds of a relatively homogenous religious outlook with a clear motivation for moral action in order for the human race to benefit. Any ethical progress would result from many small contributions to a larger social edifice in history, but the individuals who made these contributions would never enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Yet if this external manifestation of the human spirit—"objective Spirit," as Hegel would have it—becomes the *telos* of history, we are left to wonder how the individual's dynamic thought figures into this last end. If the individual only takes part in one historical moment, without the ability to make educational leaps, the Author's third age would apply more to human works or a social organism composed of many individuals, than to the individual as an autonomous subject. The Author's initial fetishization of the third age sheds light on

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[194] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 97.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid.

historicism's tendency towards a static, pre-determined destiny. The third age may speak to humanity's collective maturation, but at the price of the individual's freedom of dissent.

In order to avoid the tyranny of humanity's outward manifestations of collective progress over the individual, Lessing's Author employs metempsychosis as a corrective. If a human being cannot overtake Judaism and Christianity in the same life, he would necessarily have to return again in a different historical moment to enjoy the benefits of his education, and that of the human race. Lessing's Author emerges from his consideration of the reciprocal influence of revelation and reason by offering us a myth of the individual's independent development, the image of which goes against both orthodoxy and rationalism. "Is this hypothesis so laughable merely because it is the oldest? Because human understanding, before the sophistries of the Schools had dissipated and weakened it, lighted upon it at once?"[198] The Author creates a significant obstacle to the completion of his system by submitting the possibility of that he has fully matured in past lives.

> §96. Why may not even I have already performed all those steps towards my perfection which merely temporal penalties and rewards being to man? [i.e. Judaism]…
> §97. And, once more, why not all those steps, to perform which the prospects of eternal rewards so powerfully assist us? [i.e. Christianity][199]

The notion that the Author may have already surpassed Judaism and Christianity through education in previous lives helps to vivify the role of the individual in the progressive education of the human race. Instead of viewing individuals as locked into a specific historical epoch, using their limited autonomy to influence the external institutions that will edify their descendents, reincarnation depicts humanity's education as a dialectical movement, in which individuals have greater agency and the chance to take part in the very institutions they build, albeit in a later life.

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[198] Ibid., 98.
[199] Ibid.

Nisbet points to Lessing's fragment "That More than Five Senses Are Possible for Human Beings" as evidence of the later Lessing's interest in reincarnation.[200] Lessing employs our current set of biological senses in order to leave open the possibility that earlier organisms once possessed fewer than five senses and that human beings might develop other means of perceiving the empirical world. He begins with Spinoza's and Leibniz's assumption that "nature nowhere makes a leap," thus supporting his claim that humanity "will first have had each of these five senses singly, then all ten combinations of two, all ten combinations of three, and all five combinations of four before it acquired all five together."[201] In place of a completely biological description of the evolution of the senses, Lessing makes a notable distinction between the material organs that facilitate sense perception and the souls who access this sense data. The senses are "material" and "determine the limits of the soul's representations (*Vorstellungen*),"[202] but Lessing argues from the premise of Leibniz's hypothesis that the soul (or the *mind*) is not the mere confluence of sense data, but a substance in its own right.[203] Any "particle of matter can serve as a sense for the soul…the whole material world is animated down to its smallest part," but the soul maintains an existence independent of its various bodies and can therefore move from one array of senses to another.[204]

In a note appended to "That More than Five Senses Are Possible for Human Beings," Lessing reveals that his argument is "none other than the system of the soul's pre-existence and

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[200] Nisbet, introduction to *Lessing's Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 14.
[201] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 180.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais*, 80-81: "*Theophilus*: The mind is not only capable of knowing them [truths], but further of finding them in itself; and, if it had only the simple capacity of receiving knowledge, or the passive power therefor, as indeterminate as that which the wax has for receiving figures and the blank tablet for receiving letters, it would not be the source of necessary truths, as I have just shown that it is; for it is incontestable that the senses do not suffice to show their necessity, and that thus the mind has a disposition (active as well as passive) to draw them itself from its own depths…"
[204] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 181.

of metempsychosis," touting that his line of reasoning places him among "not only Pythagoras and Plato, but the Egyptians and Chaldeans and Persians—in short, all the wise men of the East."[205] Just as in *EHR* §95, Lessing believes that the antiquity of this position "alone must predispose us in its favor. The first and oldest opinion is always the most probable once, because common sense immediately lit upon it."[206] However, Lessing's description of the soul's pre-existence and metempsychosis differs from that of Plato in Book X of *The Republic* in that the myth of Er portrays reincarnation as circular, even retrogressive, whereas Lessing's is seemingly *progressive*. Yet it is still unclear how Lessing's figuration of metempsychosis as the eternal development of the individual affects the Author's outline of history, which terminates in the third age. Yasukata deems it "improper…to take Lessing's idea of reincarnation *dogmatically*…since he puts it forward only *gymnastically*." [207] But, according to Yasukata, while the Author's introduction of metempsychosis into *EHR* may not reflect Lessing's genuine belief in reincarnation, his motives for doing so evince his concern for the individual.

In this respect, Yasukata's analysis of *EHR* closely resembles Paul Tillich's "Lessing and the Idea of an Education of the Human Race" (1929). Tillich accepts the historicist premises of *EHR*, but ultimately judges Lessing's notion of progress to be ancillary to the essay's Christian-humanist message. He juxtaposes *EHR* to Hegel's narrative of revealed religion's role in the consummation of "objective Spirit" in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Tillich elucidates the prematurity of the Joachimites' chiliasm and of the Author's philosophical chiliasm by posing the question: "How is it that they did not reach this [third] age?"[208] The theologian sees two possible responses to his question, the Hegelian and the Lessingian. For Hegel, it is "*not the*

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[205] Ibid., 182.
[206] Ibid., 183.
[207] Yasukata, "Lessing's Basic Thought in *The Education of the Human Race*," 24.
[208] Tillich, *Begegnungen*, 108 [my translation].

personality [of the individual], but rather the objective Spirit that realizes itself in history."[209] In taking the collective Spirit as his starting point, Hegel gives up the "notion of education (*Erziehungsgedanke*)"; "it is no coincidence if he uses, above all, the idea of objective Spirit to understand history and, more importantly, devalues the individual and his fulfillment along with it."[210] While Hegel centers his philosophy around humanity's externalization of Spirit in history, Tillich perceives a similar push towards the external in *EHR*, about which Lessing's Author feels immediately uneasy. "For what part has he [the enthusiast] in it, if that which he recognizes as the best does not become the best in his lifetime?"[211] The Author reintroduces metempsychosis over and against both Enlightenment naturalism and the Christian doctrine of the resurrection, "with the certainty, as Lessing says, of a hypothesis," in order to reaffirm what Tillich calls "a fundamental truth of Christianity, the unconditional worth of the individual soul."[212] Reincarnation ironizes the thorough, dogmatic form of *EHR*, revealing that the certainty of the system is secondary to the individual's freedom to resist its content. Lessing's Author ends *EHR* with a hypothesis that he suspects will seem "laughable" to his audience because of its foreignness and association with primitive cultures to underscore the moral weight of open-minded thought. More laughable still would it be for us to select a more evident solution at the price of free thought, than to adopt a dubious hypothesis that forestalls closure.

In a letter to Reimarus' son, Lessing deploys the persistent striving that we see in *AR* in order to downplay the sincerity of his Author's system:

> *The Education of the Human Race* is by a good friend who likes to set up all kinds of hypotheses and systems in order to have the pleasure of pulling them down

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[209] Ibid., 109 [my translation].
[210] Ibid. [my translation].
[211] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 97.
[212] Tillich, *Begegnungen*, 111 [my translation].

> again. […] But what does it matter? Let each man say what he *thinks* is truth, and may *truth itself* be entrusted to God![213]

Lessing's purpose in devising this pseudepigraphical system reveals itself in the Author's joy in undermining his own argument. §§98-100 hint, not at the third age, but at an eternal education of both the individual and the human race. "Why should I not come back as often as I am capable of acquiring new knowledge, new skills? Do I bring away so much from one visit that it is perhaps not worth the trouble of coming again?"[214] In like fashion, the penultimate thesis of *EHR* represents the Author's final attempt to counteract his own act of tearing down the system:

> §99. Is this a reason against it [metempsychosis]? Or, because I forget that I have been here already? Happy it is for me that I do forget. The recollection of my former condition would permit me to make only a bad use of the present. And that which I must forget *now*, is that necessarily forgotten for ever? […]
> §100. Or is it a reason against the hypothesis that so much time would have been lost to me? Lost?—And what then have I to lose?[215]

Though there is no apparent contradiction between progressive revelation and metempsychosis, one preserving the agency of humanity and the other that of the individual, the Author's own observation that the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul and of reincarnation "lighted upon" early on in human history might be correct ironizes the idea of progress. In this light, progressive education is an illusion, our free and eternal skirting of the truth of metempsychosis, a hypothesis arrived at by many cultures which antedates God's revelation to Moses. The Author might also ask: Why should my development and the development of others be limited to just *three* ages? If what we identify as progress is really a comic cycle by which we display how little we know, we

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[213] Lessing, to J. A. H. Reimarus, 6 April 1778, in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* by Hugh Barr Nisbet, 579.
[214] Lessing, *EHR*, 98.
[215] Ibid.

might look upon *every* age as if it were the moment before the third age. "Is not the whole of eternity mine?"[216]

The Reciprocally Negative Influence of Revelation and Reason

Both Tillich and Yasukata interpret the conclusion to *EHR* as a stalemate between reason and revelation. The myth of reincarnation conjures up Socrates' retelling of Er's story in *The Republic*, but curiously resembles what Tillich calls "*the dynamic spirit of Protestantism*."[217] Lessing would find the "Augustinian ideal of a perfection that rests in itself that still just looks on" unsatisfying; for a human being, "a life that is neither struggle, nor infinite movement, would either be the divine life itself or death."[218] Tillich argues that "reason's protest against orthodoxy during the Enlightenment was seen in the same light as faith's protest against Catholicism during the Reformation…the pure teaching [of the Reformation], following the principle of the priesthood of all believers, was set alongside the rational, generally understandable teaching [of the Enlightenment]."[219] Though *EHR* leaves open the question as to the possibility of revelation or pure reason, the *form* that the Author's hypotheses assume allude equally to Socrates and Plato as it does to Luther and Melanchthon's spirit of inquiry.

Yasukata's "Lessing's Basic Thought in *The Education of the Human Race*," though initially critical of a synthesis of revelation and reason, goes further than Tillich in his assertion that Lessing believes in divine revelation, instead of merely staying open to its possibility. In agreement with Arno Schilson's reading of Lessing in *Geschichte im Horinzont der Vorsehung*, Yasukata claims that "Lessingian reason is, in essence, a 'religiously grounded concept of

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[216] Ibid.
[217] Tillich, *Begegnungen*, 108 [my translation].
[218] Ibid. [my translation].
[219] Ibid. [my translation].

reason' (*die religiös fundierte Vernunftbegriff*)."[220] Thus, the ethical dimension of a *religiously* grounded concept of reason is not merely the individual's rational autonomy, nor even God's theonomy that we see in the Hebrew Bible.

> Correspondingly, the ideal of autonomy he [Lessing] envisioned is an autonomy backed by an awareness of its own limitations. In other words, such autonomy is the mature autonomy, capable of confessing that the absolute truth is for God alone. An autonomy of this sort may well be called "autotheonomy" (*Autotheonomie*).[221]

I believe Yasukata's assertion of autotheonomy oversteps Lessing's essay in two key ways. Autotheonomy first assumes that *EHR* guarantees the existence of a substantial theonomy. But, considering the Author's vacillation with regard to miracles, Lessing does allow the reader any certainty that revealed law is anything more than the natural wisdom of Moses or Christ, though the possibility of theonomy nevertheless remains open. If, as Lessing writes in *AR*, the pure truth is for God alone, nowhere does Lessing assure us that this God truly exists or resembles the biblical God. Secondly, Yasukata uses autotheonomy to reach a conclusion about *EHR* that essentially agrees with §4: "…we can aver that the ideal of Lessingian enlightenment is the attainment of an 'autotheonomy'… In order to attain such a goal, revealed truths must not remain unintelligible truths that are only to be believed, but must become truths that are intrinsic to human reason."[222] This interpretation not only ignores the essay's internal contradictions, but also Lessing's choice to ascribe *EHR* to an anonymous Author whose opinions are not totally consistent with the *Counter-Propositions*. Moreover, Yasukata's belief that the reciprocal influence of revelation and reason enables human beings to "find certitude and repose in God"

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[220] Arno Schilson, *Geschicte im Horizont der Vorsehung*, 124; cf. Yasukata "Lessing's Basic Thought in *The Education of the Human Race*," 27.
[221] Yasukata, "Lessing's Basic Thought in *The Education of the Human Race*," 27-28.
[222] Ibid., 28.

stands in stark contrast to Tillich's more evident remark that *EHR* reflects Luther's spirit of protest.[223]

If we follow Kierkegaard's and Tillich's understanding of Lessingian enlightenment as the individual's persistent striving for the truth, Yasukata's reading of the reciprocal influence of revelation and reason as a *positive* process, whereby the two sides reach synthesis and repose, seems unlikely. The tension between §4 and §77 rule out the likelihood of certainty regarding the existence of suprarational revelation or of a pure reason that does not rest upon divine foundations. Rather, the reciprocal influence of revelation and reason, insofar as the individual remains open-minded, must always be negative, critical. Interpreting §37 in this way, each side retains a critical advantage over the other. An individual who embraces the authority of the unaided reason may still gain greater clarity through dialectical, or *gymnastic*, struggle with those who accept orthodoxy's view of revelation as both miraculous and suprarational. For Lessing, the man of reason stands to gain by confronting the possibility that important truths stand outside the bounds of human reason; the man of faith tempers his claims through interacting with religion's critics who do not share his basic theological assumptions. The third age may never come for humanity as a whole, yet *EHR* demonstrates the benefits of open-mindedness, not only for the individual, but for political life as well. The inherently ethical aspect of Lessing's open-mindedness—his persistent striving—brings about a political attitude that goes beyond mere tolerance. The open-minded individual approaches his interlocutors with the initial concession that their opinions may represent *the* truth, no matter how far they diverge from what he holds to be true.

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[223] Ibid.

Lessing' Progeny

The contemporary significance of the texts that evolved out of the *Fragmentenstreit* has yet to be fully understood. Although the sporadic nature of Lessing's theological works, coupled with the relative obscurity of his historical interlocutors, prevents Lessing from garnering a wider Anglophone readership, his religious polemics have exerted a tremendous influence on more systematic thinkers with larger academic followings. Historicist philosophers such as Hegel, J. G. Herder, and Friedrich Engels are perhaps more likely to be placed in the same genealogy as the man who penned *EHR*, but the connection between many key 19th and 20th century thinkers and Lessing's religious writings has generally been overlooked. In particular, Lessing's thoughts on religion and reason play a significant role in the works of such diverse figures as Hermann Cohen, Karl Barth, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Leo Strauss.

Although Moses Mendelssohn was perhaps more aware of Lessing's love of irony than most in their Berlin circle, his passing remarks on *EHR* in *Jerusalem* reflect an unironical understanding of the essay. On the surface, the Author presents Judaism in a rather negative light, denigrating the "Rabbis" for possessing a "hairsplitting understanding" of the Bible, and using the trope of the "sensual Jew."[224] But what is most characteristic of Mendelssohn's critique of *EHR* is his rejection of supersessionism in both its orthodox and historicist forms.

> I, for my part, cannot conceive of the education of the human race as my late friend Lessing imagined it… One pictures the collective entity of the human race as an individual person and believes that Providence sent it to school here on earth, in order to raise it from childhood to manhood. In reality, the human race is—if the metaphor is appropriate—in almost every century, child, adult, and old man at the same time, though in different places and regions of the world.[225]

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[224] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 91 &97.
[225] Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 95-96.

Mendelssohn's circular conception of history eschews the Author's comparison of humanity to an individual pupil, rescuing Judaism (or any religion) from supersession. However, before invoking Lessing's name in protest of *EHR*, Mendelssohn speculates as to the reincarnation, not of *individuals*, but of *peoples*: "Many a people is destined by Providence to wander through this cycle of ideas, indeed, sometimes it must wander through it more than once; but the quantity and weight of its morality may, perhaps, remain, on balance, about the same during all these various epochs."[226] Though Mendelssohn refers to the multiple lives of the Jewish people, rather than to metempsychosis, his hypothesis nevertheless betrays a Lessingian resistance towards progress.

Kierkegaard may have been the first major philosopher to advocate an ironic reading of Lessing's theological writings, but I wish to argue that 19th and 20th century German-Jewish intellectuals, such as Hermann Cohen, Ernst Cassirer, and Leo Strauss, were the first to speak of Lessing in terms of open-mindedness. Cohen and Strauss especially began to associate Lessing's Wolfenbüttel texts with the philosophy of Maimonides, whether he read his works directly or encountered them through Spinoza, Leibniz, or Mendelssohn.

In *Paradox and the Prophets: Hermann Cohen and the Indirect Communication of Religion*, Daniel Weiss underscores Lessing's influence on Cohen's aesthetics, especially with regard to Cohen's linking of the aesthetic experience of religion to morality. In *The Aesthetics of Pure Feeling*, Cohen "notes that that Lessing's work points to the possibility of that aesthetic experience may in fact call forth 'a new, distinctive type of consciousness.'"[227] Cohen likewise follows Lessing's reading of Spinoza's *TTP* in arguing that "the sphere of religion is distinct from the sphere of philosophy"; however, if Mendelssohn is correct in asserting that Lessing

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[226] Ibid., 95.
[227] Daniel H. Weiss, *Paradox and the Prophets*, 118.

adhered to a refined Spinozism, such refinement is to be seen in his defense of Lutheran Orthodoxy against Spinoza's charges of "non-rational egoism and base passions."[228]

But Cohen's unique contribution to Lessing's reception by German-Jewish philosophers in the 20th century is his placement of Lessing alongside Maimonides. Ned Curthoys believes that Cohen's Maimonidean work, *The Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* is inconceivable without the third age we see in *EHR*.

> Yet this great work of Cohen's was also influenced by Lessing's religious insights, since Cohen locates the unique essence of Judaism in the religion of the Prophets, as evinced from the idea of messianism. In the creation of messianism, the religion of reason is fulfilled as the religion of the future, in which the past must disappear… For Cohen humanity…has not lived in the past and does not live in the present: only the future illuminates its luminous form.[229]

In this way, Cohen equates Lessing's open-mindedness—the third age that is always still coming—to Maimonides' categorical opposition to idolatry in the *Guide*. Lessing's relative freedom from Spinoza's systematic rationalism inspired Cohen to reevaluate Maimonides' relationship to Aristotle. Though this trend Maimonides scholarship reached its peak in the 20th century with the work of Leo Strauss and Shlomo Pines, Cohen was the first to write of Maimonides as a Platonic thinker who "accepted Aristotelian terminology without much reservation," but Aristotle's dogmatism, "which seemed to have been sanctioned and nurtured in such a seemingly harmless fashion, must have scared his rationalism."[230] With Maimonides' and Lessing's negative approach to God—the being that possesses the absolute truth which we must refuse in order to retain our freedom—we "broach the entire problem of how religion relates to

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[228] Ibid.
[229] Ned Curthoys, *The Legacy of Liberal Judaism*, 150.
[230] Cohen, *The Ethics of Maimonides*, 58 &61.

ethics."[231] What Cohen identifies as the ethical dimension of Maimonides' negative attributes of God may well apply to the gymnastic style typified by Lessing's Author in *EHR*:

> …in combating positive divine attributes [Maimonides] was motivated not merely by scholastic subtlety, nor even theological concern for maintaining the conceptual purity of divine unity, but primarily by the pure rationalism of his ethics. Maimonides does not have a double standard of truth: whatever proves true for religion, must *eo ipso* apply to ethics.[232]

Lessing's separation of the free individual who never possess the whole truth with the God bears a striking resemblance to Cohen's Maimonidean notion of God's uniqueness: "He has no peer, which ultimately means that there is but One ethical grounding and origin for the ethical world."[233] Even if Lessing cannot with certainty determine if God exists and what he is like, the hypothesis of a God who is the sole steward of the truth puts Lessing in the same category as Maimonides and Plato. His persistent striving for the truth, and his enthusiasm for a third age that is always still to come, allows for all manner of folly; but Lessing's open-mindedness, like Maimonides' opposition to idolatry, enables us to do ever greater justice to the truth.

Karl Barth: The Bible Is Not Religion

Karl Barth remains the most significant non-Jewish student of Hermann Cohen, from whom he adopted the ironical interpretation of Lessing's theological essays. Barth's chapter on Lessing in *Protestant Theology in the 19th Century* shows the theologian's affinity with Cohen's reading of Lessing as an open-minded critic of dogmatism in theology and philosophy. For Lessing, "the ultimate reality is this free, stirring communion of the ego with the object, in which, however, the ego ever retains and regains the mastery…without relapsing into the naïve

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[231] Ibid., 78.
[232] Ibid., 78-79.
[233] Ibid., 104.

individualism of his older contemporaries."[234] Yet the practical application of Lessing's open-mindedness that Barth brings to his own theology is not the critical method of *Laocoön*, but rather Lessing's Maimonidean aversion to dogmatism (*idolatry* by another name) on the part of rationalist and fideist alike. Barth attunes his *Epistle to the Romans* to "Lessing's angry growl at the supposed believer, 'who has memorized and who utters, often without understanding them, the principles of Christian doctrine, who goes to church and takes part in every ceremony because it is customary.'"[235] Lessing's reaction to Reimarus in his *Counter-Propositions* and *AR* inform Barth's understanding of the Bible insofar as he distinguishes between scripture as history, revelation that "has come," and the voice of the Holy Spirit, revelation that is "still coming."[236]

Despite his confessional proximity to Lutheran Orthodoxy, Barth has largely heeded Lessing's *Counter-Propositions* and the *Axioms* addressed to Johann Melchior Goeze, helping him to cut through the 19th century's emphasis on historical criticism or abstract views on scripture. In his *Doctrine of the Word of God (CD 1.2)* and *Epistle to the Romans*, Barth places great emphasis on the minutiae of scripture and careful exegesis. However, his suspicion of outward religion, as well as the complacency and haughtiness it sometimes engenders, reveals an orthodox theology which internalizes Lessing's treatment of scripture in *Counter-Propositions*:

> For the Bible obviously contains more than what pertains to religion, and it is merely a hypothesis that it must be equally infallible in this additional respect. Religion also existed before there was a Bible. Christianity existed before the evangelists spoke and wrote about it.[237]

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[234] Barth, *Protestant Thought*, 120.
[235] Ibid., 124.
[236] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 83.
[237] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 63.

Lessing's observation that "the defense [of orthodoxy] tends to match the [reason's] attack" in the *Axioms* speak to the unsubstantial victories of religion's critics. Even if orthodoxy makes itself the subject of ridicule by laboring over the most insignificant detail to make it harmonize with a larger narrative, Lessing understands that neither the detail nor its infallibility is essential to the Christian faith. Similarly, Barth's disavowal of any Christian religion that does not go further in recognizing man's inability to save himself should be read as an act of open-mindedness and Lessingian striving. Religion contains more than what pertains to faith. Like details in the Bible, religion is the foothold of "[t]heology, church, and faith" in the world, without which these three would become "hollow and empty"; but, Barth claims, we must not let religion, that which is "merely *humanly remarkable*," obstruct "the *divinely unique*."[238]

Ludwig Wittgenstein: *A Rejoinder* and Quietism

B. F. McGuiness' and G. H. von Wright's 1991 publication of a handful of Ludwig Wittgenstein's and Bertrand Russell's letters, found in the possession of Dora Russell and the Brenner Archiv, reveals the early Wittgenstein's deep admiration of Lessing's work, particularly in the fields of aesthetics and religion. In an undated letter most likely written in 1922, Wittgenstein asks Russell if he has read Lessing's theological writings: "Do you happen to have among your books the 'Religious Controversies' (*'religiösen Streitschriften*') of Lessing? If so, please read them, I think they will interest you and give you great pleasure. I like them very much."[239] Russell responds by admitting that he has neither read nor possesses the book in question; yet he also remarks that he has seen the book among the belongings that Wittgenstein

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[238] Barth, *On Religion*, 35-36.
[239] Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Russell (1990-91)*, 120-21.

stored at Russell's house upon leaving Cambridge.[240] Another letter written by Wittgenstein to Ludwig Hänsel in 1938 concerning a photograph shows that Wittgenstein may have planned at one point to emulate Lessing by writing "a Laocoon for photographers," arguing that Lessing's study of classical expressions of pathos might inform the display of emotion in photography.[241]

Aside from his interest in Lessing's work in aesthetics, the bulk of Wittgenstein's explicit references to Lessing have to do with religion, specifically the psychological origin of faith. In his "secret diaries," he meditates upon the value of a Bible he found in a hotel while on vacation. "Do I have nothing before me in the Bible but a book? But why did I say, 'nothing but a book'? I have a book before me… that if it stands alone, can have no more value than any other document."[242] "This," he continues, "is what Lessing meant… This document in itself cannot bind me to any belief in the teachings that it contains—as little as any other document that could have fallen into my hands."[243] Wittgenstein goes so far as to say that a religion's ethical teachings, as well as its historical and soteriological beliefs, cannot become *certain* for us if we lack the necessary "condition of spirit" (*Geisteszustand*).[244] If we do not begin from the feeling of certainty with which this condition of spirit supplies us, we can neither make sense of a religion nor feel moved to accept its doctrines. "For you, there cannot be an argument about belief, for you are not familiar with that about which is argued."[245] To Wittgenstein, a "sermon," or a passage of the Bible "can be the precondition of faith," but these are not enough to "will belief to move"; only certainty can truly stir belief in this way, even if this belief agrees with a

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[240] Bertrand Russell in *Russell (1990-91)*, 122.
[241] Wittgenstein, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*, 244.
[242] Wittgenstein, *Geheime Tagebücher*, 148-49 [my translation].
[243] Ibid. 149 [my translation].
[244] Ibid., 150 [my translation].
[245] Ibid.

sermon or the Bible.[246] Wittgenstein concludes that faith and the certainty it brings come from faith's inexplicable presence in the human mind: "Faith begins with faith. One must begin with faith; faith does not follow from words. Period."[247] If we do not have faith, we cannot honestly refute it since such a refutation requires personal familiarity with faith. Nor can one who has faith entirely describe his feeling of faith to another who does not. All meaningful talk of faith can only take place between two or more human beings that possess the same feeling of certainty.

From this entry, we see that Wittgenstein reads Lessing as a radically open-minded thinker, who "attempts to demonstrate a falsehood which he himself believes to be true."[248] Like Cassirer, Wittgenstein understands Lessing's skill as a critic to derive, not an aptitude to give a mere *logical* reconstruction of another's position, but rather from his awareness of the aesthetics component of certainty. Because neither the Bible nor the liturgy fully contains the Christian faith—since it is "absolutely untrue" that anyone has "intentionally deluded himself"—we must take an agnostic stance toward the "condition of spirit" that is faith.[249] Even an approximation or the memory of faith (as the case may be with Lessing) cannot afford us the understanding of faith necessary to critique it. We may only begin to comprehend faith by starting from faith, a self-causing sense of absolute certainty.

Wittgenstein's commentators have yet to explore the influence of Lessing's "*religiöse Streitschriften*" on *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the posthumously published *Culture and Value*. In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein quotes §§48-49 from *EHR*, which speak to the Author's suspicion of esoteric writing in the Bible. Read alongside his analysis of Lessing in

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[246] Ibid.
[247] Ibid., 151 [my translation].
[248] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 97.
[249] Ibid.

Geheime Tagebücher, Wittgenstein's observation that the Bible is just a document that serves as an external record of or compass for faith echoes the Author's description of the scripture as a patchwork of genres that flies by interpreter's net. Such a document seems "to say the same thing while at bottom meaning, or being capable of meaning, something different."[250] Wittgenstein folds this passage from Lessing into a short reflection on his own attempts at writing a book. There is a "great temptation to try to make the spirit explicit"; but, "when you bump up against the limits of your own honesty…you can say what you like, it takes you no further."[251] He is not sure where to start a book containing "the original data of philosophy, written and spoken sentences," because his Lessingian honesty prods him to acknowledge "the difficulty of 'all is in flux.'"[252] "Perhaps," writes Wittgenstein, this admission "is the very point at which to start."

Wittgenstein's distillation the message of *EHR* to the suggestion that all honest philosophy emerges from our acceptance the world's inconstancy leads into an aphorism that best accounts for Lessing's apparent historicism in *EHR*. "If someone is merely ahead of his time, it will catch him up one day" (*den holt sie einmal ein*).[253] Instead of reading Lessing as the Joachim of Fiore of "progressive civilization" in modern Europe, Wittgenstein likens Lessing's style to putting "a lock on the door which will be noticed only by those who can open it, not by the rest."[254] For Wittgenstein, Lessing's remarks on chiliasm are to be taken ironically, as a way of distracting us from the lock. The medieval chiliasts succumbed to the temptation "to make the spirit explicit," putting their intuitions into "written and spoken sentences."[255] The chiliasts' language becomes an external testament to an uncertain future. When read dishonestly, their

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[250] Lessing, *EHR* §§48-49 in *Culture and Value* by Wittgenstein, 8.
[251] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 8.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Ibid.
[254] Ibid.
[255] Ibid.

words appear to mean something stable, enough to be overtaken in time. However, the more stable our interpretations render the chiliasts' statements, the easier it becomes to claim that we have caught up with these enthusiasts that once seemed ahead of their time. If we analyze the chiliasts honestly, their written and spoken sentences, as well as their historical conditions, become "a whirlpool of infinite regress," where we can scrutinize everything surrounding the chiliasts, but go no further.[256] Wittgenstein's brief commentary on *EHR* suggests that Lessing, insofar as he juxtaposes the world of flux to the rigid language we use to describe this world, is not a historicist. Rather, Lessing's style of philosophy constitutes his free surrender to the "whirlpool" of "infinite regress" to further his search for the truth. According to Wittgenstein, Lessing affirms that we cannot predict the trajectory of human progress through a systematic analysis of history if we frame the study of history as nothing more than language. The Author's doubt as to the reality of historical progress lends credence to Wittgenstein's non-historicist reading of Lessing: "Go thine inscrutable way, Eternal Providence! ... Let me not despair of thee, even if thy steps appear to me to be going backward. It is not true that the shortest line is always straight."[257] This artificially stable set of pictures can certainly *orient* us, but words and sentences cannot pin down the flux which affects human history as much as its does the physical world.

Propositions 6 and 7 of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (*TLP*) likewise reveal the influence of Lessing's theological writings on Wittgenstein's early philosophy. In particular, I believe Wittgenstein's analogy of the ladder (6.54) and his advocacy of quietism (7) resemble Lessing's rhetoric in *AR*. Moreover, there are clear stylistic similarities between Wittgenstein's concluding remarks to *TLP* and the Author's voice in *EHR*, especially in his use of rhetorical questions and aphorisms. Wittgenstein's appropriation of Lessing's style allows us to read *TLP*

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[256] Ibid.
[257] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 97.

in quite a different light. Wittgenstein's essay is not rigid system, but instead an exercise that enables the philosopher to both equivocate and better his understanding of the world through his errors.

Wittgenstein begins *TLP* by stating that, apart from the remainder of his propositions, the book's central thesis is: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."[258] This quietistic approach to philosophy fits well with his remarks on Lessing and faith in *Geheime Tagebücher*, as well as with Lessing's prudent query of biblical religion in *AR*. Though *TLP* 6 at first appears to exclude the possibility of revealed religion, with statements like "God does not reveal himself *in* the world," or "[t]he temporal immortality of the soul…will not do for us what we always tried to make it do," we should interpret Wittgenstein's removal of God and revelation from the world as his way of protecting our experience of "the mystical" from senseless criticism and ridicule.[259] He seeks to confine philosophy to "what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy."[260] Wittgenstein's relegation of religious propositions—as well as philosophy's scrutiny of these propositions—to senselessness does not prevent these claims from possessing value. On the contrary, Wittgenstein asserts that philosophy's inability to grasp ethics or aesthetics speaks casts religion in a positive light:

> If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so… It must lie outside the world. Hence there can be no ethical propositions. Propositions cannot express anything higher. It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics are transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one.)[261]

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[258] Wittgenstein, *TLP*, 155.
[259] Ibid., 153.
[260] Ibid., 155.
[261] Ibid., 149.

As much as philosophy seeks to criticize revealed religion, religion's detractors cannot logically claim that religion is without value without overreaching, for philosophy may only analyze that which is *in* the world. If philosophy approaches theological claims pertaining to things beyond the world just as it does a scientific hypothesis (i.e. a proposition that we can understand from within the world), then it subjects its critique of religion to the same senselessness it perceives in religion. By understanding value as outside the world, and by demonstrating that modern refutations of revealed religion are not logically justified, Wittgenstein safeguards the possibility of religion. Like Lessing, he prefers to judge the value of what appear to be senseless propositions by admiring the whole edifice that it bears. He turns away *the* truth, accepting the individual's ethical and aesthetic experience in its place.

Wittgenstein's discussion of the "immortality of the soul of man" and "*the riddle*" towards the end of *TLP* plays on the Author's ironizing of his progressivist system in *EHR* through his consideration of metempsychosis as a possible alternative. Since he determines the "solution of the riddle of life in space and time" to lie "*outside* space and time," Wittgenstein sees the belief that "temporal immortality" might help us to fully comprehend life as equally flawed.[262] If it is impossible for us to know a truth that lies outside of the world, infinite life in the world would give us nothing more than what we could achieve in a normal lifespan. I believe that Wittgenstein's "temporal immortality" speaks more to Lessing's hypotheses in *EHR* and *AR* than to any Judeo-Christian notion of eternal life, what Wittgenstein himself defines as "timelessness."[263] Instead, his critique of temporal immortality meshes well with Lessing's ironical treatment of historical progress. The third age is always coming because the world and

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[262] Ibid., 151.
[263] Ibid.

man's limitations exclude the possibility of its fulfillment. An infinite cycle of reincarnation cannot put us closer to the truth if what we seek is not available to us in the world.

Wittgenstein, like Lessing before him, chooses God's left hand over his right; persistent striving for the truth, rather than the truth itself, is humanity's lot. In a logical sense, the riddle whose solute lies beyond the world is not a riddle at all: "For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed… If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered." What becomes of a philosophy that denies the sense of what many religions hold to be the most important questions? Wittgenstein follows Lessing in using logically justifiable propositions to *leave behind* this style of philosophy, broaching the ethical and the aesthetic. His commitment to a philosophy that remains attentive to moral behavior demands reverence for ethics and aesthetics, even though this philosophy cannot make sense of them. Because we cannot speak of these categories, the philosopher must engage ethics and aesthetics by acknowledging the shortcomings of his language.

Wittgenstein admits *TLP* contains many equivocal statements and that he often oversteps the boundaries he lays out for himself, comparing his errors to a ladder that can be cast aside once he reaches his destination. In doing so, he echoes Lessing's siege analogy in *AR* to describe the Enlightenment's many attempts to refute revealed religion.

> My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) … He must surmount these propositions; then he will see the world rightly.[264]

Compare Wittgenstein's imagery to Lessing's description of the Fragmentist (Reimarus) towards he beginning of *AR*:

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[264] Ibid., 155.

> …the anonymous author mounted nothing less than a full-scale onslaught on the Christian religion. There is…not a single angle, however well concealed, which he has not attacked with his scaling ladders. Of course he did not fashion all these ladders himself or with new materials… But what does it matter? It is not the maker of the ladder who prevails, but the man who scales it; and even a dilapidated ladder may still support a bold and agile man.[265]

Both use the ladder as a metaphor for one's line of argument leading towards a certain goal. For Wittgenstein, the propositions advanced in *TLP* move toward the recognition of our linguistic limitations. Lessing, on the other hand, portrays the Fragmentist's various arguments against Christianity as dilapidated ladders leading the climber to the refutation of the Christian faith. However, Lessing's later comments on the Fragmentist in *AR* suggest that he believes the success of this siege to be both impossible and undesirable. Wittgenstein's borrowing of Lessing's image of the ladder points to another possible reading of *AR*, perhaps explaining what Lessing himself stood to gain in publishing and debating the Reimarus fragments. Lessing's purpose in *AR* becomes much clearer if we imagine that *he* is the climber, using these faulty ladders to reach a goal other than the refutation of Christianity. Because the Fragmentist reuses so many ladders that have "been used in several assaults" without success, "every objection" to the Bible from "time immemorial," Lessing understands that the ladders will not bring about victory for religion's detractors.[266] Rather, the many flawed (often underhanded) arguments against Christianity only serve to demonstrate how incomplete all arguments against the possibility of revealed religion are. Lessing defends orthodoxy, not because he offers something else to take its place, but out of his awareness that modern critics of religion lack definitive proof of their claims.

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[265] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 96.
[266] Ibid.

Wittgenstein's appropriation of Lessing is significant in that it allows him to not only secure religion's autonomy on philosophical grounds, but also to question whether philosophy can make ethical or aesthetic claims at all. Moreover, his quietism suggests that Lessing's agnosticism towards revealed religion and Enlightenment's emphasis on the self-sufficiency of human reason is the only defensible position, from a logical standpoint. Religion and philosophy may attempt to disparage one another through ridicule or coercion, but Wittgenstein, like Lessing, recognizes the inherent meaninglessness of such a quarrel.

Leo Strauss: Esotericism and Revelation

In the twentieth century, Leo Strauss stands out as the most vocal proponent of Lessing's open-minded style of philosophy. Although Strauss died before carrying out his plan to publish a full-length book[267] on Lessing's religious writings, many of Strauss' principle works contain explicit references to texts written by Lessing during his time at Wolfenbüttel, such as *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930), *Philosophy and Law* (1935), and *Natural Right and History* (1949/1953). In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss refers to Lessing's 9 January 1771 letter to Mendelssohn in favor of his preliminary argument against belief in historical progress.[268] Strauss' citation of Lessing in the context of an argument against historicism suggests that Strauss not only doubted that *EHR* reflected Lessing's genuine beliefs, but also that he understood Lessing to be historicism's greatest enemy: "[there are] a thousand to every one to whom the goal of their thinking is the place where they become tired of thinking."[269] Lessing's early rejection of the type of historicist philosophies that would come to dominate political

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[267] Leo Strauss Papers, 1930-1997. Box 16, Folder 5. Special Collections Research Center. Regenstein Library. University of Chicago. Chicago, Illinois.
[268] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 22.
[269] Lessing, *Briefe*, 880 [my translation].

thought after his death prompted Strauss to consider what Lessing saw as the superior alternatives to Enlightenment progressivism. Strauss heralds Lessing as unique among modern philosophers in that, by ultimately rejecting progress and the Enlightenment's attack on religion, he in turn recovered both classical philosophy and biblical religion.

In "Exoteric Teaching," Strauss credits Lessing as one of a handful of modern thinkers who rediscovered the distinction between exoteric and esoteric writing characteristic of classical and medieval philosophy. Alongside Maimonides' introduction to the *Guide*, essays such as "Leibniz on Eternal Punishment" and "Andreas Wissowatius' Objections to the Trinity" helped Strauss to reassess the relationship between a philosopher wish to publish his ideas and his prudence with regard to politics and religion, culminating in his oft-disputed *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Yet, by looking beneath the surface of the technique involved in exoteric writing, the situation that prompts a philosopher to conceal his opinions suggests a more substantial similarity between Strauss and Lessing. Strauss understands exoteric writing not only to be a response to possible persecution, but also to philosophy's limitations with respect to the most significant questions—"God, man, and the world."[270] Though "all practical and political life is essentially inferior to contemplative life," the prudent philosopher recognizes that his speculations may contradict the religious and political opinions necessary for political order and justice.[271]

Yet Strauss believes Lessing to share in the tradition of open-mindedness initiated by Socrates and Plato, and best understood by Maimonides. Thus, Lessing engages in exoteric, or *dialogic* writing not only to protect the non-philosopher from his heterodox observations, but also because he understands his ideas to be provisional. Strauss groups Maimonides and Lessing

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[270] Kenneth Hart Green, *Leo Strauss and the Rediscovery of Maimonides*, 93.
[271] Leo Strauss, "Exoteric Writing" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 64.

together as open-minded thinkers because both demonstrate a great deal of humility as to the certainty of their conclusions. Even if Maimonides and Lessing claim to represent *the* truth, they concede that their beliefs rest on basic assumptions that are not entirely self-evident, and therefore open to debate. These two philosophers refrain from criticizing religion out of prudence and their knowledge that philosophy cannot honestly refute revealed religion without assuming away the core principles of revealed religion—the belief in miracles and God's ability to reveal his will to humankind.

Strauss asserts that exoteric writing becomes a key aspect of Lessing's analysis of earlier philosophers and of his own writing only in the last decade of his life. It is no coincidence that Lessing discovered exotericism through Leibniz's comments on eternal damnation during his engagement with various early-modern critics of orthodoxy while librarian at Wolfenbüttel. For Strauss, Lessing's open-minded interest in the politically charged question as to the nature and possibility of revelation necessitated an ironical style that would make it difficult to separate Lessing's own opinion from those of his interlocutors. The gravity of the matter best explains Lessing's dissimulation in the *1777 Beyträge*, *AR*, and *EHR*, as well as his predilection for putting many voices—real or invented—in dialogue with one another.

However, Strauss' remarks on Lessing suggest that there is a deeper relationship between the form and content of Lessing's thought. As with Plato or Maimonides, Lessing's ability to reconstruct a faithful representation of an interlocutor's argument points to his open-mindedness, his unwillingness to temporarily exclude his own prejudices from his study of another's thought. Lessing's presentation of Leibniz's exotericism shows that a philosopher engaged in careful writing makes only exoteric statements, the truth of which "he does not, strictly speaking,

believe in"; he merely introduces an idea as "a mere possibility."[272] This technique not only allows a philosopher to avoid pinning down his own beliefs, buts also points to his train of thought, rather than his conclusions. He maps out a path by which his reader might arrive at the same conclusions and preempts the responses of what he imagines to be the most notable objections to his claims. Strauss' most concise work on textual interpretation, "How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy," recommends the open-minded attitude that we see in Lessing's fair reiteration of both the orthodoxist and rationalist positions in *AR*. The "historian of philosophy…must have as perfect a freedom of mind as is humanly possible. No prejudice in favor of contemporary thought, even of modern philosophy, of modern civilization, of modern science itself, must deter him from giving the thinkers of old the full benefit of the doubt."[273] Thomas Pangle asserts that Strauss views this guideline to be equally as important to the philosopher as it is to the historian of philosophy, who must himself undergo a "conversion to philosophy, if he wants to do his job properly."[274] Strauss identifies an unchecked self-confidence as the hamartia of modern rationalism, which simply understands reason as the most obvious authority. However, the open-minded philosopher "must not start from the premises that assume the sufficiency of reason," but instead needs to:

> …justify the authority, of reason in the eyes, and in the terms, of men who do not begin by accepting such a standard as necessarily the supreme standard. An he must execute this task in full awareness of the fact that what he faces is not mere intellectual doubt but moral suspicion, and even the likelihood of moral persecution.[275]

Thus Strauss' image of the philosopher is a contemplative human being caught between two competing, though mutually necessary, ideas of justice. The philosophic individual has a moral

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[272] Ibid., 66.
[273] Strauss, "How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 211.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Thomas Pangle, Introduction to *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* by Leo Strauss, *xviii*.

obligation to himself, in the sense that one's choice to spend his finite life in search of the truth implies that he does not wish to squander his life. This individual likewise values the community which affords him the leisure required to develop his thought, conducting his studies in such a way that does not publically threaten the received opinions necessary for this community to maintain its existence. However, Strauss recognizes one case in which the philosopher's justice to himself conflicts with his responsibility to his community, a situation exemplified by Lessing's involvement in theological debates in his final years.

Heinrich Meier's study of Strauss' opposition of philosophy and theology highlights the connection between Strauss' work on exotericism and what he calls the theological-political problem. The ineradicable differences between philosophical criticism, on the one hand, and religion and politics, on the other, are for Strauss "*the* theme of his life's work."[276] Strauss' central criticism of the modern state, explains Meier, is that "the demands of politics are rejected with same matter-of-factness as those of religion."[277] Philosophy and science have so allied themselves with the modern state such that humans in general no longer poses the question, "Why politics?"; philosophy "no longer knows how to answer the question, 'Why philosophy?'"[278] Strauss traces modern rationalism's lack of self-reflection to Spinoza's apparent defeat of biblical religion. Because we disassociate religion from politics, and classical political questions from rational discourse, modern philosophy is not compelled to speak to the theological-political problem. Strauss names this lack of concern for religion and politics for Spinoza's treatise because *TTP* represents philosophy's unqualified decision to turn away from the radical objections to pure reason that revealed religion and politics represent.

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[276] Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*, 4.
[277] Ibid., 11.
[278] Ibid.

Strauss' work on Maimonides and Spinoza draws our attention to the stark separation of reason from revelation that we also see in Lessing's correspondence with his brother Karl. Spinoza's explicit partition of philosophy and theology has precedence in the *Guide*. Though Maimonides does not, like Spinoza, make the division of philosophy and revelation the central thesis of the *Guide*, he maintains that his audience consists of Jewish scholars that have encountered discrepancies between Judaism and the problems specific to Greco-Arabic philosophy. Maimonides does not speak to the "ill-informed Theologian," who, "possessing no knowledge of the properties of things," will pass over statements in scripture that contradict the truths so clear to those well versed in philosophy.[279] The *Guide* speaks to religious matters, but Maimonides' objective in invoking the Bible and rabbinical commentaries within a book of philosophy is to consider the question: What, if anything, does philosophy give to or take away from Jewish Law and its principle doctrines. The *Guide* appears to mix philosophy and Judaism, but Strauss suggests that Maimonides does this in order to furnish us with specific examples of moments where it is reasonable to conclude that philosophy is unable to understand Judaism, and *vice versa*. Maimonides' lengthy discussion of homonyms in the Bible, for instance, does not begin from revealed doctrine, but rather from a *philosophic* opinion, namely that God is incorporeal. In this way Maimonides must take a very critical approach to diction in the Bible, cataloguing how each word or expression is used in both its literal and figurative senses, excluding the invention wordplay characteristic of some Midrashic literature. By doing so, he demonstrates how knowledge of natural science and metaphysics may assist the exegete in interpreting scripture and its legal ramifications, for Maimonides himself points to "numerous"

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[279] Maimonides, *Guide*, 5.

passages in which God "is represented as a corporeal being."[280] Even though scripture refers to God as both corporeal and incorporeal, Maimonides' assertion that God's incorporeality "has been demonstrated by proof" and better fits Judaism's aversion to idolatry shows that philosophy may help Judaism clarify its teachings.[281]

However, while there are many instances where philosophy may elucidate the Bible, the ineradicable difference between creation *ex nihilo* and Aristotle's eternal universe represents a case where philosophy stands to cause Judaism harm. Maimonides' discussion of creation and the eternity of the universe is significant in that Strauss is able to make sense of *Guide* II.25 only through Spinoza's prejudiced reading of Maimonides and Lessing's corrective reading of him in *AR*. Despite recommending that we separate philosophy from theology, Spinoza attacks Judaism on multiple fronts and envisions a very limited Christianity. Spinoza's belief that the Law of Moses contains "nothing but the decrees of the historical Hebrew state," that no one "but the Hebrews" is compelled to adopt these laws, and even the Hebrews "were only bound to them so long as their state survived" presupposes rabbinical, or *stateless* Judaism to be meaningless.[282] Moreover, the theology that he wishes to keep apart from philosophy does not pertain to any existing theological tradition in the west. For Spinoza, theology is "revelation in so far as it proclaims the purpose which we said that Scripture intends, namely the method and manner of obedience that is the dogmas of true piety and faith."[283] He subsequently condemns the use of the Bible or the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" to make claims beyond the sphere of moral behavior.[284] Spinoza reduces scripture to its moral content, arguing "revelation alone teaches us

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[280] Ibid., 199.
[281] Ibid.
[282] Spinoza, *TTP*, 9.
[283] Ibid., 190.
[284] Ibid., 193.

that it comes from a singular grace of God which we cannot acquire by reason."[285] Since Spinoza's philosopher is already moral and remains the only type of man that would derive his morals from reason alone, allows the "whole human race"—the non-philosophers—to have good laws, made absolute by invoking God.[286] Without "this testimony of Scripture," the temporal salvation of the non-philosopher "would be in doubt."[287]

Strauss understands the difference between Maimonides' and Spinoza's separation of philosophy and theology as indicative of a major shift from medieval to Enlightenment rationalism. Maimonides' *Guide* encapsulates medieval philosophy's approach to revelation across the three major confessions: "only the philosophers can recognize the truths of revelation by themselves and even they can do so after strenuous, protracted preparations."[288] The Enlightenment rationalists assert the exact opposite—revelation takes little effort to comprehend, to say nothing of philosophical training. The moral truths found in the Bible "are at the same time the truths of a 'healthy common sense,' and are thus accessible to all men without further ado."[289] In this way, philosophers like Spinoza see scripture as containing nothing qualitatively different from those truths at which we arrive by common sense; we merely append the epithet "divine" to these truths for pedagogical purposes. Strauss determines that, for its lowering of revelation to only a name, a divine sanction of common sense, the Enlightenment "merits the destructive, contemptuous critique to which Lessing subjected it."[290] In asking the question "What is a revelation that reveals nothing?", Lessing upholds Spinoza's division of philosophy

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[285] Ibid., 194.
[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid.
[288] Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 43.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid.

and theology more than Spinoza does in *TTP*.[291] Because he questions the assumptions necessary for Spinoza to carry out his critique of religion, Strauss reads Lessing's theological writings as a return to the medieval view of revelation held by Maimonides.

Following Strauss, what separates Maimonides and Lessing from Spinoza and the Enlightenment is their radical appraisal of the limits of human reason, their admission that philosophy might be "*dependent* on Revelation."[292] From "the reciprocal influence" of reason and revelation in *HER* §§36-37, Strauss derives the name for Maimonides' and Lessing's decision to doubt whether philosophy can stand on its own footing: "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy."[293] The lesson of Maimonides' refutation of Aristotle's eternal universe in *Guide* II.25 goes beyond a mere critique of Aristotle's argument. In both *Philosophy and Law* and "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," Strauss focuses on Maimonides' distinction between "knowledge of sublunar things," that which is available to humans, and "knowledge of the things of heaven," that of which our knowledge is incomplete.[294] Because Maimonides conceives of the sublunar world (human beings included) to consist of matter, "becoming and decay," any arguments concerning the higher, immaterial spheres are by and large inconclusive.[295] "Matter," says Strauss, "our determination by it and our dependence on it, is the reason we can only inadequately fulfill our highest and actual calling, the knowledge of 'God and the angels.'"[296]

In *AR*, Strauss finds Lessing deploying Maimonides' tactics against the historical-critical treatment of miracles in the Bible. Alongside Lessing's assertion that the dubiousness of the

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[291] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 66.
[292] Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 45.
[293] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 89.
[294] Strauss, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," *lv.*
[295] Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 45.
[296] Ibid.

gospel accounts of miracles is not sufficient to refute the possibility or historical reality of these miracles, the relative success of the Christian religion "must render probable the miracles which are said to have occurred when it was first founded."[297] Strauss echoes Lessing's response to historical criticism in "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy":

> …the historical refutation of revelation…presupposes natural theology because the historical refutation always presupposes the impossibility of miracles, and the impossibility of miracles is ultimately guaranteed only by knowledge of God…and this in turn requires completion of the true system or the true and adequate account of the whole. Since such a true or adequate, as distinguished from a merely clear and distinct, account of the whole, is certainly not available, philosophy has never refuted revelation.[298]

Lessing's unique contribution to philosophy's recognition that revelation is possible and deserves consideration on its own terms stems from his turn from the Enlightenment and his reassessment of the relationship between law and dogma in Christianity. Strauss cites Lessing's 9 January 1771 letter to Mendelssohn in order to clarify how Lessing understood his relation to biblical religion as a non-believer: "I worry…that, in having thrown away certain prejudices, I have thrown away a little too much, which I need to get back. That I have not, for my part, already done so is because I was hindered by the fear that, little by little, I would drag the muck back into my house."[299] Strauss dismisses the claim that the prejudices Lessing threw away were those of Protestant Christianity, that he "was about to return from the intransigent rationalism of his earlier period toward a more positive view of the Bible and the Biblical tradition."[300] Strauss points us to F. H. Jacobi's letter to Georg Hamann (30 December 1784): "When *The Education of the Human Race* was seen by some as not an un-Christian writing, closer to a palinode, his

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[297] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 105.
[298] Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Philosophy and Theology," 117.
[299] Lessing, *Briefe*, 880 [my translation].
[300] Strauss, "Exoteric Writing" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 69.

[Lessing's] irritation at people's stupidity rose to the point of rage."[301] The prejudices which Lessing threw away indeed include Christian doctrine, but Strauss argues that Lessing likewise retrieved those "truths contradictory to the truths generally accepted by the philosophy of enlightenment and also accepted by Lessing throughout his life."[302] These truths are none other than the methods of prudent inquiry embraced by ancient and medieval philosophers. By broaching the question, "What is a revelation that reveals nothing?", Lessing tacitly announces his return to a truly open-minded investigation of revealed religion that allows both revelation and philosophy to present themselves on their own terms.

Strauss understands the reciprocal influence of reason and revelation to be the principal thrust of *EHR*. Lessing, like Maimonides before him, defers to biblical religion, not merely because he realizes the impossibility of refuting revelation, but because philosophy stands to gain by confronting revelation in the most honest fashion. Admitting the possibility of revelation entails that "philosophy itself is possibly not the right way of life," a concession that Strauss believes most modern rationalists were unwilling to make.[303] Lessing's posing of the question as to the self-sufficiency of human reason is the source of his open-mindedness. In order to bolster philosophy's argument in its own defense, it is neither enough to assume the primacy of reason, nor even to find a merely satisfactory compromise between philosophy and other modes of life. Philosophy must seek out the alternatives to the philosophers' way of life that have the strongest arguments against it. Unlike Socrates, who saw myth and politics as philosophy's most formidable rival, Strauss asserts that Maimonides and Lessing found revelation to the most daunting opponent of self-sufficient reason.

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[301] Cf. Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 275 [my translation].
[302] Strauss, "Exoteric Writing" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 70.
[303] Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," 118.

The reciprocal influence that we see in *Guide* II.25 and in *EHR* §§36-37 is revealed to be a negative, or *critical* influence, as opposed to the inclination to merge theological and philosophical inquiry. Strauss' argument that most opponents of revelation presuppose unbelief, and that philosophy's detractor presuppose faith, leads us to the conclusion that there "seems to be no ground common to both, and therefore superior to both."[304] Theoretically speaking, since neither side can refute the other without amending their basic assumptions, revealed religion and philosophy are the most natural of sparring partners. Though we must rule out refutation, consideration of revealed religion's strongest objections to the self-sufficiency of human reason offers philosophy the chance to better its apology for the philosophic life. Both theology and philosophy benefit from an honest critique of how each side articulates what it understands to be true and what this truth entails for human life.

Yet Strauss acquiesces—though this mutual influence remains a possibility, the alignment of theology and philosophy with politics with a specific historical context renders the theoretical impossibility of refuting revelation or philosophy a practical reality. Lessing plays an important role in Strauss' political thought in that, unlike Maimonides, Lessing offers an example of how open-minded debate could function in a modern liberal democracy. Lessing himself lived before the advent of the democratic state in Europe and his later theological writings, especially his public correspondence with Goeze, incited the Lutheran clergy to put pressure on the Duke of Braunschweig to censor Lessing's publications. The duke, Lessing's sponsor as head-librarian at Wolfenbüttel, finally succumbed to the church's complaints, issuing

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[304] Ibid., 117.

a ban in July 1778 that prevented Lessing from "publishing further writings on religion without advanced approval by the Brunswick censorship."[305]

However, Strauss believes that Enlightenment philosophy, more than Lutheran Orthodoxy, impeded the spread of Lessing's open-minded approach to religion. Because Lessing realized the impossibility of refuting orthodoxy, he began to see *ridicule* as the Enlightenment's primary weapon against faith: "The Enlightenment, as Lessing put it, had to laugh orthodoxy out of a position from which it could not be driven by any other means."[306] Even if modern philosophy could not refute revealed religion, it could intimidate adherents of orthodox Christianity socially and politically by making its doctrines the object of laughter. Neology's alliance with the German university system and with political authority presented an even greater obstacle to both Lutheran Orthodoxy and Lessing's *libertas philosophandi*. Much like Pietism in the seventeenth century, Neology quickly secured control of the Lutheran church in Germany and put itself in a politically advantageous position. Not only did the Neologists garner a wider audience through their "didactic preaching," which centered on "happiness and betterment," but they likewise oversaw the editorial apparatus responsible for redacting and printing the hymnals and prayer-books used in all German Lutheran churches.[307] Neology proved itself politically when the orthodoxist J. C. Wöllner issued the Edict of Religion in 1788, setting out "to destroy theological rationalism in the Lutheran church, the universities, and other educational institutions."[308] Wöllner's edict met with such opposition from the Neologists and rationalists in the government—including the "agnostic" Friedrich Wilhelm II—that the edict and the committee designated to purge the church of unorthodox pastors were allowed "to fall quietly

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[305] Nisbet, *Philosophical and Theological Writings* by Lessing, 184.
[306] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 143.
[307] Walter Sparn, "Neology" in *Encyclopedia of Christianity* Vol. 3, 718.
[308] Robert M. Bigler, *The Politics of German Protestantism*, 17.

into desuetude."[309] Wöllner's failure to expel "freethinkers" through the channels of the Lutheran ecclesiastical hierarchy "showed that the church as a statutory institution could no longer be clearly distinguished from state authorities and their interests."[310]

While Lessing often needed to draw recourse to subterfuge and dissimulation to publish his ideas, *AR* and *EHR* indicate his hopes for free philosophical and theological debate, unfettered by orthodoxy or the enlightened state. Strauss asserts Lessing's rejection of Enlightenment philosophy lead to his repudiation of "secular despotism," which Strauss believes "could easily be allied with the philosophy of enlightenment."[311] Though Strauss maintains that Lessing thought "despotism which is based 'exclusively' on superstition" preferable to secular despotism, we should not rule out the possibility that Lessing's theological writings reveal his preference for a certain type of liberalism. For there is a feature common to state religion and liberalism that we do not see in the secular despotism allied with the Enlightenment's distrust of religion, namely religion's ability to contribute to or to check secular authority. Lessing lamented that the his and Reimarus' reception quickly descended into an exchange of prejudicial statements, the rationalists disparaging "every clergyman as a scheming priest," the orthodoxists labeling "every philosopher an atheist."[312] Lessing identifies both religious and secular prejudice, especially when it carries legal force, as the key obstacle to open-minded debate, which entails that each party forswear "slanderous judgment" and "all recriminations."[313] Lessing's ideal polity accepts that it "is not true that speculations upon these things [dogmata] have ever done harm or been injurious to civil society."[314] "Reproach," insists Lessing's Author, "is due, not to

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[309] Ibid.
[310] Sparn, "Neology" in *Encyclopedia of Christianity* Vol. 3, 719.
[311] Strauss, "Exoteric Writing" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 71.
[312] Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 64.
[313] Ibid., 98.
[314] *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 95-96.

these speculations, but to the folly and tyranny which tried to keep them in bondage; a folly and tyranny which would not allow men to develop their own thoughts."[315] His accusation of "tyranny" is perhaps truer of the modern secular despot than of any religious institution.

Lessing's intellectual liberalism must be understood as a compromise between Maimonides and Spinoza. Although Strauss characterizes Lessing's religious writings as *exoteric*, mirroring the prudence of classical and medieval philosophers, his remarks on toleration betray his distance from Maimonides' wish to conceal Judaism and philosophy's most radical teachings from the uninitiated. To accomplish this, Lessing suggests that we must temper Spinoza's reduction of religion to moral behavior by appealing to Maimonides' defense of Judaism against Aristotelianism on the basis of Jewish Law. Morality, for Lessing, becomes the sensible middle ground between self-sufficient reason and revelation. If the philosopher can accept the soundness of Christian morality, his doubts concerning Christian theology notwithstanding, and Christianity the moral behavior of the philosopher, we may begin to see more open-minded debate. Such mutual respect on moral grounds allows philosophers and theologians to discuss their unique approaches to life's most significant questions without fear of bodily harm or social ostracism.

However, unlike Spinoza, Lessing's recourse to morality should be read as his reduction of theology to law or ethics, "the method and manner of obedience."[316] Rather, our recognition of the individual's moral virtue, whether he claims to obey revealed law or his own autonomous reason, is the pre-condition for intellectual tolerance. In the case of revealed religion, Lessing disagrees with Spinoza's characterization of biblical religion as a noble lie that is meaningless outside of the sphere of moral behavior. If we admit the possibility that revelation is divine and

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[315] Ibid., 96.
[316] Spinoza, *TTP*, 190.

pertains to more than morality, we must also allow theology to put forward propositions pertaining to the natural world and human nature. Strauss' reading of Lessing as a political philosopher, however, remains ambivalent. Lessing's freedom from prejudice, especially insofar as he was a *reader* of other philosophers, proved indispensible to Strauss' own scholarly work. What is more, Strauss' scattered remarks on Lessing show that he truly believed that modern philosophy's renewed interest in religion's objections to reason was necessary for the survival of political philosophy. Yet Strauss' praise for Lessing is clouded with doubt, not of Lessing, but of the possibility of Lessing's open-minded style of philosophy gaining a wider audience. Not only did he understand National Socialism and Soviet Communism to be the outworking of Enlightenment politics, but Strauss likewise wondered if liberal democracy's idea of tolerance already weighed too much in favor of reason to do justice to revelation.

Conclusion: Nathan, or Lessing?

After Lessing's taxing debate with Goeze and the death of his wife, Lessing became increasingly cynical, ultimately submitting to the Duke of Braunschweig's decision to censor any further publication by Lessing on the theme of religion. Because Lessing sought to avoid further conflict with his sponsor or the Lutheran clergy, he returned to theater, composing his "dramatic poem in five acts," *Nathan the Wise.* Recent critics, such as Paul Mendes-Flohr and Willi Goetschel, maintain that the Jewish Nathan is "[p]atently based on Moses Mendelssohn," or possibly on Spinoza, serving "the simple purpose of denouncing all religion."[317] Other's like Friedrich Niewöhner and Axel Schmidt identify Nathan with Maimonides, especially in light of parallels between Lessing's *Ringparabel* (Act 3, Scene 7) and Maimonides' discussion of false

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[317] Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity*, 36; Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine*, 15.

messiahs in his *Epistle to Yemen*.[318] In a proposal for a collection of essays on medieval philosophy tentatively entitled *Philosophy and Laws: Historical Essays*, Strauss gives brief descriptions of several essays that he eventually published in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, as well as in various journals. Among these familiar titles, we see that Strauss planned to write two essays dealing with Lessing's relationship to medieval Jewish thought: "A controversy on Spinoza" and "Nathan the Wise." Strauss claims that Lessing did not use Spinoza or Mendelssohn as the model for Nathan, but rather Maimonides: "The recollection of the man Maimonides was probably one of the motives underlying *Nathan the Wise*, the outstanding poetic monument erected in honor of Jewish medieval philosophy."[319]

Though these critics are indeed correct in pinpointing the certain ways in which Nathan resembles Mendelssohn, Spinoza, and Maimonides, I believe Franz Rosenzweig's remarks on *Nathan* raise questions as to the extent to which we can read Nathan as a *Jewish* philosopher. According to Ephraim Meir, Rosenzweig "did not like Lessing's Nathan who says that all are equal and that, therefore, the one can tolerate the other with his different clothes and different eating and drinking habits: all this is too bloodless and abstract."[320] Nathan's retort, "Are Jew and Christian rather Jew and Christian than men?"[321], leads us in a different direction altogether. In the play, "Jew" more often than not signifies "suspicious individual," rather than "an adherent of Judaism."

I believe that Lessing's "Attempts at a Foreword" speaks to his rationale in placing a Jew that is abstracted from Judaism at the heart of his dramatic poem. Lessing explains that he chose

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[318] Cf. Friedrich Niewöhner, *Veritas sive Varietas*, 266.
[319] Leo Strauss Papers, 1930-1997. Box 16, Folder 5. Special Collections Research Center. Regenstein Library. University of Chicago. Chicago, Illinois.
[320] Ephraim Meir, "The Relevance of the *Gritli-Letters* to the Clarification of Key Concepts and Central Ideas in Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*" in *The Legacy of Franz Rosenzweig: Collected Essays*, 30.
[321] Lessing, *Laocoön, Nathan the Wise, and Minna von Barnhelm*, 149.

Jerusalem during the Crusades as his setting because he knew of no other historical epoch in which the question as to the true revealed religion was asked with such urgency. To Lessing, the Crusades must have made Jews, Christians, and Muslims painfully aware of the similarities between their prophets and holy writings. Nathan is not so much Jewish in the sense of his religion, but instead in the way that the Christian and Muslim characters demand that he defend his Jewishness. This is especially true of Nathan's audience with Saladin, the sole representative of political force in the play. When Saladin accuses Nathan of dissimulation by answering with the *Ringparabel*, Nathan responds that he is a Jew by mere accident of birth, and remains so because of "them who from our childhood gave us proofs of love."[322] Nathan concedes that, insofar as his faith in Judaism proceeds from his belief in his ancestors, Judaism is no different from Christianity or Islam: "How, then, shall I my fathers less believe than you your own? … Can I demand that you should give the lie to your forefathers, that mine not be gainsaid?"[323] Instead giving an affirmative explanation of his Jewishness, by ascribing faith to chance, Nathan casts doubt on *all* revealed religions.

In light of Nathan's critical doubt with regard revelation, I argue that Nathan, while displaying characteristics of Maimonides, Spinoza, and Mendelssohn, most resembles Lessing. In "Attempts at a Foreword," Lessing welcomes our association of the titular character with the playwright: "Nathan's disposition against *all* positive religion has been *mine* for as long as I can remember."[324] Though an autobiographical reading of *Nathan* appears simplistic, Lessing's foreword intimates that neither he nor Nathan will be easily understood. Lessing contrasts himself (and Nathan) with the "person who has not entirely rejected every revealed religion,"

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[322] Ibid., 168.
[323] Ibid.
[324] Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*, 7 [my translation].

claiming that he "is not shifty enough" to pretend to be such a person, but "certainly brazen enough" not to "disguise" himself as one.[325] Here, Lessing discloses his unbelief, his personal rejection of all positive religion, more openly than in *AR* or *EHR*. The wording of his confession contains a moral judgment: to cease identifying oneself as pious is merely brash, but to feign belief indicates a moral failing. In this way, *Nathan the Wise* becomes Lessing's apology for open-minded inquiry in the face of persecution and political reality. For Lessing, the open-minded individual may need to exercise caution, especially if he fears for his life; but, on the other hand, he has a responsibility to safeguard freedom of thought and speech.

Nathan's reply to Saladin, in which he touts that all faith is but an accident of birth, at first seems to indicate that Nathan rejects the possibility of all revealed religions. Yet Saladin fails to make the most obvious objection: If one's upbringing determines one's faith, is it not also possible that the philosopher's resistance to revelation on the grounds that its content is not self-evident just a disposition? What separates Lessing from the modern campaign against revealed religion initiated by Spinoza is his willingness to accept that his personal unbelief remains to be proven. Only in light of his self doubt can we make sense of Lessing's spirited defense of Lutheran Orthodoxy against enlightened Christianity and historical criticism of the Bible. Chadwick might be correct in asserting that Lessing's *initial* motive in provoking theological discussion was to eradicate the enticing Neology so that the absurdity of Lutheran Orthodoxy could be seen in greater relief. However, Chadwick's reading is inconsistent with Lessing's emphatic arguments against the Enlightenment's supposed refutation of Christianity in *AR*, or with the Author's self-destructive system in *EHR*.

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[325] Ibid.

By examining the intersection of Lessing's work with that of Spinoza and Maimonides, I wish to suggest that further consideration is due to the influence of medieval Judaism on Lessing's defense of revealed religion, as well as of the individual's right to stray from it. Lessing's approach to orthodoxy is truly the culmination of the radical positions advanced by Spinoza and his teacher Maimonides. From Spinoza, Lessing derives his ability to clearly distinguish between philosophy, theology, and frustrated attempts to synthesize the two. In Maimonides, Lessing sees the necessity of recognizing the limitations of reason and therefore questioning the Enlightenment's unswerving trust in the authority of reason. Beyond his consideration of revelation's theoretical possibility, the work which grew out of the 1777 *Beyträge* betrays the practical outlook of medieval Judaism and Spinoza's break with it. Even if we assent to Lessing's open-mindedness to the possibility of revelation, Spinoza's concern for *libertas philosophandi* and concrete religious tolerance nevertheless merits consideration, especially if we understand modern liberal democracy to rest on the basic principles articulated in *TTP*. The common thread running through the political philosophy of Maimonides and Spinoza remains their appeal to law and ethics to prove revelation's worth to philosophy. Lessing's honest assessment of revelation is decidedly Maimonidean, but his hopes that open-minded inquiry will achieve political security bear Spinoza's mark.

The parallels between Lessing's theological polemics and the work of German-speaking intellectuals in the twentieth century underscores two alluring features of Lessing's philosophy. Because Lessing most succinctly captures the flaws of the Enlightenment's critique of religion, he is appealing to Barth, Wittgenstein, and Strauss, each questioning the primacy of human reason in his own way. To the self-consciously Jewish philosophers, Cohen and Strauss, Lessing represents a pertinent challenge to modern philosophy, inasmuch as it originates in an

exclusively Christian context. Lessing's appropriation of Maimonides' emphasis on Jewish Law offers a strong critique of the ambiguous relationship of reason and revelation in the history of Christian theology, suggesting that a refutation of Enlightenment thought and policy demands an open-minded evaluation of Christianity's influence on modern rationalism. This, in turn, requires us to suspend our prejudices so that we may understand Christianity and the Enlightenment on their own terms.

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